

## Gender and Sex in Early Polish Modernism: Przybyszewski, Irzykowski, Witkacy, Schulz

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THE relationship between sex or gender, sexuality and ethics was one of the most fundamental concerns of Polish Modernism, especially in its early phase.<sup>1</sup> Its source was, put in very general terms, the rebellion against the model of human subjectivity inscribed in the literary conventions of Naturalism and Realism. This rebellion did not only affect literature, it was a phenomenon characteristic of all art of the period. Within the confines of literature, however, and especially of prose, the relation between gender and sex was a particularly distinctive theme. It marked out the direction taken by a new anthropological project: the search for both a new human identity and a new conception of literature. Of the many possible examples, I have chosen only four, each of which illustrates both aspects of the new undertaking.

### *Przybyszewski: discovery of the libido and the unconscious*

Stanisław Przybyszewski's (1868–1927) conception of a “new art” anticipated issues which would be among the phenomena considered by twentieth-century knowledge to be beyond the control of our conscious mind. “Our method is the direct rendering and recreation of feelings, thoughts,

impressions, dreams, visions, just as they appear in the soul, without logical connections, in all their violent leaps and associations.”<sup>2</sup> Contained in this formula, from Przybyszewski's manifesto-article of 1899 on the “new” art, is the ready-made programme of various artistic currents generally recognized as representing modernity in twentieth-century literature.

It was a literary programme that was to unfold throughout the course of the twentieth century under the influence of psychoanalysis. Przybyszewski's conception opened up possibilities both for Freudian psychoanalysis and for the analytical psychology of Jung and Adler. Przybyszewski, like Freud, regarded sexual desire and the sexual drive as the main factor “steering” human nature, but also as a cosmic force. The thesis is most succinctly expressed by Przybyszewski's famous phrase “in the beginning was lust,” where his use of “lust” corresponds to the Freudian categories of *libido* and *eros*.<sup>3</sup> At the same time Przybyszewski, like Jung, sought evidence in dreams of the links between human beings and the symbolic sphere of culture and its myths. Przybyszewski's interest in this field is evident in his conception of androgyny, as in his “poem in prose” *Androgyn* (1900) which strikingly anticipates Carl Gustav Jung's conception of the *anima*.

Przybyszewski discerned accurately that twentieth-century literature would make the unconscious and suppressed components of human subjectivity the central issue of its enquiries: sexual desire and identity, the link between the body and the life of the soul or spirit, and above all the implications of these for the human psyche. The most Modernistic feature of Przybyszewski's creative work was his penetrating analysis of every dimension of human subjectivity, the constantly revisited question about what differentiates a human being — as a subject of enquiry — from the external world: from things, collectivities, Nature, social institutions, cultural norms. Przybyszewski treated these as taboos and often provoked scandal by questioning them. He was a programmatic amoralist who advocated Nietzsche's thesis that the artist was a high priest unbound by any norms. This brought him short-lived fame; after 1918 he was practically

1 The term “Modernism” in the Polish tradition has a different meaning from that usually applied in British and American research. See Włodzimierz Bolecki, 2003, “Modernism in Poland: The Troublesome Subject,” *Swedish-Polish Modernism: Literature — Language — Culture*, ed. M.A. Packalén & S. Gustavsson, Stockholm, pp. 39–60; a another version appeared as 2002, “Modernizm w literaturze polskiej xx w.: Rekonesans,” *Teksty Drugie* 4, pp. 11–34. Cf. Ryszard Nycz, 1997, *Język modernizmu*, Cracow.

2 Stanisław Przybyszewski, 1966, “O ‘nową’ sztukę,” *Wybór pism*, ed. R. Taborski, Wrocław, pp. 149–159; p. 158.

3 Stanisław Przybyszewski, 1904, *Requiem aeternam*, Lwów, p. 5.

forgotten as a writer. Many of his ideas about art, however, would shortly be taken up by other twentieth-century Polish writers, especially in the 1930s, including Zofia Nałkowska and Witold Gombrowicz, as they approached issues surrounding the body, childhood, sexuality, repressed urges, transgression, the social suppression of difference, and so on.

*Irzykowski: demolishing the lie of social, moral and literary convention*

These same problems were treated in an entirely different way by Karol Irzykowski (1873–1944). Whereas Przybyszewski treated literature as the expression of repressed impulses and the life of the psyche (the soul), Irzykowski recognized literary conventions themselves as the chief source of falsification or distortion in our knowledge of human beings. In other words, according to Irzykowski, the cultural image of humans inscribed in literature was a collection of redundant stereotypes. The mission of Irzykowski's work therefore became the constant struggle against accepted conventions in literature — and also in the theatre, in film, but above all in the realm of ideas.

Irzykowski's first novel *Pałuba* (*Pałuba*, 1903)<sup>4</sup> was one of the most radical and versatile experiments in Polish prose of the entire century to come.<sup>5</sup> In the intentions of its author, however, *Pałuba* was not so much a literary work as a “psychological treatise,” as it was described by Koniński.<sup>6</sup> At the same time *Pałuba* marked the beginning in Polish literature of a modern experimental prose (metafictional and metanarrational), of a

4 Miłosz translates *Pałuba* as *The Hag*, though this emphasizes only one of several meanings; see Czesław Miłosz, 1983, *The History of Polish Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Berkeley, pp. 362–364. Jerzy Peterkiewicz's rendering of the title in the anglicized form *Paluba* is preferred here, cf. footnote 1 to German Ritz' article in this volume, “Does *Paluba* have a Sex?”, p. 124.

5 See Colleen Taylor, 1973, “Karol Irzykowski's ‘Pałuba’: A Guidebook to the Future,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 17 (3), pp. 288–300; Stanisław Eile, 1996, *Modernist Trends in Twentieth-Century Polish Fiction*, London; Władimir Krysin, 1988, “Metafictional Structures in Slavic Literatures: Towards an Archeology of Metafiction,” *Postmodern Fiction in Europe and the Americas*, ed. T. D'haen & H. Bertens, Amsterdam, pp. 63–82; Henryk Markiewicz, 2003, “Nazywanie ‘beziemnego dzieła,’” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 94 (1), pp. 45–69.

6 Karol Ludwik Koniński, 1955, “Katastrofa wierności: Uwagi o ‘Pałubie’ K. Irzykowskiego,” Koniński, *Pisma wybrane*, ed. M. Morstin-Górska, Warsaw, pp. 115–150.

modern psychological prose, and also of modern analytical studies about human identity. Regarding the latter, *Pałuba* introduced a series of problems which have become known in the late phase of psychoanalysis and in contemporary cognitive psychology as “self studies.”

*Pałuba* consists of two, apparently separate works: the novella or “palimpsest,” as Irzykowski calls it, entitled *The Dreams of Maria Dunin* (*Sny Marii Dunin*), written in 1896, and the longer prose work *Pałuba: A Biographical Study* (*Pałuba: Studium biograficzne*), written 1899–1902. The author's commentaries as well as the structures of the plots, however, combine the two texts into a coherent whole. Despite Irzykowski's being extremely well-read in contemporary German culture and scholarship (literature, philosophy, psychology), it is obvious that he had not yet heard of the works of Sigmund Freud when he wrote *Pałuba*.

Irzykowski was a much more original and profound thinker than Przybyszewski; he not only anticipated the questions of modern psychology, he also managed at the same time to find his own original language for them. In the opinion of some critics, “he picked up the scent of several fundamental theses of Freud concerning the symbolism and psychology of dreams.”<sup>7</sup> Although *The Dreams of Maria Dunin* appeared four years before Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* (*Die Traumdeutung*, 1900), the work contains a complete set of Freudian hypotheses about the hidden connections between dreams and sexual desire.

In *Pałuba* the function of the psychoanalyst is fulfilled by the narrator, whose aim is to elucidate the dreams as well as the strange and sometimes obsessive behaviour of the protagonists. The verbalization of the unconscious is therefore an attempt, firstly, to explain what is incomprehensible — it fulfils a cognitive and interpretative function, as well as a therapeutic one. The heroine of *The Dreams of Maria Dunin*, for example, recounts to her lover (who is simultaneously the narrator) her obsessive dreams in order to liberate herself from them. Just as Freud would do later, Irzykowski introduces into his conception of the unconscious an active correlation between the “patient” and the “sick person,” the basic assumption of psychoanalysis as therapy.

7 Kazimierz Wyka, 1948, “Wstęp do ‘Pałuby,’” Karol Irzykowski, *Pałuba*, ed. K. Wyka, Cracow; reprinted in Wyka, 1968, *Modernizm polski*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Cracow, pp. 363–390; p. 373.

Secondly, dreams in Irzykowski reflect the hidden problem of human consciousness. We learn, for example, that Maria "led a life full of the phantoms she saw in her dreams,"<sup>8</sup> among which there persistently appeared the figure of a man. The heroine cannot free herself from this obsessive image, which penetrates her whole being with "fear and trembling" (9). In this way, Irzykowski indicates the phenomenon that psychoanalysts would later call "obsessional neurosis." Irzykowski also discovered the connection between dreams and erotic fantasies. "When I used to fall asleep," the hero of *Sny Marii Dunin* recalls, "I would be visited by fantastic dreams, unhealthy ones [...] in these dreams I was pursued by women." (5). Similarly, when describing the hero of *Paluba*, Piotr Strumieński, Irzykowski observes, not unlike Freud, that dreams are controlled by complicated laws, operating far beyond the influence of human will and reckoning, ready to surprise us with the most diverse and unexpected baggage. Irzykowski drew attention to the existence of a link between the unconscious (dreams, for instance) and the conscious self (the will, aspirations, aims in life).

Thirdly, Irzykowski identified very accurately the active role played by sexual desire (*libido* in the language of Freud) in shaping psychic phenomena (both conscious and unconscious), as well as the way in which the pathology of sexual life can cause distressing dreams. He also observed the characteristic erotic symbolism of dreams to which Freud would later devote so much space. We can find in Maria's dreams typical Freudian phallic symbolism; we read, for instance, that Maria "dreamed about herself and about him [her lover] as two gigantic snakes [...] carelessly dozing somewhere beneath soaring tropical trees." (13).

An original discovery of Irzykowski was his assertion that the bedrock of eroticism may be fear, of which we are not conscious and which manifests itself in dreams in the form of hallucinations, madness and strange eccentricities. Irzykowski noticed the striking proximity in dreams of extreme emotions, for instance between those associated with sexual activity and cruelty (his protagonists "devised plans for terrible and disgusting tortures" 12) or with eroticism and death. Irzykowski claimed that eroticism was one of those subjects that were never talked about (in Chapter

8 Irzykowski, 1948, p. 8. All further references to *The Dreams of Maria Dunin* or *Paluba* will be from this edition; page references will be given in brackets.

VII of *Paluba* he speaks of "how words timidly retreat from this precipice" 96). Eroticism as presented in Irzykowski's work thus exposes and violates social, moral and linguistic taboos. We learn, for instance, that the protagonists of *The Dreams of Maria Dunin* "behaved towards one another as though they were man and wife" (12) and, what is most amazing, that they managed "to swap their sex for fun" (12); also, that the narrator had two lovers, and that his desire was proof of the "derailing" (23) of his mind.

Also similar to later discoveries of psychoanalysis was Irzykowski's assertion that the unconscious (dreams, eroticism) could perform a repressive function. His heroine "seemed to be a statue of slavery bonded to a chain, the end of which disappeared somewhere into the impenetrable depths of the night." (13). In addition, the task of her lover ("to liberate her from her distressing dreams" 14) was identical to that of the psychoanalyst.

It is interesting that in his descriptions of the unconscious Irzykowski used, as Freud would later, images taken from mythology, the very ones which would soon become the characteristic topoi of psychoanalytic narration. The name of one of the characters in *The Dreams of Maria Dunin*, Acheronta Movebo, is an allusion to the subterranean river of Greek mythology. Furthermore, the hero of the novella says: "intending to enter the labyrinth, where the Minotaur had imprisoned its victim, I had first of all to take with me my guiding thread — that of common sense." (18). The motif of the labyrinth — including the labyrinth of the unconscious — was soon to become a typical motif in Modernist literature.

The psychological issues raised by Irzykowski go far beyond the investigation of the unconscious, however. Above all — and unlike Freud — Irzykowski did not attach any great importance to biological determinants. He perceived them, but it was not they that formed the main focus of his psychological interests. Irzykowski proposes in his novel a number of disciplines for which even the compromise umbrella term "analytical psychology" seems too narrow. He characterizes this project as follows: "Before Modernism appeared, Womela and I cultivated a discipline which we called 'intimacy', because it was about dragging up our most intimate human secrets and letting them all hang out [...]. I have remained loyal to this discipline until now, only instead of sexual secrets I recognized, under the influence of Gross, intellectual secrets to be more important." (340).<sup>9</sup>

Irzykowski deconstructed the established conventions for representing human beings in literature, but at the same time he formulated his own

analyses within the perspective of his assumed knowledge of human psychology. This is why *Paluba* is simultaneously both a literary experiment and a psychological treatise. The specific Modernist character of the psychological discourse in the novel does not only depend, however, on the author's deep incursion into the psychology of the individual. For the main feature of Irzykowski's narrative is its establishment of a specific field of enquiry which we might call the demystification, or discrediting, of the attitudes, thoughts, feelings and behaviour of its protagonists. *Paluba* is the most fundamental treatise in Polish Modernist literature on the distortion of human beings, a treatise whose aim was to expose various forms of duplicity in human relationships.

Irzykowski was concerned on the one hand with literary conventions, on another with social conventions, on a third with conventions in the modes of people's thinking. If the first pertained to problems related to the literary tools of writers (their use of language, composition, plot) and the second comprised a criticism of taboos and hypocrisy in public life, then the third were created by Irzykowski as his proposal for a new modern psychology. The subject of study was to be the intellectual obstacles that prevented human beings from properly identifying and comprehending reality—including their own selves. Irzykowski found no models in Polish literature for "discovering life's truths" (289, 354, 356). Instead he found them in the works of Scandinavian writers such as Jens Peter Jacobsen, Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg.

In *Paluba* reality is called a "goddess." It thus became Irzykowski's programme to demonstrate that this "goddess of reality" eludes identification and description, because people employ sophisticated and extended strategies that serve in fact to avoid the truth about her. The novel's protagonists are not always sincere with one another, and sometimes unconsciously suppress the deeply hidden reasons for their behaviour. Irzykowski's "intimacy" therefore depends on the radical demystification of the motives behind the protagonists' behaviour and of their ways of thinking. The author's aim was to "glimpse behind the scenes" (153) of their thoughts and feelings. Therefore the narrator tracks down, names and

9 See Irzykowski's "Uwagi do Pałuby" which follow the main text of the novel. The references are to his friends Stanisław Womela and Emil Gross. Cf. German Ritz, "Does Paluba have a Sex?" in this volume, especially footnotes 11 and 12, p. 128f.

comments on duplicity, artificiality, dissimulation, pretence, "calculated feelings" (that is not spontaneous, but staged or rehearsed ones) and the falsification of the "facts of reality" (53).

The novel's main hero, Piotr Strumieński, is unable to love. He therefore manufactures in himself a bent or "disposition for feelings" (77) and adapts himself to what others say about him; his behaviour is controlled by delusions, platitudes, the acting out of male-female relationships learnt by rote, as well as by his simulation of feelings. Accepted social conventions thereby prove to be a lie and a mystification and are the cause of why such a man finds himself, according to Irzykowski, "in a prison of his own making" (70).

The psychology of human interrelationships was, in Irzykowski's view, an as yet undiscovered theme in literature, a challenge with which the twentieth century would confront it. "Between people who are the closest to one another," he wrote, "silent battles are seething which do not have their Homer" (102). Irzykowski indicated that the fundamental barriers to human understanding were to be found within human beings themselves, in other words "human being is cut off from human being" (97) by such things as shame, misunderstanding, failures in life. This problem was to become a typical field of interest for the psychological prose of Modernism and such writers as Henry James and Virginia Woolf, and in Poland, Zofia Nałkowska, Tadeusz Breza, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and Stanisław Czycz.

The protagonists of *Paluba*, Angelika and Strumieński, make use—according to the narrator—of "a shared language of platitudes" which assures them of a certain "harmony" in understanding; they "invent lies," concoct in front of one another constant games and mystifications, as a result of which they do not understand "the roots of their characters" (58–59). Among the reasons for this both conscious and unconscious lying, Irzykowski identifies above all the conduct of human beings according to established stereotypes, thus initiating one of the most important themes in Polish psychological prose of the twentieth century. Irzykowski's continuators in this respect were to be Zofia Nałkowska, Adam Wazyk, Tadeusz Breza and Witold Gombrowicz.

Established stereotypes in Irzykowski's conception include ready-made models, received conventions and standard patterns of behaviour which render it impossible for the individual to understand him- or herself or other people. In human thinking, he maintained, there are various

“moulds” of thought, or “compartments,” whose specific characteristic consists in the fact that although they are mutually exclusive and generate inconsistencies in behaviour, they nevertheless do not obstruct one another. Irzykowski exposed an almost “chemical bonding of contradictions in the motives behind human behaviour” (135). One source of these contradictions was, in his view, our family upbringing and education. It became Irzykowski’s ambition to characterize these stereotypical behavioural patterns, to portray their functioning, sources and consequences. Not unlike a modern literary scholar, he set about proving that every author who portrays literary figures, holds up the “filter” of various established conventions, of various patterns of behaviour: social, erotic, national, gender, emotional, literary — according to which his or her own way of seeing the world has been conditioned.

Irzykowski’s conception anticipated by several decades descriptions of human behaviour according to such categories as “roles” and “masks” (as in Gombrowicz) or conceptions of models of culture represented by categories of “dress” (Gombrowicz, Sławomir Mrożek). The latter motif derives from Thomas Carlyle, whose works were well known to the Modernists.<sup>10</sup>

Irzykowski’s project, that is his aspiration to demystify and de-falsify the “culture of feelings and thoughts” (149), was accompanied by another project, a more positive one. He believed that modernity must hinge on the creation of a “culture of sincerity” (149). The web of psychological problems raised by his novel would be continued by Zofia Nałkowska, Adam Ważyk, Maria Kuncewiczowa, Tadeusz Breza, Witold Gombrowicz and Karol Ludwik Koniński. Such writers were interested, following Irzykowski, in the factors that determined human behaviour, such as the conscious self, the unconscious, chance and coincidence, the role of society, the significance of taboo, all of which exerted an important influence on the lives of individuals.

In English-language reflections on the modern novel, beginning with Henry James’ *The Art of Fiction* (1884) and later developed theoretically by Percy Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) and Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), the chief distinguishing mark of the modern or

10 Thomas Carlyle, 1836, *Sartor Resartus*; 1841, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Cf. translation into Polish: Thomas Carlyle, 1892, *Bohaterowi: Cześć dla bohaterów i pierwiastek bohaterstwa w historii*, Cracow.

Modernist novel was the disappearance of an omniscient narrator. Irzykowski’s *Paluba*, on the other hand, initiated an entirely different trend in the deconstruction of the realist novel that was to develop alongside the so-called personal novel, and whose defining feature was the conspicuous narration of the author. The crucial innovation in this development in prose was the appearance on the novel’s “stage” of the author, who thereby destroyed any sense of illusion regarding the act of storytelling. The author does not pretend that he is not present in the novel, nor does he suggest that the reader is looking at an objective world, simply because it is represented from the perspective of a character or characters. Hence, if the personal or stream of consciousness novel led to a maximal illusion of reality, then Irzykowski’s *Paluba* initiated in Polish literature a prose of maximal disillusionment, the closest to it being the type I have called elsewhere the “sack-novel.”<sup>11</sup> One could say, to use Max Weber’s definition, that Irzykowski in his *Paluba* achieved a “disenchantment with literature,” thus creating one of the most significant points of departure in Polish modern prose.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Witkacy: the erotic as social experiment*

In the novel *Farewell to Autumn* (*Pożeganie jesieni*, 1927) by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1892–1939, pseudonym Witkacy), as in the majority of his plays, three types of protagonist predominate: first, the hero ravaged by internal conflicts; second, the “demonic woman” desired by the hero (Witkacy’s version of the *femme fatale*); and third, the absolute tyrant or

11 Włodzimierz Bolecki, 1996, *Poetycki model prozy w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym: Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Schulz i inni. Studium z poetyki historycznej*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Cracow.

12 Irzykowski’s novel was certainly known to Bruno Schulz. Gombrowicz also knew of it (though it is uncertain whether he ever read it). It was highly rated by the well-known critic Artur Sandauer, who wrote in a letter to Schulz of 11 July 1938: “I have recently read *Paluba*; an excellent book. [...] Irzykowski is indeed the father of Polish experimenters.” Quoted in Bruno Schulz, 2002, *Księga listów*, ed. J. Ficowski, Gdańsk, p. 287. On the significance of *Paluba* for metafiction in the twentieth-century Polish novel, see: Joachim T. Baer, 1984, “Some Observations on the Style and Meaning of Irzykowski’s ‘Paluba,’” *The Polish Review* 29 (4), pp. 27–41; Krysinski, 1988; Eile, 1996, pp. 42–45; Włodzimierz Bolecki, 2003, “Metaliteratura wczesnego modernizmu,” *Arkusze* 2–3, Henryk Markiewicz, 2004, “Paluba — ‘beziemienne dzieło,’” *Przygody dzieł literackich*, Gdańsk, pp. 177–218.

despot. In *Farewell to Autumn* these are respectively Atanazy Bazakbal, Hela Bertz and Sajetan Tempe. Witkacy makes use of the standard fictional model of the *Bildungsroman*, allowing him to portray the life experiences of his protagonists: family experience (Zosia), erotic experience (Hela, Łohoyski), religious experience (Father Wyrztyk), political experience (Sajetan Tempe) and their ethical implications.

A characteristic feature in the education of Witkacy's protagonists is the process of initiation, or the experience for the first time of important existential questions. Thus in *Farewell to Autumn* Atanazy undergoes several initiations: heterosexual (Hela), homoerotic and narcotic (Łohoyski), marital and domestic (Zosia), political (the ideology of "levelism" preached by Tempe<sup>13</sup>) as well as the experience of war. The other characters also undergo some kind of initiation: Hela, for example, undergoes erotic and religious initiation and Prepudrech artistic (he becomes a composer), while they all experience initiation into a life that has been "levelled" (Chapter VIII). Initiation in all Witkacy's works, however, is permanent and ongoing. His protagonists cannot content themselves with the mere repetition of experience, since the repetition itself brings them no satisfaction. Instead they have to constantly reinforce every experience, making it more and more intense and violent, more and more profligate and perverse — in other words, they must turn it each time into another experience, an ever new and thus... an initial one. "To intensify monstrosity," Atanazy thinks to himself, "for the sake of its deeper defeat."<sup>14</sup> Drugs, food, alcohol and above all sex are the experiences which Hela and Atanazy constantly intensify and reinforce, approaching "monstrous and terrifying forms," as the narrator puts it.<sup>15</sup> An initiation, however, which provokes a subsequent initiation, one that is even more intense than the previous one, cannot last for ever. That is why at the end of all the initiations experienced by Witkacy's protagonists there awaits only self-destruction, catastrophe, degrada-

13 The term "levelism" (Polish: *niwelizm*) is derived from the verb *zniwelować*, to level or annihilate. In the novel it is a euphemism for Bolshevism, which Witkacy had encountered directly during his time in Russia (1914–1918).

14 Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 1997, *Pożegnanie jesieni*, ed. W. Bolecki, Cracow, p. 296. All further references are to this edition, page numbers in brackets.

15 The whole of Chapter VIII, entitled "Escape" ("Ucieczka"), is devoted to this theme.

tion or death. And initiation into death happens only once. In this way Witkacy engages with the basic themes of European decadence.

In the first chapter of *Farewell to Autumn* Witkacy describes a twenty-eight-year-old man who loves his fiancée (Zosia) so much that he decides to betray her. Witkacy is not interested in the event itself, but in the way Atanazy thinks, his attitude to himself, to Zosia, Hela, Prepudrech. On the one hand, "a beastly ordeal," or a state of "emptiness" and "nothingness" (by which he means everyday, mundane reality) lies in wait for them all; on the other, they feel themselves called to "experience the Mystery of Existence," but this demands extraordinary sensations and experiences of exceptional intensity — and sometimes of "ordinary obscenity" (189).

In going to Hela, Atanazy constructs for himself the concept of "systematic betrayal," which is analysed sarcastically by a narrator who does not spare his hero his own malice, gibes, insults, or descriptions that completely depreciate the hero morally. To the narrator, Atanazy's plan is "vile" and his thoughts "mendacious" (194–195). Atanazy has an equally bad opinion of himself. He feels himself to be a "sordid creature" that belongs to the "dying refuse of bourgeois culture," a "degenerate" individual and a "miserable swine" who commits the "usual systematic obscenities" (414). True, there comes a moment, as the narrator observes, when Atanazy "did not feel even a hint of the subtle obscenity he had committed" (415–416), but this is a momentary deception, because Atanazy usually perceives in his own behaviour "a vile deformation, with the intrusion of moments of lying and sordidness." (413). But why does the hero of the novel have to betray his fiancée "systematically?" The answer is supplied both by Atanazy and by the narrator. Atanazy declares that he loves Zosia so much that he hates her.

Atanazy's essential problem is his desire to live at any cost in a state of "non-definability" (185): for him the "whole charm of life" depends on this. Meanwhile his love for Zosia forces him to define himself, but, as we learn from the narrator, he is "notoriously incapable" of doing this (185). He needs the intensity of his experience to be equal to his love; therefore, not only must his betrayal be "systematic" but his lover must be unusual. Atanazy thus begins to compose a life for himself in which "great love" and "great betrayal" fulfil contrapuntal functions, both intellectual and emotional, rather like the "directional tensions" in Witkacy's own art and the-ory of Pure Form, as expressed, for example, in his essays "New Forms in

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In English-language reflections on the modern novel, beginning with Henry James’ *The Art of Fiction* (1884) and later developed theoretically by Percy Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) and Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), the chief distinguishing mark of the modern or

10 Thomas Carlyle, 1836, *Sartor Resartus*; 1841, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Cf. translation into Polish: Thomas Carlyle, 1892, *Bohaterowi: Cześć dla bohaterów i pierwiastek bohaterstwa w historii*, Cracow.

Modernist novel was the disappearance of an omniscient narrator. Irzykowski’s *Paluba*, on the other hand, initiated an entirely different trend in the deconstruction of the realist novel that was to develop alongside the so-called personal novel, and whose defining feature was the conspicuous narration of the author. The crucial innovation in this development in prose was the appearance on the novel’s “stage” of the author, who thereby destroyed any sense of illusion regarding the act of storytelling. The author does not pretend that he is not present in the novel, nor does he suggest that the reader is looking at an objective world, simply because it is represented from the perspective of a character or characters. Hence, if the personal or stream of consciousness novel led to a maximal illusion of reality, then Irzykowski’s *Paluba* initiated in Polish literature a prose of maximal disillusionment, the closest to it being the type I have called elsewhere the “sack-novel.”<sup>11</sup> One could say, to use Max Weber’s definition, that Irzykowski in his *Paluba* achieved a “disenchantment with literature,” thus creating one of the most significant points of departure in Polish modern prose.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Witkacy: the erotic as social experiment*

In the novel *Farewell to Autumn* (*Pożeganie jesieni*, 1927) by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1892–1939, pseudonym Witkacy), as in the majority of his plays, three types of protagonist predominate: first, the hero ravaged by internal conflicts; second, the “demonic woman” desired by the hero (Witkacy’s version of the *femme fatale*); and third, the absolute tyrant or

11 Włodzimierz Bolecki, 1996, *Poetycki model prozy w dwudziestolecu międzywojennym: Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Schulz i inni: Studium z poetyki historycznej*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Cracow.

12 Irzykowski’s novel was certainly known to Bruno Schulz. Gombrowicz also knew of it (though it is uncertain whether he ever read it). It was highly rated by the well-known critic Artur Sandauer, who wrote in a letter to Schulz of 11 July 1938: “I have recently read *Paluba*; an excellent book. [...] Irzykowski is indeed the father of Polish experimenters.” Quoted in Bruno Schulz, 2002, *Księga listów*, ed. J. Ficowski, Gdańsk, p. 287. On the significance of *Paluba* for metafiction in the twentieth-century Polish novel, see: Joachim T. Baer, 1984, “Some Observations on the Style and Meaning of Irzykowski’s ‘Paluba,’” *The Polish Review* 29 (4), pp. 27–41; Krysinski, 1988; Eile, 1996, pp. 42–45; Włodzimierz Bolecki, 2003, “Metaliteratura wczesnego modernizmu,” *Arkusze* 2–3, Henryk Markiewicz, 2004, “Paluba — ‘beziemienne dzieło,’” *Przygody dzieł literackich*, Gdańsk, pp. 177–218.

despot. In *Farewell to Autumn* these are respectively Atanazy Bazakbal, Hela Bertz and Sajetan Tempe. Witkacy makes use of the standard fictional model of the *Bildungsroman*, allowing him to portray the life experiences of his protagonists: family experience (Zosia), erotic experience (Hela, Łohoyski), religious experience (Father Wyrzytyk), political experience (Sajetan Tempe) and their ethical implications.

A characteristic feature in the education of Witkacy's protagonists is the process of initiation, or the experience for the first time of important existential questions. Thus in *Farewell to Autumn* Atanazy undergoes several initiations: heterosexual (Hela), homoerotic and narcotic (Łohoyski), marital and domestic (Zosia), political (the ideology of "levelism" preached by Tempe<sup>13</sup>) as well as the experience of war. The other characters also undergo some kind of initiation: Hela, for example, undergoes erotic and religious initiation and Prepudrech artistic (he becomes a composer), while they all experience initiation into a life that has been "levelled" (Chapter VIII). Initiation in all Witkacy's works, however, is permanent and ongoing. His protagonists cannot content themselves with the mere repetition of experience, since the repetition itself brings them no satisfaction. Instead they have to constantly reinforce every experience, making it more and more intense and violent, more and more profligate and perverse—in other words, they must turn it each time into another experience, an ever new and thus... an initial one. "To intensify monstrosity," Atanazy thinks to himself, "for the sake of its deeper defeat."<sup>14</sup> Drugs, food, alcohol and above all sex are the experiences which Hela and Atanazy constantly intensify and reinforce, approaching "monstrous and terrifying forms," as the narrator puts it.<sup>15</sup> An initiation, however, which provokes a subsequent initiation, one that is even more intense than the previous one, cannot last for ever. That is why at the end of all the initiations experienced by Witkacy's protagonists there awaits only self-destruction, catastrophe, degrada-

13 The term "levelism" (Polish: *niwelizm*) is derived from the verb *zniwelować*, to level or annihilate. In the novel it is a euphemism for Bolshevism, which Witkacy had encountered directly during his time in Russia (1914–1918).

14 Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 1997, *Pożegnanie jesieni*, ed. W. Bolecki, Cracow, p. 296. All further references are to this edition, page numbers in brackets.

15 The whole of Chapter VII, entitled "Escape" ("Ucieczka"), is devoted to this theme.

tion or death. And initiation into death happens only once. In this way Witkacy engages with the basic themes of European decadence.

In the first chapter of *Farewell to Autumn* Witkacy describes a twenty-eight-year-old man who loves his fiancée (Zosia) so much that he decides to betray her. Witkacy is not interested in the event itself, but in the way Atanazy thinks, his attitude to himself, to Zosia, Hela, Prepudrech. On the one hand, "a beastly ordeal," or a state of "emptiness" and "nothingness" (by which he means everyday, mundane reality) lies in wait for them all; on the other, they feel themselves called to "experience the Mystery of Existence," but this demands extraordinary sensations and experiences of exceptional intensity—and sometimes of "ordinary obscenity" (189).

In going to Hela, Atanazy constructs for himself the concept of "systematic betrayal," which is analysed sarcastically by a narrator who does not spare his hero his own malice, gibes, insults, or descriptions that completely depreciate the hero morally. To the narrator, Atanazy's plan is "vile" and his thoughts "mendacious" (194–195). Atanazy has an equally bad opinion of himself. He feels himself to be a "sordid creature" that belongs to the "dying refuse of bourgeois culture," a "degenerate" individual and a "miserable swine" who commits the "usual systematic obscenities" (414). True, there comes a moment, as the narrator observes, when Atanazy "did not feel even a hint of the subtle obscenity he had committed" (415–416), but this is a momentary deception, because Atanazy usually perceives in his own behaviour "a vile deformation, with the intrusion of moments of lying and sordidness." (413). But why does the hero of the novel have to betray his fiancée "systematically?" The answer is supplied both by Atanazy and by the narrator. Atanazy declares that he loves Zosia so much that he hates her.

Atanazy's essential problem is his desire to live at any cost in a state of "non-definability" (185): for him the "whole charm of life" depends on this. Meanwhile his love for Zosia forces him to define himself, but, as we learn from the narrator, he is "notoriously incapable" of doing this (185). He needs the intensity of his experience to be equal to his love; therefore, not only must his betrayal be "systematic" but his lover must be unusual. Atanazy thus begins to compose a life for himself in which "great love" and "great betrayal" fulfil contrapuntal functions, both intellectual and emotional, rather like the "directional tensions" in Witkacy's own art and theory of Pure Form, as expressed, for example, in his essays "New Forms in



Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising from Them" ("Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia," 1919) and "Theatre" ("Teatr," 1922). Since all that matters to Atanazy is the "whole," the "finished composition," the individual elements, even when they are "systematic obscenities," are valued only as "structural" elements. Atanazy values "composing his life" higher than "composing works of art," which seem to him to be proof of degeneracy, and this is why he does not wish to be an artist.

Witkacy thus addresses a fundamental theme of much literature written in the early Modernist period, while Atanazy and the other protagonists of *Farewell to Autumn* serve as laboratory guinea-pigs in his dissection of their souls, characters, attitudes and opinions:

In natures of Atanazy's type, pure feeling is nothing but a form of psychological masturbation: the hated self, kicked aside in contempt, worships itself by projecting itself onto another person, woman or man — it's no longer of any consequence. These are individuals who can quite easily be homo- or heterosexual, depending on what kind of screen best lends itself to reflecting the charming contours of their self-idolization. Dual sexuality for them is only an extra, what they really are — are masturbators. (194–195)

Sexual involvement and erotic feeling are evident in almost all the relationships between the protagonists in *Farewell to Autumn*. Sex is a constant topic of conversation, continually in their thoughts and in the commentary of the narrator. Sexual relationships include those between Atanazy and Zosia, Hela Bertz and Łohoycki, Prepudrech and Hela, Hela and all the men including even Father Wyrzytyk, whom she tries to seduce. In addition the priest loves and desires Hela subconsciously, Łohoycki "shamelessly seduces captain de Purcel" and others, Smorski seduces Iza Krzeczewska, Atanazy — Gina Baer, and so on. We could also say the same of Atanazy's relationship with Hela as of the protagonists in Witkacy's earlier novel *622 Downfalls of Bungo, or the Demonic Woman* (*622 upadki Bunga, czyli demoniczna kobieta*, 1910–1911): "the paradox of this love is such that the closer it binds the lovers together, the more it draws them apart."<sup>16</sup> "Sexmania," writes Witkacy, "spread like a sticky mist across the city's night-life that was just beginning. Everything seemed to be noth-

ing but a mask hiding the sex which had been shamelessly dismantled." (184).

Eroticism in Witkacy's works flew in the face of contemporary social and moral conventions, with which he was simply unable to cope. According to Jan Błoński, he had only one way out: "to inflate the Young Poland [Modernist] style of love until it reached grotesque proportions."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Błoński adds, "eroticism culminates in a grotesque phantasmagoria." This affects the treatment of the erotic in every work by Witkacy. Błoński characterizes the typical Witkacy hero as: "A young man surrounded by luminaries and old-timers. He goes through an initiation into 'real life,' rejecting the temptations of homosexuality only to fall into the power of a demonic female lover, who teaches him — and then unteaches him — love."

The language of the erotic in Witkacy's novels is indeed a deformation and parody of early Modernist descriptions of love. This language, however, does not differ at all from the language he uses to express his protagonists' experiences in other spheres of life, or to describe other aspects of reality. Witkacy's descriptions of sex are therefore no more "graphomaniac" than his descriptions of nature, his heroes' "alcoholic whinging" or philosophical, aesthetic and psychological "whinging."

Witkacy's diagnosis was thus not dissimilar to that of Irzykowski: conventional literary means of expression (and even language itself) limit, deform and distort vast areas of human experience. Their conclusions, however, were different. Irzykowski believed that it was possible, having rejected convention, to represent reality and to describe a person's pure consciousness, i.e. his or her authentic and undistorted consciousness. *Paluba*, as a psychological treatise, represents a great Modernist utopia of "pure" intellect; it contains a similar dream to that which accompanied Husserl in his striving to understand the phenomena of consciousness. Witkacy believed otherwise. He rejected all descriptions of reality, declaring that the only thing that literature (or art) was capable of doing was to show the "essence" of that reality by means of ever greater deformation of its elements. Art, with the aid of deformation, was to provoke in its receiv-

16 Jan Błoński, 1996, *Od Stasia do Witkacego*, Cracow, p. 114.

17 Błoński, 1996, p. 114.

ers "a metaphysical shudder" — and not any old shudder, but one that would expose the strangeness, mystery and menace of existence.

The concept of "systematic betrayal" as an antidote to "great love," as well as such concepts as "composing life" as an antidote to life's "ordinariness," "boorishness" or "mundane commonplaceness," form points of departure in *Farewell to Autumn* from which the destinies and ideas of Witkacy's protagonists are launched. He is interested in the psychological and intellectual mechanisms involved in "systematic betrayal." And in following the meanderings of his heroes' thoughts and behaviour, he appears to be asking where it might all be leading. The answer comes in the final chapter entitled "Mystery of a September Morning" ("Tajemnica wrześniowego poranka"), when all of the protagonists add a fresh betrayal — now that the revolution has succeeded and a "levelist" system has come to power — to those that had applied before: namely, the betrayal of themselves and all the ideals they had earlier professed. Arriving in Europe from India in 1918, Atanazy no longer has to cultivate further conceptions of "systematic betrayal" and "systematic bestiality," since both have now become the structural foundations of the new state whose leader is the Bolshevik Sajetan Tempe. The "menace of existence" thus confronts Atanazy from a completely unexpected quarter, manifesting itself in history, in the character of human beings. For it also transpires that Witkacy's protagonists, more than anything else, seek love, that is they all want to be loved and to have someone to love, even if this turns out to be an ideologue of totalitarianism such as the Bolshevik dictator Sajetan Tempe. Indeed, *Farewell to Autumn* is a prophetic vision anticipating the behaviour of intellectuals that would later be portrayed by Czesław Miłosz in *The Captive Mind* (*Zniewolony umysł*, 1953).

#### *Schulz: mythologization of the erotic*

According to Witkacy, Bruno Schulz' speciality was "female sadism combined with male masochism."<sup>18</sup> The fascination with male-female relations (especially perverse ones) however, was one of the standard themes

18 Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 1976, "Wywiad z Brunonem Schulzem," *Bez kompromisu: Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne*, ed. J. Degler, Warsaw, pp. 181–183; p. 182. Cf. in this same volume "Twórczość literacka Brunona Schulza," pp. 184–196.

of early Modernism and above all of Witkacy himself (in both art and literature). Suffice it to say that Witkacy's observation that "[Schulz'] agent for the oppression of men by women is the leg, that most terrifying part of the female body, apart from the face and certain other things,"<sup>19</sup> could be applied first and foremost to Witkacy's own novels and plays.

The same applies to another of Witkacy's theses. He maintained that Schulz' women "use their legs to tantalize and trample underfoot his stunted men-freaks — submissive in their erotic torment, debased and finding in their debasement the height of agonized delight — and drive them into a gloomy, impotent frenzy. His [Schulz'] pictures are masterpieces to the cruelty of legs."<sup>20</sup> Such a representation reminds us of course of Schulz' drawings, but even more so of Miss Acne ("Pani Akne") in Witkacy's novel *622 Downfalls of Bungo, or the Demonic Woman* or of Hela Bertz and other female characters in *Farewell to Autumn*. Without going into the detail and deeper moral context of this subject, we should nevertheless bear in mind that it could be found in a great many Polish paintings and literary works of the 1920s. Melchior Wańkiewicz, for instance, recalls that an exposed female "calf was something mysterious and idolized in dreams," at which he "stared transfixed."<sup>21</sup> The moral *Zeitgeist* often revealed itself in the motif of women's legs.

Witkacy's portrayal of Schulz' "masochistic" fascination with women remains axiomatic in Schulz studies.<sup>22</sup> All Witkacy's assertions regarding the "gloominess," "impotency," and "debasement" of men as represented

19 Witkiewicz, 1976, p. 182.

20 Witkiewicz, 1976, p. 182. Cf. Jerzy Ficowski, 1986, *Okolice Sklepów cynamonowych: Szkice, przycinki, impresje*, Cracow, p. 12: "In a letter written thirty-five years ago, Schulz' friend Izidor Friedman (vel Tadeusz Lubowiecki) confides an old secret: 'Bruno trusted me without bounds and [...] allowed me to see a little way into his private life [...]. He was a self-confessed fetishist. [...] His fixation consisted in his admiration for beautiful long legs — which had to be dressed in black silk stockings. Kissing those legs was for him — as he told me more than once — the greatest of pleasures?'"

21 Melchior Wańkiewicz, 1986, *Anoda-Katoda*, Cracow, p. 521.

22 Cf. Bohdan Budurowycz, 1992, "Galicja w twórczości Brunona Schulza," *Bruno Schulz: In memoriam 1892–1942*, ed. M. Kitowska-Lysiak, Lublin, pp. 9–16; p. 14. In his article in the same volume "Twarz Brunona Schulza," pp. 25–39, Stanisław Barańczak observes quite correctly that this "masochistic" interpretation causes a "fundamental distortion" in our portrait of the writer.

in Schulz' drawings, however, belong more to his own world than to that of Schulz.

Witkacy was absolutely right, on the other hand, to observe that the all-important subject of Schulz' graphic art were the "relations" between women and men. Indeed, the number of such "relations" portrayed in the drawings is much greater than autonomous acts of women. Representations, however, of male-female relationships that could conceivably be classified as "masochistic" are marginal in relation to the "non-masochistic" representations of women and men. For we are talking at most of a dozen or so drawings that show a man or a woman holding a riding-crop, a lash or a whip, or a woman holding her foot on a man's neck. In addition we should distinguish between the popular "trappings of masochism" (the woman with a riding-crop, a whip, a cane) and the pathological condition. The function of the former does not have to be the expression, symbolization or representation of a clinical masochism, but is first and foremost the relating, quoting or illustrating of popular motifs extracted from literary and artistic tradition, and even from the iconography of mass culture at the turn of the century. In other words, this is not the expression of repressed masochistic sexual complexes, but a sophisticated "playing with context" involving both persiflage and a deeper significance. And hence a playing with the motifs of sexual initiation: expeditions to the island of Cythera, the goddess Circe, Susannah, nymphets or "infantas" (today we might call them "Lolitas"), the rites of spring, bacchanalia, Dionysus' train, festive pageants, carnival, half-beasts-half-humans, masks, pierrot figures<sup>23</sup> — all the various personifications and sublimations of the sexual urge; playing, in a word, with the whole range of topoi found in the art and literature of early Modernism. This does not mean to say that the "trappings of masochism" are irrelevant to an interpretation of Schulz; the kind of relations they depict between men and women, however, demand a different reading.<sup>24</sup>

In almost all Schulz' drawings women are foregrounded, while men are portrayed in the background. Women are shown in raised positions (on a bed, sofa, podium, or in the foreground of a scene, such as in the street),

23 Theodosia S. Robertson, 1992, "Bruno Schulz i komedia," *Bruno Schulz: In memoriam*, pp. 101–109.

whereas as men are always to one side, lower down, on the peripheries, far from the centre (in the corner of a picture or room, on the floor, on the edge of a bed, at a woman's feet, outside a window). If the space where the woman is depicted is clear and distinct (the objects on which she reclines also being distinct: a bed, sofa, chair), then the space out of which the male figures loom tends to be undefined, effaced, fading into gloom or formlessness.

It is symptomatic of Schulz' drawings that women are always represented, so to speak, in the fullness of their bodies, whereas the man is frequently depicted in miniature or as a fragment of his body — the most extreme example of this perhaps being the placing of nothing but his head somewhere in the corner of a room (such depictions are often self-portraits of Schulz himself). This polarization of the figures (the large figure of the woman, and the diminished head of the man) brings us *in medias res*, straight to the heart of male-female relations in Schulz: woman is at the centre, man at the periphery. Woman attracts other figures to her, man is only attracted. Woman hierarchizes the space round about her, man is subject to this hierarchization. And above all, if the woman in these drawings is the body, then man is the gaze, if woman is looked upon, then it is man who does the looking.

In Schulz' drawings men, depicted in a great variety of situations, appear to have time for only one activity: gazing at women. In the large heads of the men are set equally large eyes, open very wide. What is in their gaze? Mainly curiosity, because the women in the world portrayed by Schulz are watched extraordinarily intensely. At the same time there is admiration, wonder, ecstasy and fascination. Men therefore peep, glance, openly or

24 Analyses of the theme of women in Bruno Schulz can be found in the following articles: Małgorzata Kitowska-Lysiak, 1992, "Bruno Schulz — 'Xięga Bałwochwalcza': wizja — forma — analogie," *Bruno Schulz: In memoriam*, pp. 133–151; Krystyna Kulig-Janarek, 1992, "Erotyka — groteska — ironia — kreacja," *Bruno Schulz: In memoriam*, pp. 153–177; 1993, "Schulzowska mitologia," *Kresy* 14, pp. 37–49; Andrzej Sulikowski, 1992, "Bruno Schulz i kobiety: O motywach nie tylko z 'Xięgi Bałwochwalczej,'" *Bruno Schulz: In memoriam*, pp. 179–195; Serge Faucherbeau, 1992, "Balthus a Schulz, Klosowski, Joue i inni," *Bruno Schulz: In memoriam*, pp. 197–218. On the links between Schulz and turn-of-the-century art and literature, see: Tomasz Gryglewicz, 1984, *Groteska w sztuce polskiej xx w.*, Cracow; Kulig-Janarek, 1992; Ewa Kuryliak, 1992, "Gąsienicowy powóz, czyli podróż Brunona Schulza w przyszłość przeszłości," *Bruno Schulz: In memoriam*, pp. 219–235.

stealthily, or stare at women, follow and devour them with their gaze, yet they always maintain a distance. This distance would seem to be the defining feature of male-female relations in Schulz. In his fictional narratives it is shown in the motif of a meeting or "encounter," where a bow, a bending forward of the body, a kiss on the hand or a hand on the heart represents a whole gamut of semiotically loaded reflexes: from curiosity through respect to admiration and homage. Homage is especially celebrated by Schulz, above all in the motif of men making pilgrimages to women's bodies.

Gestures of homage paid to women in Schulz' drawings appear to hover on a "borderline" between respect and idolatrous worship. To recognize the latter one has only to recall the numerous scenes portraying men kneeling before women or kissing their feet. It is characteristic, however, that there is neither fear nor humiliation in these images. Instead there is a diminution of the male figures paying tribute, this being an extreme expression of their admiration, fascination and recognition. But also in these gestures — and here the difference between Schulz and Witkacy is fundamental — we can detect the hidden meaning of Schulz' portrayal of relations between women and men, namely that they are gestures of prayerful absorption, prostration or kneeling before an object of worship, where the object is always located at the centre of the space where the action is being played out. Such gestures thus reveal a subtle religious stylization which sometimes contains allusions to religious subjects as in the drawing "Naked Woman on a Couch and Man Lying on the Floor with a Head on a Dish" ("Naga kobieta na tapczanie i leżący na podłodze mężczyzna z głową w misie"), for example, which refers to the motif of Salome (one of the most popular motifs of the secession or *fin de siècle* style); in a similar way, we can detect "inverted" biblical allusions in Schulz' depictions of men washing and kissing women's feet. This is without doubt a world he considered sacred.<sup>25</sup>

The religious rites where woman is venerated are portrayed with their associated attributes in the album of drawings entitled *The Booke of Idolatry* (*Xięga bałwochwalcza*). The individual composition entitled "The Booke of Idolatry" shows what looks like the interior of a sanctuary where,

25 On the play with allusions, quotations and stylization in Schulz' graphic art, see Kulig-Janarek, 1993.

in an atmosphere of religious mystery, the triumphant deity — a woman in contemporary dress — receives the tribute due to it. The woman stands on a pedestal-altar, behind which can be seen a great open book as well as a sun shining in glory; meanwhile in front of the altar, beside which burns a lighted candle set in a tall candle-holder, the humble believer prostrates himself. The sun, signifying divine power, illuminates the two figures looming out of the gloom: the prostrate man and the woman arrested in the pose of a cultic statue. The solemnity of this spectacle is reinforced by another scene set outside a church and entitled "Procession" ("Procesja"); here further figures appear in the background — a man standing behind the central figure of a naked woman and holding a cape, and another wielding a church flag with a picture of a woman's shoe. The whole procession has come to a halt before the façade of the church. The clash between the scenery of contemporary church rituals and the appearance of the individuals taking part in the ceremony — the naked woman and the mysterious men who surround her, their faces bearing "the barbarian mask of a pagan cult"<sup>26</sup> — has, as Kulig-Janarek suggests, "a provocative and blasphemous character."<sup>27</sup>

I am not convinced, however, by this thesis. It would seem that the function of the religious connotations (the sanctuary, the sense of mystery, the procession, the deity, the making of a pilgrimage, the figures of the priests, the flags, and so on), not only in Schulz' own work but in the art of early Modernism that was closest to him (the Polish representatives being Wojtkiewicz, Miciński, Jaworski), belong to an entirely different modality from "blasphemous provocation" or, in the wider sense, of parody of what is held sacred. The function of the religious trappings is rather the sacralization of the depicted actions and figures and of the relations between them, including across time and space.<sup>28</sup> And also their staging, their theatricalization, their playing with "deeper" significance, and some-

26 An image in Schulz' story "August" ("Sierpień") from the collection *Cinnamon Shops* (*Sklepy cynamonowe*, 1934).

27 Kulig-Janarek, 1993, p. 43.

28 Władysław Panas notes that a frequent motif in Schulz' drawings is that of waiting for the Messiah's coming, and that this Messiah might be a... woman. See Władysław Panas, 2001, *Bruno od Mesjasza*, Lublin; and 2003, "Żeński Mesjasz, czyli o 'Wiośnie' Brunona Schulza," *W ulamkach zwierciadła... Bruno Schulz w 110 rocznicę urodzin i 60 rocznicę śmierci*, ed. M. Kitowska-Łysiak & W. Panas, Lublin, pp. 35-46.

times even their amusement value. "Hosannah!" [...] I have become an adherent of the new gospel," exclaims the narrator of the short story "Spring" ("Wiosna") in the collection *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass* (*Sanatorium pod klepsydrą*, 1937) referring to something as relatively insignificant as postage stamps.

We could say then that the object of male adoration in Schulz' graphic art is chiefly the nakedness of the female body, studied, examined and even spied upon from different angles, in every situation, in a great variety of poses, from a snapshot outline of the body to its full and overtly licentious exposition. But women in clothes are also the object of adoration in Schulz' pictures. In all Schulz' representations of women and men, in their relations and their gestures, there is something else too which, in my opinion, constitutes a highly characteristic feature of male-female interaction in Schulz and again indicates its "hidden meaning"; and that is that Schulz' female figures clearly evade or shun men's gazes, as well as all those gestures of curiosity, worship and idolatry. There is kind of mystery concealed in the way Schulz depicts relations between women and men, defined on the one hand by male fascination with female otherness, and on the other by the fact that his women always evade men's eyes. Woman, visible from all angles, and sometimes stripped of all clothing, is above all unattainable. As is well-known, this was one of the typical motifs of the Art Nouveau and of earlier Modernism in general.

Schulz' women therefore elude men or pass them by, while the men remain motionless, even paralysed in gestures of admiration. Men make pilgrimages to the figures or silhouettes of naked women. They then, however, either stop at a certain distance from them (sometimes there is a physical boundary such as a window, as in the illustration to the story "Edzio")<sup>29</sup> or they barely manage to scrape the extremities of the women's bodies — their feet, their toes or their fingertips, which they then try to kiss, wash or touch, but which always constitute an insurmountable boundary separating them from the female territory.

Hence, the insurmountable boundary between woman and man, the boundary between naked women and clothed men and thus between what is exposed and arouses fascination (the female body, femininity) and what

29 Another story from *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*.

is veiled and — in Schulz' representation — arouses no-one's fascination (the male body), as well as the elusiveness of his women or rather their specific air of mystery and — from the perspective of men — their unattainability, seem to me much more striking themes in Schulz than speculations about his masochism. Women and men, or rather femininity and masculinity, seem to create in his work two inseparable and yet entirely separate worlds or versions of "reality."

A female figure who in this perspective arouses particular interest is Undula, the protagonist of several of the pictures in *The Booke of Idolatry*<sup>30</sup> and — what is especially significant — one of the few figures in Schulz' drawings who is given her own name.

The name Undula (from the Latin *unda* meaning water, wave, whirlpool, unrest) is associated with Undine the water-spirit, although there is no trace of this element in *The Booke of Idolatry*. *Undine* was the title of an enormously popular novella by the German Romantic writer Friedrich Heinrich Karl de la Motte Fouqué (1777–1843) published in 1811. Despite the first edition appearing in a magazine, Fouqué was preparing a libretto in the following year for E.T.A. Hoffmann's opera based on the story and performed in Berlin in 1816. The story of Undine was widely known and praised by Goethe, Walter Scott and Richard Wagner, and was later popularized in Poland by Artur Górski's translation *Ondyna* which appeared in 1913.<sup>31</sup>

The eponymous Undine is a nymph or water-spirit, and like many female figures of Romantic fantasy, well-known in Polish literature of the period. In his tale Fouqué tells of the love of a knight for the beautiful water-spirit Undine, whom he gets to know and marries believing her to be the foster-daughter of a fisherman. The details of the plot are not impor-

30 See Małgorzata Kitowska, 1979, "Bruno Schulz — grafik i literat," *Literatura* 1; 1979, "Czytając 'Xięgę bałwochwalcą,'" *Twórczość* 35 (3), pp. 157–160; 1981, "'Xięga bałwochwalcza' — grafiki oryginalne (clichés verres)," *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 43 (4), pp. 401–410; 1992, "'Xięga bałwochwalcza' (studia — szkice — dzieło)," Bruno Schulz, *Gorzów Wielkopolski* [Introduction to the catalogue of the Bruno Schulz exhibition of materials from the collections of the Museum of Literature and the National Museum in Warsaw, December 1992]; Kitowska-Łysiak, 1992; Cf. Jerzy Ficowski, 2003, "'Xięga bałwochwalcza,'" *Regiony wielkiej herezji i okolice: Bruno Schulz i jego mitologia*, Sejny, pp. 243–280.

31 Fryderyk de la Motte Fouqué, 1913, *Ondyna*, trans. A. Górski, Warsaw.

tant to our purpose here, for they are merely variations on a motif already familiar from ancient mythology, popularized in medieval folk legends and rediscovered during the Romantic period. What is important instead is the essential nature, so to speak, of Fouqué's heroine.

Undine, when she reveals the secret of her origin and nature to her husband, explains that apart from the human world there also exists a world of elements—of water, fire, air and earth—and this world is inhabited by beings that look identical to people but differ from them in that they do not possess a soul. Water is inhabited by water-spirits, and among these the women or nymphs are called "undines" by human beings. In that underwater world "there are all the relics of the ancient world, beautiful things that people nowadays have lost the right to enjoy, covered over by the waves with their mysterious veil of silver."<sup>32</sup> Fouqué took this vision from the *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris, et caeteris spiritibus* by the famous alchemist Paracelsus (1493–1541) and prototype for Faust. The beings described by Paracelsus, and following him Fouqué, indeed do not possess an individual soul; instead they have a collective soul and are all therefore specimens as it were of one single being. As Undine says to her lover:

[...] we call ourselves human, too, and so far as our physical appearance goes, that's what we are — if it weren't for one thing. When we and other elemental spirits die, we disappear without leaving any trace of our existence. You others will awake one day to a purer life, but we just remain where we were, with sand and sparks and wind and waves. For we have no souls. Our element sets us in motion, and obeys us, so long as we're alive. But as soon as we are dead, it disperses us for ever. (64–65)

So what might this have in common with Schulz? If we accept that Undula in *The Booke of Idolatry* is a relation of the Undine in Fouqué's tale and of the medieval vision of Paracelsus, then Schulz' Undula would appear to be as much a collective name as a personal name. Undula is therefore not a

32 Friedrich Heinrich Karl de la Motte Fouqué, 1960, *Undine*, trans. P. Turner, London, p. 64. Subsequent page references are given in brackets.

concrete person, but every one of the women that Schulz portrays, or rather she is Woman in general. But—and her name allows us to make this interpretation—Undula in being a woman, is at the same time *not* a woman, since she belongs to the other mysterious, unattainable and constantly changing world of the elements. She is admired by men and arouses wonder because, in accordance with the legend, she is not only the embodiment of beauty, she is also beauty craving for human love, and not any love but love that is faithful until death.

Apart from water-spirits or undines that inspire fascination and arouse the sexual desire of men, one may also encounter beings in the other elements: in the air live the sylphs, in fire—salamanders, and in the earth, so Undine informs us, "mischievous, wizened" gnomes (63). There are also hideous underground imps, known as kobolds, with grotesque features, who jealously guard their underground treasure. Such features, should we choose to accept them as possible means to interpretation, may be recognized in several of Schulz' representations of men, and especially in those of the author or artist himself. Yet it is hard to discover in Schulz' world a copy of or even an allusion to a prototype. His imagination is governed by a capacity for instantaneous transformation, and one so fundamental that it in no way resembles any prototype, whatever the original inspirations may have been.

The world portrayed by Schulz conceals on the symbolic level more riddles than we might suppose. It is a world whose symbolism does not have a single pedigree. Schulz, in a way peculiar to himself, weaves into a single thread many strands: allusions to Greek and Roman mythology, the Old Testament, the mysticism of the Kabala and no doubt the mystical pantheism of Jakob Böhme. All these inspirations demand yet more thorough analysis.<sup>33</sup> In the work of Schulz accounts of sex and gender are not inscribed into the problem of demystifying reality in art, as was the case with Przybyszewski, Irzykowski and Witkacy, but into precisely the contrary: the mythologization of reality.

The "Mythologization of Reality" was the title of Schulz' most important programmatic statement on literature, his literary and philosophical manifesto.<sup>34</sup> "Mythologization," put in the simplest terms, signifies in

33 Cf. Władysław Panas, 1997, *Księga blasku*, Lublin; Panas, 2001.

34 Bruno Schulz, 1936, "Mityzacja rzeczywistości," *Studio* 3–4, pp. 32–34.

Schulz' conception transgression, the transformation of reality into a myth, but myth is also the transformation of antique mythology, which for Schulz is the universal repository of all manner of contemporary ideas, definitions and plots. For him therefore, myth is a universal matrix, upon which all cultural histories and elements have left their mark. Mythologization, understood in this sense, constantly accompanies human history, although it may appear to have been held back by the development of civilization. Myth is therefore, according to Schulz, a lost "primordial state," which can only be regained through literature or art. The task of literature is thus the "regeneration of primordial myths," in the realization of which Schulz adopts a symbolistic view of literature and language.

Schulz' entire oeuvre revolves around the mystery of the creation of the world, of the myth and symbolism of the coming of the Messiah.<sup>35</sup> His conception of reality and his anthropology are infused with the myth of the eternal metamorphosis of matter, which fashions a random and mutable shape out of every form of life, including human beings. This is also the source of Schulz' characteristic irony towards every one of these forms, which he treats as though they were but temporary masks, roles performed on the stage or behind the scenes of existence.

Different forms of life are also portrayed in Schulz' short stories as an ontological difference between the sexes. The narrator's father, Jakub, represents the male world. Their servant, Adela, represents the female world. Together they represent the two sexes as two different ontologies, two separate and distinct fundamental principles of being. Adela expresses the essence of femininity or being female, its "substance," and finds the ontological mainstay for her existence within herself. Jakub seeks instead ever new forms of existence for himself — always incomplete and flawed. Jakub is detached from reality (he constantly creates fantastic stories and conceptions), whereas Adela "forces him to take root" in reality. Woman and man in Schulz' short stories, as in his paintings and drawings, are two different modes of being. Man is weak, and unable to be self-sufficient; he is dependent on woman, who is self-sufficient because she represents the fullness of being, including the biological. Man is subordinate to woman

35 Schulz' magnum opus, a novel entitled *The Messiah (Mesjasz)* has never been recovered.

but is also transfixed by her. In desiring Adela, Jakub accepts her domination. On the one hand Adela is his arch-enemy, yet on the other she, like the narrator's mother, guarantees the stability of the world and its order (she is after all a servant). Man in Schulz' stories worships in woman the biological mystery of existence; at the same time he feels threatened by her. And so all Jakub's quasi-scientific experiments (he rears, for example, a menagerie of hybrid birds) are *de facto* a rebellion against the order of nature represented by Adela. But she ridicules Jakub's experiments and liquidates his fantastic theories and biological experiments with a single sweep of her broom. Man in Schulz sets alight a great fire with his fantastic ideas, yet is rendered helpless by the mysterious flame, as he sees it, fanned by male-female relations. And this mysterious flame is *eros*. Schulz portrays the problem of the battle of the sexes, typical of early Modernism, as a mythic mystery of life. In this his mentor was undoubtedly Nietzsche and his conception of the "birth of tragedy." But that is another story.<sup>36</sup>

36 See Włodzimierz Bolecki, 2003, "Principium individuationis: Motywy nietzscheańskie w twórczości Schulza," *Teksty Drugie* 5, pp. 17–33. In this article I identify another source of inspiration for Schulz' imagination and artistic ideas, namely Nietzsche's conception of Dionysian culture.