

Marcin Romanowski
University of Gdańsk

Jerzy Ficowski and the Biographical Affect

The Subject and his Biographer

If any writer could be reasonably called doomed to oblivion, it would be Bruno Schulz. Schulz was born in 1892 in Drohobycz¹ in Austrian Galizia, in the family of assimilated Jewish merchants. As a young man Schulz studied art and architecture in Vienna (where he unsuccessfully applied to join the Academy of Art in 1923), then architecture in Lviv, but did not graduate. After World War I he started working as an art teacher in King Władysław Jagiełło Gymnasium in his home town Drohobycz (already part of Poland). Before he started to think about writing, Schulz revealed himself as an artist with an album of cliché-verre, *Xięga bałwochwalcza (The Booke of Idolatry)*. Encouraged by his friend, philosopher Debora Vogel, to publish his prose (which was written primarily as postscripts in Schulz's letters to Vogel), Schulz contacted Zofia Nałkowska, an outstanding novelist and a prominent figure of Polish literary life at that time, who, enchanted by his writing, decided to support his efforts and helped him publish his book entitled *Cinnamon Shops* (in the English translation *The Street of Crocodiles*). The debut happened in 1933, and brought a little literary fame to this modest, shy, and provincial art teacher. The critics noticed the singularity of his poetic prose; however, they read it as a failed attempt at realistic prose, discussing Schulz's language and lack of interest in problems of 'real' reality. In 1937, Schulz published his second book, *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, composed of older short stories. In 1938 he was awarded the Golden Laurel Award by the Polish Academy of Literature. Then the war set in and Drohobycz came under the rule of the Soviet Union (1939-1941), then of the Third Reich. In Soviet Drohobycz, Schulz remained a teacher but his artistic career stopped. His aesthetics were too far from the expectations of communist cultural authorities, with their unrealistic poetics and lack of interest in working-class issues ('We don't need any more Prousts'—he was told by the editors of the journal *New Horizons* in Lviv²). But under German occupation, Schulz became only a Jewish *Untermensch* with no rights at all. And as a Jew he was murdered on the street in Drohobycz by SS Scharführer Karl Günther (19 November 1942). The reason for the murder was rivalry between Günther and another SS, Felix Landau, who was somehow Schulz's protector. Schulz was working for Landau as a painter, he painted Landau's portrait, the interior of the Gestapo canteen and of the Riding School. He also painted fairy-tale stories on the walls of Landau's son's bedroom.³ Schulz died

¹ Polish satirist Marian Hemar called Drohobycz 'a-one-and-a-half of a town, half Polish, half Jewish and half Ukrainian' in order to express its multicultural aspect.

² Jerzy Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy. Bruno Schulz: A Biographical Portrait*, translated and edited by Theodosia Robertson, New York-London, Norton & Company, 2003, p. 130.

³ That last work (although considered interesting from a biographical and not an artistic point of view), discovered in Landau's former house in 2001, became an object of international scandal when it was taken by representatives of Yad Vashem Institute. See Jerzy Ficowski, 'The Last Fairy Tale of Bruno Schulz,' in *Regions of the Great Heresy*, *op. cit.*, p. 163-172.

on the day he was to escape from Drohobycz ghetto. His body was buried in a nameless grave in the Jewish cemetery, which was destroyed soon after the war to build some blocks of flats.

The whole literary output of Bruno Schulz consists in these two volumes of short stories. A manuscript of his novel *Messiah*, viewed as Schulz's *opus magnum*, was lost, as well as the short story 'Die Heimkehr,' sent to Thomas Mann, and a story about the son of a shoemaker, sent to Lviv's communist journal *Nowe Widnokreghi* (*New Horizons*). Even these little remains came close to disappearing for evermore. After the war, under the new communist regime, one could say *nihil nisi malum* about Schulz. His manuscripts, drawings and letters were destroyed or lost. People who knew Schulz were killed or scattered all over the world. Or if they stayed in Drohobycz, which was now a part of the USSR, they chose to remain silent. But even though doomed to oblivion by history, Schulz found his own Max Brod.⁴

The basic facts about Bruno Schulz's life and work that we know today, we owe to one person: Jerzy Ficowski. An outstanding scholar of Schulz's prose, Jerzy Jarzębski, in an article written for Ficowski's 75th birthday, called him 'an adoring critic.' This kind of critic, with his lifelong fidelity to a beloved author, does not only explain his favourite author's work, but also gives his author a prominent place in his own work.

Who is therefore the adoring critic? More than an exegete or a collector of heirlooms, he gives a writer a place in literature and his work a chance to survive. When he passes away, the writer dies a second time.⁵

Another scholar, Stanisław Rosiek, claims that 'Schulzology was born of rapture.'⁶ A peculiar feature of Jerzy Ficowski is that he 'was able as no one else to turn his rapture into work.'⁷

It has to be said that apart from being an authority on Schulz's life and work Jerzy Ficowski had many other activities and interests. He was also a precursor for studies on the culture of Polish Gypsies, wrote a monograph on symbolist painter Witold Wojtkiewicz, but he was also a translator, a song-writer and a poet—wrongly neglected—known in particular as the author of *The Reading of Ashes*, considered one of the most poignant literary representations of the Holocaust. Jerzy Ficowski was also a soldier in the Polish Home Army and took part in the Warsaw Uprising. From 1976 onwards his name was banned from publishing because of his signing the Letter of the 59, a protest against changes in the constitution of communist Poland.

⁴ Max Brod was a friend of Franz Kafka and the administrator of his estate after his death. Brod disobeyed Kafka's instructions to burn his papers and decided to publish it. Comparing Ficowski to Brod we must however remember that unlike Franz Kafka Schulz wanted his works to be preserved.

⁵ Jerzy Jarzębski, 'Krytyk miłujący (Jerzy Ficowski jako badacz twórczości Schulza),' in *Wcielenia Jerzego Ficowskiego według recenzji, szkiców i rozmów z lat 1956-2007*, Piotr Sommer (ed.), Sejny, Fundacja Pogranicze, 2010, p. 494 ('Kim jest więc krytyk miłujący? Kimś więcej niż egzegetą czy zbieraczem pamiątek. W jego osobie pisarz znajduje, by tak rzec, bytowy fundament i szanse dalszego istnienia. Gdy go nie stanie—artysta umiera po raz drugi'). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author of this article.

⁶ Stanisław Rosiek, 'Zachwyty Ficowskiego,' *Schulz/Forum*, vol. 3 (2014), p. 3 ('schulzologia zrodziła się z zachwyty').

⁷ *Ibid.* ('jak nikt inny w takim stopniu swój zachwyty przełożył na pracę').

The story of Ficowski's fascination began in 1942, when he was 18 years old and an underground⁸ high school student: a schoolmate lent him Schulz's *Cinnamon Shops*. Enchanted by this prose, he decided to write a letter to the author in order to express his admiration and gratitude. Young Ficowski did not know that the letter was sent too late and Schulz would never receive it. After learning the tragic news of Schulz's death, probably in the Spring of 1943, Ficowski started to write about his beloved author. He wrote a critical essay called *Regions of the Great Heresy* (the title is a quotation from Schulz's short story 'Tailor's Dummies'), full of exaltation and naivety.⁹ With the later biography this text has in common only the title. Ficowski also got from his friend three letters from Schulz to the critic Andrzej Pleśniewicz. Unlike their receiver who perished in the last days of war, the letters managed to avoid the fate of many other manuscripts and epistolary documents.

After the end of the war, in 1947, Ficowski published in several Polish journals an announcement that he was searching for any information about Bruno Schulz, his life and the fate of his artistic output. Many people who knew Schulz before the war (some of them his disciples) answered his request. Jerzy Ficowski's archives contain about 1600 letters about Schulz, which is a great and still unexplored source for Schulz's biography.¹¹ These testimonies are the basic elements from which Ficowski assembled his portrait of Schulz.

Ficowski started collecting letters, sources, gathering testimonies of those who knew Schulz personally. But due to political issues the climate was unfavourable for recalling such a person as Bruno Schulz. Only in 1948 was Ficowski able to publish in the journal *Odrodzenie* a photograph of a portrait of Schulz painted by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz with a one-sentence caption: 'six years ago Schulz perished in Drohobycz, murdered by Nazis.'¹² It is significant that the only context in which Schulz could have been mentioned is martyrological. Only in 1956, when Stalinism was over, could Ficowski publish his first article on Schulz, entitled 'Przypomnienie Brunona Schulza' ('A Reminder about Bruno Schulz'). At that time, interest in Schulz was growing, with a new edition of his prose. In 1964, Wydawnictwo Literackie published the *Proza (Prose)* volume with an introduction by Artur Sandauer ('Rzeczywistość zdegradowana,' or 'Reality Degraded') and with several of Schulz's letters edited by Ficowski. In 1965, Ficowski published an article, 'In Search for Traces of Bruno Schulz,' in the literary journal *Współczesność (Contemporaneity)* where he described his unsuccessful researches in Schulz's home town. Finally, in 1967 Ficowski published the first edition of *Regions of the Great Heresy*. The biography would have four editions. Even though he claimed that all was lost and no other discoveries could be made, Ficowski carried on with his work in progress. In 1973 he published a

⁸ It's important to note that the school was part of underground education in occupied Poland. In the German-controlled General Government education was illegal. According to the Nazi's theories Slavic people didn't need education (except courses for factory workers). The formation and development of the whole system of conspiratorial education, including not only high schools but also even secret universities, is considered as one of the greatest achievements of the Polish Underground State.

⁹ The second version of this text is in Jerzy Ficowski's archive. The first one was lost by its author in an urban train in 1943.

¹¹ On Ficowski's epistolary correspondents see Jerzy Kandziora, 'Przestrzenie pamięci, przestrzenie rozproszenia (Składanie biografii Brunona Schulza),' in *Przestrzenie geo(bio)graficzne w literaturze*, Elżbieta Konończuk and Elżbieta Sidoruk (eds.), Białystok, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Białostockiego, 2015, p. 245-265.

¹² J. Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy*, op. cit., p. 29.

facsimile edition of a manuscript short story, 'Druga jesień' or 'Second Autumn' (which is the only surviving manuscript of Schulz's literary work), with a preface by himself. In 1975, the second edition of *Regions* and *The Book of Letters* came out, and in 1983 the volume *Bruno Schulz. Listy, fragmenty, wspomnienia o pisarzu* (*Bruno Schulz: Letters, Fragments, Memories about the Writer*). 1986 was the year he published a collection of essays, *Okolice sklepów cynamonowych* (*The Environs of Cinnamon Shops*), in 1988 came the album edition of *The Booke of Idolatry*, in 1992 the third edition of *Regions* (which is the base for Theodosia Robertson's translation). In 2002 the Fundacja Pogranicze (foundation 'Borderland') from Sejny published *Regiony wielkiej herezji i okolice. Bruno Schulz i jego mitologia* (*Regions of the Great Heresy and the Environs. Bruno Schulz and his Mythology*), which is the most complete set of Ficowski's Schulzian works. It encompasses *Regions*, *Environs*, prefaces to editions of 'Second Autumn' and *The Booke of Idolatry*, several newly discovered letters and a few new essays (like 'J [...] Bezimienna,' or 'J.–the Nameless,' about Józefina Szelińska, Bruno Schulz's fiancée). Ficowski also wrote two poems about Bruno Schulz, 'Mój nieocalony' ('My Unsaved') in 1968 and 'Drohobycz 1920' in 1981, which are included in this final edition of *Regions* as a kind of prologue and epilogue.

The Voice of the Biographer

Paula R. Backscheider in her book *Reflections on Biography* claims that 'the most invisible person in a biography is the most powerful—the author. At every moment his or her voice can be heard—but isn't.'¹³ The voice of the biographer, although heard through the whole story, seems to be unnoticeable. The voice of the biographer manifests itself in the initial parts of the narrative—prologue, preface, initial chapters—and establishes the shape of the whole narrative, determines the biographer's choices of what to include and how to present chosen events and problems as well as his perspective of appraisal. Backscheider compares the voice of the biographer to the contract between the author and the reader.

More than a bridge, it is the primary signal of the writer's relationship to readers and to content. As readers accept and come to trust the contract, they feel that they are in expert hands, as if they are being conducted on a tour by a superb driver who knows the landscape, its historical markers and contemporary significance.¹⁴

Answering the question, what should the voice of the biographer sound like, Backscheider enumerates such issues as accuracy, comprehension of the cultural and historical contexts, ability to demonstrate 'grasp and penetration, range and depth,'¹⁵ ability to select material, but also strictly literary skills—ability to create an interesting, readable story.

The Polish scholar working on biographical writing Anita Całek proposes the notion of biographical pact (inspired by Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact). In the biographical relation between author and reader, we may see a kind of pact which

¹³ Paula Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography*, n.p., Createspace, 2013, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

obligates the biographer to examine the subject's life, to explain it using precise theoretical and methodological tools, to study all the sources which are available and finally to write a biographical narrative as good as the biographer is able to write, a narrative that becomes a reconstruction of the subject's life-course. In return, the reader assumes that the biographer is the author of a text that belongs to a particular genre, and that the biographer is trustworthy. The biographical pact also determines the relationship between the biographer and the subject. The biographer becomes a representative of the subject, speaks in his name, is obliged to present the subject's life truly and to explain his approach in case he has discovered new materials or sources.¹⁶

Both theoretical approaches emphasize the double nature of biography—a genre which demands from its authors both the expertise of the historian and the literary skills of the novelist. In underlining the merits and literary aspects of biographical work, both Backscheider and Całek neglect another aspect of biographical relations: the affective one. This is the problem I would like to examine in the case of Jerzy Ficowski: how biography can be a means of expressing the biographer's affect and how the biographer can transmit this affect to readers. My approach is supported by Charles Altieri's theoretical proposition. He considers affect to be an umbrella term and divides it into four basic categories: feelings, emotions, moods and passions.

Affects are immediate modes of sensual responsiveness to the world characterized by an accompanying imaginative dimension. [...] Feelings are elemental affective states characterized by an imaginative engagement in the immediate processes of sensation. Moods are modes of feeling where the sense of subjectivity becomes diffuse and sensation merges into something close to atmosphere, something that seems to pervade an entire scene or situation. Emotions are affects involving the construction of attitudes that typically establish a particular cause and so situate the agent within a narrative and generate some kind of action or identification. Finally, passions are emotions within which we project significant stakes for the identity that they make possible.¹⁷

In the case of Ficowski we have to do with emotions and passions, but I am not interested in discussing the limits between those notions and settling whether we have to do with affect or emotion, etc. I agree with Michał Paweł Markowski when he claims that:

Due to enormous terminological confusion it would be useful to use the notion of 'affective condition' which encompasses all non-volitional and non-intellectual reactions on what happened in the world: emotions, sensations, feelings, moods, passions, desires. Affective condition defines subjective involvement in the world without which human existence itself is impossible.¹⁸

¹⁶ Anita Całek, *Biografia naukowa: od koncepcji do narracji. Interdyscyplinarność, teorie, metody badawcze*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013, p. 60-61 and 151-156.

¹⁷ Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture. An Aesthetics of the Affects*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2003, p. 2.

¹⁸ Michał Paweł Markowski, 'Emocje. Hasło encyklopedyczne w trzech częściach i dwudziestu trzech rozdziałach (nie licząc motto),' in *Pamięć i afekty*, Zofia Budrewicz, Ryszard Nycz, Roma Sendyka (eds.), Warszawa, Wydawnictwo IBL, 2014, p. 350 ('Z powodu olbrzymiego zamieszania terminologicznego pożyteczne może być posługiwanie się kategorią "kondycji afektywnej" (*afficere* = wywoływać zmiany, wpływać), obejmującej wszystkie niewolicjonalne i nieintelektualne reakcje na to, co wydarza się w świecie: emocje, odczucia, uczucia, nastroje, namiętności, pragnienia. Kondycja

Both Jerzy Jarzębski and Stanisław Rosiek underline Jerzy Ficowski's emotional engagement in his Schulzian researches. Jarzębski writes about the biographer's admiration and adoration of his subject. Rosiek considers Ficowski's rapture a crucial feature of his relationship with Schulz. My goal is to cross the horizon of these remarks. I would like to interrogate the language of rapture and admiration in order to recognize how these spheres of affect appear on the map of Ficowski's biographical work. What I am interested in is not only how Ficowski expresses his affection for his subject, but also how he affects, *i.e.* transmits his affect to, his readers. I am going to focus on three aspects: rapture, the sense of loss and the fragility of the biographee.

Rapture–Constructing the Reader

In the initial chapter of *Regions of the Great Heresy*, Jerzy Ficowski gives his reasons for writing this book and more generally what motivates his whole interest in the life and work of Bruno Schulz. The meaning of his whole work seems to originate in one peculiar moment of his first reading of Schulz in 1942. This moment of literary initiation is presented with particular attention to its emotional background.

My own enchantment with the writing of Bruno Schulz lies at the heart of this book. When I experienced in 1942 the incomparable emotion which accompanies a first reading of Schulz's works, it turned out to be the last year of his life. [...] It [desire to write about Schulz, *Author's Note*] had emerged immediately after my initial delight with *Cinnamon Shops*. [...] I naively wrote that although it might mean nothing to him, he should know that there was someone for whom *Cinnamon Shops* was the source of intense delight and revelation. The attainment of the Schulzian artistic postulate led me to a state of feverish ecstasy.¹⁹

In order to focus more precisely on the expression of rapture I have to refer to the Polish original. Ficowski uses two key words in his response to Schulz: 'zachwyty' translated as 'delight,' and 'olśnienie,' translated as 'enchantment.' 'Zachwyty' contains the root 'chwyt,' which is common with the verb 'chwycić' (to catch). Historically 'zachwycić' meant to capture someone. 'Olśnienie' has the same root as the verb 'lśnić,' which means 'to shine.' The literal meaning of this word could be defined as 'being temporarily blinded by strong visual sensations.' These linguistic considerations provide insight into how Ficowski describes his experience. In his approach, reading Schulz was a kind of encounter with something overwhelming and exceeding his perceptive power. Schulz seems to capture the imagination of the young reader. So much so that Ficowski also used to describe his relationship with Schulz in terms of religious experience. He uses the word 'revelation,' describes Schulz's work as a new sacred text, and finally—he calls himself a believer or exegete, as opposed to an objective scholar. Such religious language can also be considered an expression of Ficowski's emotions: his enraptured admiration of Schulz.

Moreover, Ficowski uses the same expressions to describe other people's responses to Schulz's art: Debora Vogel, Naum Aronson or Stanisław Ignacy

afektywna określa "podmiotowe zaangażowanie w świat," bez którego niemożliwa jest ludzka egzystencja jako taka').

¹⁹ J. Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy*, *op. cit.*, p. 25-27.

Witkiewicz.²⁰ The book *Cinnamon Shops* was composed from the postscripts originally written for Debora Vogel alone.

Debora received these extraordinary letters with increasing delight.²¹

Aronson was fascinated with Schulz's drawings, and the degree and sincerity of Aronson's delight was obvious even to Schulz, who was inclined to lack of faith in himself.²²

Witkiewicz's moving hope testifies to his enchantment with *Cinnamon Shops*, to his captivation by its autonomous inner truth, almost not the work of a writer but the result of some magical initiation or shared secrets.²³

Ficowski projects his sensation on all those who came in contact with Schulz. Describing their reaction in the same way as his own, Ficowski establishes his own style of literary response as a paradigmatic reaction to Schulz's prose. However, Ficowski noticed that obviously rapture was not the only reaction elicited by Schulz's writing, but he neglected those negative appraisals, claiming that outstanding critics and writers recognized and appreciated the value of Schulz work, whereas those who misunderstood him were minor critics or prejudiced antisemitic nationalists.²⁴ What is more, this paradigmatic response to Schulz's work is not only projected onto the past, but also becomes a challenge for future readers. In his preface to the fourth Polish edition of *Regions*, a volume including almost everything Ficowski wrote about Schulz, the biographer gives a kind of testament to the next generations of scholars.

They [the younger generation of critics, *Author's note*] have already achieved a lot in this field, they will achieve much more—maybe they will be given a chance to read and analyse those works which are still awaiting discovery. Maybe they will be given a chance to experience new delights and enchantments?²⁵

²⁰ Debora Vogel (1902-1942) was a philosopher and poet writing in Yiddish (especially known for her volume of poetic prose *Acacias bloom*). She was a friend of Schulz and encouraged him to publish his prose. Vogel perished in the Lviv ghetto where she was forced to move with her husband Rafał Barenbluth and their children in 1942. Naum Aronson (1872-1943) was a sculptor. He met with Schulz in Paris in 1937. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, or Witkacy as he called himself (1885-1939), was one of the most original and intriguing artists of Polish modernism: painter, novelist, playwright, philosopher, catastrophist, author of the theory of pure form in fine art, famous for his experiments with drugs and his sexual excesses.

²¹ Jerzy Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁴ Ficowski didn't mention the negative approaches of admittedly notable critics like Kazimierz Wyka and Stefan Napierski and their *Dwugłos o Schulzu* (*Duologue on Schulz*), no more than the opinion of Ignacy Fik who included Schulz in 'choromaniaks' (from the second name of writer Michał Choromański: it's a word play which mean 'sick maniacs') who are interested in oneiric and uncanny matters of perverted psychology instead of dealing with serious social issues like poverty or inequality.

²⁵ Jerzy Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji i okolice. Bruno Schulz i jego mitologia*, Sejny, Fundacja Pogranicze, 2002, p. 9 ('Już dokonali niemało, dokonają jeszcze więcej – a może będzie im dana także możliwość lektury i analizy tych dzieł, które czekają jeszcze na odnalezienie? Może dostąpią nad nimi szansy nowych olśnień i zachwyków').

These forthcoming readings are supposed to remain within the framework of the model of response established by Jerzy Ficowski's youthful reading, the founding act of Schulzology.

Loss–Deepening the Sense of Preciousness

At the beginning of Ficowski's research adventure lies an overwhelming experience of loss. Communication failed, and the young admiring reader did not get a chance to meet his beloved author: his letter remained undelivered. This moment of loss shapes the entire relationship between biographer and subject. The cultural phenomenon called 'Bruno Schulz' is marked by partiality and absence. We have nothing but luckily saved pieces of information about him. Many biographical sources, like manuscripts and works of art, perished during the historical storms of the 20th century. Jerzy Ficowski's works on Schulz are filled with the sense of loss, and they become a sort of catalogue of the lost works and sources, a kind of Schulzian death record.

In *Regions of the Great Heresy* we find several examples of the lost manuscript motif. It appears for the first time in the case of the letters to Władysław Riff: a young poet and student of Polish philology at Jagiellonian University, he was a friend of Schulz's in the 1920s. Riff suffered from tuberculosis. Because of his sickness, he had to quit his studies and spent the last years of his life in the Zakopane mountain resort. Ficowski surmised that in their correspondence Schulz and Riff discussed matters of art and philosophy. Their epistolary conversations had a great influence on Schulz's literary imagination. The letters, a great source of development for Schulz's literary art, were burned after Riff's death for hygienic considerations.

On December 25, 1927, at the age of twenty-six, Riff died of tuberculosis at his mother's pension in Zakopane, and the fumigators who disinfected his room burned, among other things, the manuscripts of Riff's unpublished works and all of Schulz's letters.²⁶

Schulz's letters to Debora Vogel, where in postscripts Schulz wrote the first version of *Cinnamon Shops*, had a similar fate. The letters were left in Debora's house in Lviv when she and her husband moved into the ghetto in 1941. Unlike their author and receiver, they survived the war, but to no avail, for they were 'burned during a general cleaning several years earlier' (than Ficowski's arrival in Lviv).²⁷ In a report on his journey to Drohobycz entitled 'W poszukiwaniu śladów Brunona Schulza' ('In Search For Traces of Bruno Schulz'), published in the literary journal *Współczesność* ('Contemporarity') in 1965,²⁸ Ficowski presents an even more drastic version of how a Ukrainian janitor described the fate of Vogel's papers, calling it 'superfluous garbage.'²⁹

Both episodes elicit the same motif, of the fragility of what remains after the death of a great, enchanting, beloved yet unrecognized artist, whose legacy has been

²⁶ J. Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy*, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁸ Two years before the first Polish edition of *Regions of the Great Heresy*.

²⁹ J. Ficowski, 'W poszukiwaniu śladów Brunona Schulza,' *Współczesność*, vol. 25-26 (1965), p. 6 ('niepotrzebne śmieci').

absurdly annihilated. Biographical evidence, inestimable for Ficowski, was left at the mercy of people who considered it mere garbage. The effect of these episodes on the readers consists in confrontation between Ficowski's admiring logic and the brute pragmatic logic of the annihilators. The fate of the letters can also be viewed as a metonymy of Schulz's fate. In the same way, the place name of Drohobycz becomes synonymous with the sense of loss. In *Regions of the Great Heresy*, Ficowski mentions his journey to Schulz's hometown in 1965, and compares it to a pilgrimage. 'My findings were meagre, but my Drohobycz walks were like a pilgrim's visit to a sacred site—to the cradle of Schulzian myths.'³⁰ In this sentence we may observe two aspects of the biographer's experience in the locales of his subject's life. The first one is archival-archaeological: searching for unknown sources. The second is affective-intimate: searching for empathic encounters with the sites where the biographical subject lived, soft emotional experience instead of hard material evidence. For Ficowski the latter aspect does not matter at all: no sources were left in Schulz's native town.

The starting point of the journey is a 1934 letter by Schulz to the novelist Tadeusz Breza, in which Schulz invites Breza to visit him in Drohobycz. Thirty years later, Ficowski decided to take 'advantage of his 1934 invitation.'³¹ The literary record of this journey is the main part of the chapter 'Phantoms and Reality,' which is actually devoted to problems of Schulz's representations of reality. Ficowski notices changes in the urban space, the disappearing of buildings and other details as well as of the pre-war society of the town.³² But he also finds a consistency in some elements of urban space, especially non-material sensations, described in Schulz's prose.

The house where he was born and in which he spent his childhood no longer exists; another building has stood for decades on that corner site, where the dawn sunlight streams through its front windows. [...] The glass jars displayed in the shop that once belonged to the pharmacist Gorgoniusz Tobiaszek are long gone. Only the sun, rising and setting precisely as Schulz described, still illumines the facades of the various buildings.³³

Writing out his sensations, Ficowski puts them together with quotations from Schulz's prose. The sensual impression of sunlight becomes the only tie with the lost materiality of Schulz's hometown. That is what the fruitfulness of this journey is all about: despite the lack of discoveries, his encounter with the urban space of Schulz's Drohobycz gave the biographer a sense of how Schulz's literary visions were rooted in a real place. The journey also allowed the biographer to feel the *genius loci* of Schulz's Drohobycz, even though it was not the same site anymore.

In his narrative on visiting Drohobycz, Jerzy Ficowski's experience of the biographical journey, what Paul Murray Kendall calls 'the importance of the locale,'³⁴

³⁰ J. Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³² Ficowski notices that Drohobycz in 1965 is not the same as in Schulz's times, because the identity of the town was destroyed due to historical events. During the Second World War the Jewish people of Drohobycz were mostly killed in the Holocaust, and after the war, when the town became part of the Soviet Union, Polish people were forced to migrate to Poland. 'The war, the changes in the Polish borders, the death of the majority of Schulz's friends, the destruction of his vast correspondence, and the loss of all his manuscripts and signed works—so completely destroyed had been the era of his life and those who witnessed it,' *ibid.*, p. 28.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 93-94.

³⁴ 'This complex, subtle, frequently inarticulate relationship between biographer and locale affects not

has much in common with other biographers like Leon Edel and Richard Holmes. All those notable biographers independently came to a similar conclusion about the importance of experiencing the scenery of a subject's life. Leon Edel writes about his Italian trip:

When I came to write I wrote not out of old books but out of visual reality; I had the Arno Valley before my eyes and the vaulted sky, the spacious rococo rooms, the pebbly terraces—I could almost feel them under foot. I wrote of a small, intricate world with a familiarity I would not otherwise have had—a world in which an emotional drama had taken place whose echoes alone were available to me.³⁵

Edel calls the biographical journey 'the most intimate kind of travel.'³⁶ Richard Holmes in his essay *Footsteps. The Adventures of A Romantic Biographer* describes biographical practice by using two metaphors: 'pursuit' and 'haunting.'

'Biography' meant a book about someone's life. Only, for me, it was to become a kind of pursuit, a tracking of the physical trail of someone's path through the past, a following of footsteps. You would never catch them. But maybe, if you were lucky, you might write about the pursuit of that fleeting figure in such way as to bring it alive in the present.³⁷

The biographer then shall firstly follow his subject's footsteps, visit the same places, touch the same things as the subject did in order to get as close as he can to the one he is pursuing. The pursuit seems successful when a deeply emotional, imaginary relationship appears, so much so that the biographer feels haunted.

Nothing, of course, that would make a Gothic story, or interest the Society for Physical Research; but an act of deliberate psychological trespass, an invasion or encroachment of the present upon the past, and in some sense the past upon the present.³⁸

But empathically following the footsteps of a biographical subject is not enough for biography to appear. The true moment of birth for a biography is when this naive identification breaks down, and the encounter of the physical traces of someone's past presence brings out a sense of the impossibility of grasping the past life.

There are many other examples of lost Schulziana: the manuscripts of all his known literary works but one; the novel *Messiah*; the short story 'Die Heimkehr' sent to Thomas Mann; the short story about a shoemaker's son sent to *Nowe Widnokreği (New Horizons)*—a literary journal in communist Lviv; an unknown number of letters; a diary from the ghetto. What is the meaning of this exposure of losses? First of all, they

only the simulation of the life but also the simulation of the life-relationship. The interaction of biographer and subject is heightened by the biographer's direct, sensory experience of the matrix from which the subject's experience has been shaped [...] a conviction—call it a romantic quirk, if you will—that where the subject has trod he must tread, what the subject has seen he must see [...] The winning of this kinship, more than anything else he can do, helps to annihilate the centuries, the spaces, the deceptions of change, the opacity of death,' Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography*, New York, Norton, 1965, 1985, p. 150.

³⁵ Leon Edel, *Writing Lives. Principia Biographica*, New York-London, Norton Press, 1984, p. 231.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

³⁷ Richard Holmes, *Footsteps. Adventures of A Romantic Biographer*, London, Harper Press, 1985, p. 27.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

become a symbolic representation of Schulz's fate, that of a fragile individual colliding with the brutal reality of the 20th century. Secondly, it is a gesture by which the biographer exposes his own craft, disclosing all the obstacles he had to face in his work. It can also be considered a kind of appeal to all those who hold some item of Schulziana or who know something about Schulz to share their knowledge with the biographer. Thirdly, Ficowski also focuses on losses in order to bear witness to the historical experience. Stories of 'works preserved and lost' are in equal measure the stories of people who managed to save them. Telling their stories seems an attempt, albeit imperfect, to save them from total annihilation. Significantly, the whole preface of *The Book of Letters* is devoted to blocks of correspondence that have entirely perished. Such perspective brings the experience of brutal historical catastrophe to the fore. Ficowski's work is like a lamentation for irredeemable losses. The feelings it provokes are those associated with grief: regret, sorrow, melancholy.

But if we follow the path suggested by the title of the first chapter of *Regions*, 'I found an Authentic,' we may consider another approach to matters of loss. This interpretive path leads us to Schulz's short story 'The Book,' from *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, which played a great part in Ficowski's intellectual life. In 'The Book,' Schulz tells the story of rediscovering the mythical Book, called by the narrator 'the Authentic,' which in his earliest childhood memories had been read by his father and shone with incomparable splendour, as an object of fascination and enchantment. Rediscovered years later, the Authentic turns out to be a devastated shred of old newspapers with announcements and advertisements from years ago. With the father's suggestion that 'The book is a myth in which we believe when we are young, but which we cease to take seriously as we get older,' Józef, the narrator, disagrees: 'I knew then that the Book is a postulate, that it is a goal. I carried upon my shoulders the burden of a great mission.'³⁹

In Ficowski's interpretation of Schulz's writing, 'The Book' is a kind of manifesto of his artistic program. But its plot can also be considered a pattern for Ficowski's life and research story, with youthful memories of being enchanted by the great, brilliant book that seems to contain the key to a mystery. Following the moment of loss, and thereafter searching for and discovering fragmented, or rather desecrated, shattered pieces⁴⁰ of the Book meant not as a literary text, but as the whole of a phenomenon called 'Bruno Schulz,' Ficowski is also a biographer who seems to carry upon his shoulders the burden of a great mission proclaimed in the title of his 1956 article: 'A Reminder about Bruno Schulz.'

In such an approach the Book (meant as the Whole) is a promise. The Book seduces by its absence and elusiveness. It is the object that does not exist, that fills the admiring researcher, on the one hand, with sorrow, while, on the other hand, opening up a space for the free play of imagination. For, if the Book is unreachable, it can also be loosely imagined and invented. The object of those games of imagination is not the content of the Book, but the emotional expectation of an encounter with it. The Book demands an aesthetic of nostalgia that, as Marek Zaleski claims, 'is blurred. It is the

³⁹ Bruno Schulz, 'The Book,' *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, trans. Celina Wieniawska (1978), available online: <http://www.brunoschulzart.org/> (17.08.2016).

⁴⁰ Already cited fragments about treating Schulz's letters and drawings as garbage associate with a fragment of *The Book* where Józef realizes that Adela is packing food in paper ripped from *The Authentic*. "You silly boy," she answered shrugging her shoulders. "It has been lying here all the time; we tear a few pages from it every day and take them to the butcher's for packing meat or your father's lunch."

beauty that gives birth to melancholy. It's a pleasure that hurts.'⁴¹ The pain of the irreversible incompleteness of Schulziana mingles with the peculiar pleasure of the elusive, the charm of the object that does not exist, and hence cannot disappoint.

Another issue connected with problems of loss is the change in the biographer's attitude towards his researches during all these years. *Regions of the Great Heresy* had four editions, in 1967, 1975, 1992 and 2002. Each one was updated and supplemented with new information based on newly discovered sources or newly received accounts.⁴² If we compare all four editions, we see that Ficowski's attitude to his Schulzian researches has changed between the second and the third edition. Theodosia Robertson's translation of *Regions of the Great Heresy* is based on the third, 1992 edition. In her translation the last paragraph of the chapter 'Works Preserved and Lost' is filled with the hope of further discoveries, expressed in the conditional mode.

Even a cursory glance shows how enormous and lamentable is the loss of so much of Bruno Schulz's work. If no further discoveries of manuscripts are made, Bruno Schulz's literary heritage will consist only of two books and a handful of texts published in journals in his lifetime. Nevertheless, that surviving portion of the output of this gifted artist ensures him a prominent place in the literature of the century.⁴³

But if the translation had been based on the first or second edition (provided with significant subtitles like 'Sketches on the Life and Work of Bruno Schulz,' which emphasized the fragmentary nature of that approach), the last paragraph would have had a different shape. In the first two editions Ficowski claims that all hope is gone and there is no chance of further meaningful discoveries. Between the second and the third edition something happened in Ficowski's approach, and he started to hope that some new discoveries might turn up. The drawings, manuscripts and letters earlier thought to be destroyed now seem to be just temporarily not found. There was no single moment when that shift of attitude happened. It was rather a process of cumulating new discoveries as well as receiving responses from the readers of his works. Younger scholars of Bruno Schulz appeared, like Jerzy Speina, Wojciech Wyskiel or Jerzy Jarzębski, and that increased the biographer's enthusiasm. Then the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of Soviet archives raised new hopes.

Frailty—Asking for Compassion

How did Ficowski create a portrait of Bruno Schulz from all those scattered surviving fragments? Which elements played an important part and what issues did he rather dissemble? What kind of affective response did Ficowski attempt to evoke? The crucial feature of Ficowski's biographical discourse is his embodiment of the biographical subject. As Susan Tridgell notices in *Understanding Our Selves. The Dangerous Art of Biography*:

⁴¹ Marek Zaleski, *Formy pamięci. O przedstawianiu przeszłości w polskiej literaturze współczesnej*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo IBL 1996, p. 12-13 ('*Estetyka nostalgii jest zmącona: to piękno, które rodzi melancholię, przyjemność, która sprawia ból*').

⁴² See Jerzy Kandziora, 'Jerzy Ficowski o Schulzu—między rekonstrukcją a retoryką. (Refleksje nad *Regionami wielkiej herezji*)', *Schulz/Forum*, vol. 3 (2014), p. 54-62.

⁴³ J. Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy*, *op. cit.*, p. 152-153.

Biographers often hold implicit, rather than explicit conceptions of the self: whether or not a biographer holds a disembodied view of the self, for example, may be revealed not in an explicit statement about 'the nature of the self' by the biographer, but in a decision that the biographer makes about what to include in the biographical narrative. [...] We might note, though, that a biographer could argue (against Mellor) that it would be foolish to include descriptions in a biography of bodily functions which could be taken for granted (such as defecation) as they are shared by all human beings. A biographer might have a view of selves as embodied and yet only include those bodily experiences which he or she felt were most significant for the biographical subject.⁴⁴

In the case of Ficowski, we see a biographer who pays close attention to somatic aspects of his subject's life. It does not mean an unlimited openness on each and every kind of bodily matter, but stressing the connection between the psycho-physical condition of the subject and his life-course. The portrait of Bruno Schulz we may find in *Regions of the Great Heresy* is founded on the tension between his intellectual or spiritual greatness and his physical frailty, anxiety and weakness in interpersonal relationships. Schulz's image is made up of such features as physical weakness, fragility, bashfulness, reclusiveness, but also secretiveness. His inferiority complex is contrasted with the impression he used to make on others: fascination and respect. Ficowski refers to the romantic conception of the relation between the weakness of a sick body and a mighty spirit,⁴⁵ regarding illness as evidence of extraordinary sensibility. David Ellis, while commenting on Georges Painter's biography of Marcel Proust, claims that there are two influential patterns by which biographers may handle their subject's illness.

One of these is that there is some natural connection between the pathological and the creative: that no person who is completely 'healthy' is likely to do important work. The second, lingering on even in writers who would disclaim any interest in religion, is that there is a providential scheme which ensures that the severest of afflictions are likely to bring their compensations.⁴⁶

Ficowski's approach to Schulz seems to be based on such an assumption. The biographer has no doubt that physical frailty had a great impact on Schulz's sensibility and his art. In the chapter 'Bruno, Son of Jacob,' where the childhood and youth of Schulz is presented, Ficowski sketches physical features of the would-be writer that had a huge impact on his daily life and relations with other people. Bruno is small, frail-bodied; his voice is delicate and quiet. 'He remained physically frail, somewhat hunched over, very thin, and draped with overly long arms, so that even in childhood he differed from his contemporaries in outward appearance.'⁴⁷ Unspecified heart disease and vulnerability had two consequences on Bruno's early years. The first is a peculiar relation with his mother, who had to devote herself to taking care of her weakly and hypersensitive son. Bruno was not only sickly and physically frail. His hypersensitivity was evidenced in his fear of going out without his mother onto the balcony; his timidity

⁴⁴ Susan Tridgell, *Understanding Our Selves. The Dangerous Art of Biography*, Bern and New York, Peter Lang Verlag, 2004, p. 48.

⁴⁵ See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.

⁴⁶ David Ellis, *Literary Lives. Biography and the Search for Understanding*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 83.

⁴⁷ Jerzy Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy, op. cit.*, p. 38.

with his playmates whom he avoided and from whom he retreated into solitude; and the inexplicable tenderness he could show towards the last autumn flies that struck the window panes—by feeding them with sugar.⁴⁸

Schulz's mother, sturdy and plump Henrietta [...] devoted many years to nursing not only her husband, but also Bruno himself, whose frail health demanded constant care. He suffered all his life from a heart defect.⁴⁹

The second consequence was isolation. We can imagine how hard it was for this weak, frail, hypersensitive boy to get along with his strong, proficient peers.

It was difficult for him to adapt to the company of other pupils. He was affable but mistrustful, and unable to compete with them physically. [...] Schulz kept himself apart from others, not out of superiority or disdain, but because he felt entirely unworthy as a companion and envied his schoolmates their elemental vitality. He was ashamed of his physical weakness and the illnesses to which he was frequently prey.⁵⁰

His bad state of health influenced his later fortunes. First of all, it became one of the reasons for his giving up his studies in architecture in Lviv. Bearing in mind his frailty, we can also look differently at his friendship with Władysław Riff, which seems to be a kind of conspiracy of the weak, united by a common sensibility. The image of Schulz's feeble health is completed and intensified by the description of the years of depression and nephrolithiasis from which Schulz suffered during the years of World War II.

Illness now set in on the already depressed Schulz. He developed kidney stones and had to take the cure at Truskawiec. [...] He continued to work despite serious illness and a painful treatment to eliminate his kidney stones (secretly saving the stones he passed in a little box).⁵¹

Interestingly, Ficowski distinguishes between depression and physical illness, as if he did not consider depression a disease, but a usual perquisite of the soul of an artist. In this cited fragment there is one more significant detail: Schulz's behaviour towards his kidney stones. By keeping them he seems to put them in some mythical, interpretative order. That is significant, because every mention of Schulz's frailty comes with remarks about his intellectual and spiritual power.

Schulz was developing some remarkable aura around him. Despite his unprepossessing outward appearance, Bruno's personality was intensified by the phenomenon of an unaffected demonic aspect that was sensed by everyone with whom he came into contact. His manner of speaking, sometimes hushed almost to a whisper, combined softness with a compelling but unobtrusive, even self-deprecating, strength of conviction.⁵²

The half-real, elflike aura that radiated from his person, his expression, and his voice made the magic of his fairy-tale improvisation even more charming to the listener. That unusual

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36-38.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 131-132.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

aura struck everyone who encountered Schulz. Stefan Jaracz, then a popular actor and director, met Schulz in 1934 when he visited the Atheneum Theatre in Warsaw. Later the great actor recalled that Schulz made an extraordinarily fascinating impression on him. Here, to a great extent, lay the source of the respect and esteem which young people, in spite of everything, accorded this shy teacher, so defenceless against the pranks of a group of children.⁵³

Physical fragility is in Ficowski's approach accompanied with psychological frailty. Schulz is paralysed with bashfulness and inferiority complex. We can imagine how hard it was for him to participate in any activities demanding interactions with the others, such as exhibiting his works, publishing his writings or working in school as a teacher. Bruno Schulz's entire life was overshadowed by his intuition of imminent danger. Ordinary daily discomforts assumed the dimensions of catastrophes, and potential dangers confirmed his worst fears. Schulz was lost in large groups, amid alien people and surroundings. He fell prey to a frightening strangeness that overwhelmed his very existence. He was said to be childishly timid. Mechanically stroking the edge of his jacket, he looked like a pupil suddenly called to go to the blackboard or a child frantically seeking someone his own age to whom he could cling.⁵⁴

The crucial psychological state sensed by Schulz, in some way grounding his personality, was—according to Ficowski—an overwhelming anxiety. Because of his hypersensitivity even incredibly ordinary situations could have been a cause for pervasive fear.

Once, during the 1930s, in the course of a lively conversation with a friend in a cafe in Łódź, Schulz suddenly turned gloomy. He finally admitted that a tall factory chimney glimpsed through the window so distressed him that he could not break free of it. From that moment the chimney had become a third person in their conversation. Its inescapable presence and the possibilities it contained 'became, as it were, a reality for us both,' explained Schulz's friend.⁵⁵

All his life long Schulz felt an overwhelming threat of encroachment, of being enclosed in a dangerous space rendering him unable to realize his ideas. Even though Ficowski indicates some sources of psychological discomfort associated with living in a small provincial town, lack of satisfying intellectual contacts, the obligation to work as a teacher, the biographer remains convinced that the main cause of his inner anxiety was his hypersensitivity, and situates this state beyond historical explanations such as the experience of the modern disintegration of the world (sensed intensively in Drohobycz where the oil industry developed rapidly in the beginning of the 20th century), the rise of anti-Semitism⁵⁶ and the autocratic climate of the 1930s, and finally the Second World War and forthcoming Holocaust.

In this context of anxiety we may discern some features of biographical discourse which I would like to call foreshadowings of Schulz's fate. Unlike his subject, the biographer knows what will happen later.⁵⁷ Foreshadowings are events and situations the meaning of which is interpreted by the biographer in the light of later

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 51

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99-100.

⁵⁶ See Henri Lewi, *Bruno Schulz. Ou les stratégies messianiques*, Paris, La Table ronde, 1989.

⁵⁷ See Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, Warwick, Routledge, 2000.

episodes. In Ficowski's life of Schulz we may find some scenes where glimpses of knowledge about his final fate appear, disclosing knowledge of the historical catastrophe which in some sense will make Schulz's fears come true. Such an episode is the one about giving alms to a beggar.

Himself sunk in poverty, he never refused alms to a beggar. He once even gave a beggar five zlotys. He was naive, and more than once others took advantage of his charitable sensibility. Perhaps when giving to others he saw himself in them, in some mysterious but always ominous future whose obsessive spectre, irresistible premonition, constantly followed him.⁵⁸

Ficowski presents this situation as a kind of prophetic vision of Schulz's fate: degraded, excluded from humankind by the Nazis, and sentenced to death as a Jewish inhabitant of the ghetto. Another, much subtle anticipation can be found in the already quoted fragment about the fear of chimneys. When Ficowski writes about the 'disturbing distraction of the chimney,' he knows that in the post-Holocaust world words about ominous chimneys irresistibly connote the fate of the six million European Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Even if we know that Schulz died shot down in the ghetto street and avoided the gas chamber and the chimneys of the crematorium, we feel the affective power of the image of the chimney that will always be associated with the Holocaust. This apparently invisible mention becomes a sign of the historical machinery whose victim Schulz became.

At the crossroads of anxiety and body matters lies the problem of Schulzian sexuality. This topic is treated by the biographer with distance and moderation. Ficowski unwillingly elaborates on this topic even though he knows much about Schulz's masochistic inclinations, which were an autobiographical motif of his art. In a letter to Ficowski Tadeusz Lubowiecki (a.k.a. Izydor Friedman⁵⁹) raised the issue of Schulz's masochism, claiming that he was a fetishist and used to visit brothels where he asked to be lashed and humiliated. In *Regions of the Great Heresy*, Lubowiecki (Friedman) appears only as a witness to Schulz's death. The biographer uses Lubowiecki's relation in his essay 'Feretron z pantofelkiem' ('A procession float with a sign of a high-heeled court shoe') from his volume *Okolice sklepów cynamonowych (Environs of Cinnamon Shops)*, but significantly he censored this fragment, suppressing Schulz's contacts with prostitutes. Ficowski also knew a recollection of Andrzej Chciuk's (a writer in exile from Drohobycz, author of memoirs and a disciple of Schulz) who wrote about a situation when he—as a student—once met Schulz going to the brothel hiding a whip under his coat. Ficowski obviously does not mention this. The biographer also knows of an account by Irena Kejlin-Mitelman,⁶⁰ whose portrait as a little girl Schulz painted. During the modelling session he is supposed to have fallen to her feet in a kind of homage, a scene Schulz recorded in his drawings. Silence about Schulz's sexuality is not a question of lack of accounts, it is a consequence of Ficowski's euphemized treatment of his biographical subject. None of those accounts were used in

⁵⁸ Jerzy Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁵⁹ Izydor Friedman was a Jewish lawyer and a friend of Bruno Schulz. He was a witness to Schulz's death. He survived the war under the fictional name Tadeusz Lubowiecki and under this name returned to work when the war was over. He was murdered in 1949 by a hitman hired by the jealous husband of Lubowiecki's mistress.

⁶⁰ Published in the volume *Bruno Schulz. Listy, fragmenty, wspomnienia o pisarzu*, Jerzy Ficowski (ed.), Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984.

Regions of the Great Heresy, but the question of masochism appears in the biography several times, where Ficowski situates masochism only in the context of art, refusing to cross the border between art and life.

In his school years he was already frank in his drawings, not camouflaging even the most embarrassing content. Here intimate matters emerged without guise, and in this early period the subject matter of his drawings was already marked by an unambiguous masochism. Domineering women appear, sometimes with whips in their hands, surrounded by dwarfed men who crawl on all fours at their feet. [...] As a rule, one of the male dwarfs resembled Schulz himself. Schulz was reluctant to discuss the content of his drawings. When questioned about the *recurring* masochistic theme, he replied characteristically that precisely this kind of drawing best suited him, that he did not choose the theme, but rather the theme chose him, and that even when one is free to choose a theme, one is a prisoner of one's self. And it cannot be helped what that self is like.⁶¹

In the English translation, the theme of masochism is said to be 'recurring,' whereas the word '*jednostronny*' in the Polish original means 'one-side.' As it is unusual to use such a word in the context of an artistic appraisal, it seems to be a euphemism for another expression: 'obsessive' or even 'perverse.' The word 'recurring' expresses even more precisely what Schulz's friends were thinking about masochistic motifs of his drawings but the tendency to euphemize is lost in translation. Calling Schulz's theme choices that way indicates an obtrusive repetition of one theme, the overrepresentation of which seems to be disturbing, crossing the limits of what is considered 'normal,' decorous.

In the same chapter, Ficowski mentions another experience that could be meaningful for the interpretation of Schulz's masochism. In this episode masochism seems to be an echo of a kind of primal scene—being punished by a nurse in early childhood.

Spared by his mother, who never raised a hand to him, Bruno was often punished by his nanny when his parents were not at home. He never complained about this, and only many years later did he confide to someone close to him that probably those dim and apparently minor incidents were the cause of his masochistic tendencies, which in time developed and intensified.⁶²

It is significant that Ficowski does not follow this trail. Moreover, in this fragment we may notice evident discreetness. Ficowski is consequently diminishing the impact of that event, claiming that it was an experience on which Schulz himself did not use to talk willingly, and stressing that it is the only probable explanation for Schulz's masochism. The episode with the nanny appears as a digression in a narrative that explores Schulz's relationship with his mother and the narrator quickly comes back to those matters.

The problems of Schulz's masochism appear for the last time at the beginning of the chapter 'The Settling of Accounts':

The realm of the erotic where the agents of threat were female enabled him to experience some satisfaction through masochism. While such satisfaction permeated his artistic and

⁶¹ Jerzy Ficowski, *Regions of the Great Heresy*, *op. cit.*, p. 38-39. The italics are mine.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

literary work, it did not extend to everyday life, where suffering always inhibited his writing.⁶³

It is a polemical allusion to Artur Sandauer's statement that Schulz's death was a kind of masochistically motivated suicide. According to Sandauer, a literary critic whose works on Schulz played an important role in bringing him back to the literary canon after the Stalinist period, and who—unlike Ficowski—knew Schulz personally, Schulz was possessed with an overwhelming desire of self-annihilation. There are no more references to Schulz's masochism in *Regions of the Great Heresy*. However, we must pay a little more attention to short fragments connected with the sexual sphere, which seemingly have nothing to do with masochism, but reveal some assumptions of Ficowski's portrait of Schulz. In the beginning of the chapter 'Phantoms and Reality' Ficowski writes about persons who appear in Schulz's drawings:

Among the powerful female temptresses the men idolize one can recognize some of the Drohobycz ladies of whom Schulz was fond: Mila Lustig, Tynka Kupferberg, and Frederika Wegner, along with many others. In Schulz's drawings, they are fantastic creatures and their garb is much scantier than Schulz would have had occasion to observe—only their faces remained the same. [...] Schulz's likenesses are so accurate that one Drohobycz resident, recognizing a long-legged naked nymph as his wife, remonstrated with Schulz, groundlessly accusing his spouse of having posed for the picture of a nude.⁶⁴

The crucial sentence for my argument is: 'their garb is much scantier than Schulz would have had occasion to observe.' Ficowski indicates the prototypes of figures from Schulz's drawings in order to eagerly disclaim the potential supposition that they could ever pose naked for Schulz. Indeed Ficowski denies not only the fact of posing, quite obviously because the role of model was not considered appropriate for decent burghers' wives. Ficowski even denies the possibility of Schulz's contact with female nudity. Ficowski's Schulz seems to be almost completely asexual. Desexualizing is part of a wider strategy of infantilizing in his shaping of the subject. According to Ficowski, Schulz does not so much want to 'mature into childhood'⁶⁵ but, to tell the truth, he is defended by the biographer against initiation into maturity. Indecisive, rapt in his own imaginative world, dreaming about returning to the age of childish genius, telling fairy tale to his pupils in order to pacify them, Schulz appears as a person caught in endless childhood, a kind of Peter Pan figure. For Ficowski, Schulz must remain innocent, outside the dirty sphere of sexuality.

Regions of the Great Heresy is a narrative on a weak, frail subject, exposed to perpetual danger, real or imagined. On the one hand, such a narrative, emphasizing the physical and psychological frailty of the subject, elicits a kind of compassion for a subject too weak and too sensitive to live in the modern society of the first half of the 20th century. On the other hand, describing Schulz's out-of-this-world fragility with the widespread sense of loss, and the repeatedly stressed extent of those losses, intensifies a vision of Schulz as a precious object of enchantment and fascination. A subject who

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 127-128.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91-92.

⁶⁵ The expression comes from a letter Schulz wrote Andrzej Pleśniewicz (4.03.1936) included in *Regions of the Great Heresy*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

appeared, and to some degree managed to survive in spite of pervasive manifold awe: metaphysical, somatic, historical.

In his attitude towards Bruno Schulz, Jerzy Ficowski takes on four different roles: that of the archaeologist,⁶⁶ the restorer, the exegete and the polemicist. Firstly, the basis for his work is the activity of biographical archaeology: searching and discovering lost, scattered sources and accounts that would have perished forever without his archaeological investigation. Secondly, by gathering and publishing these documents Ficowski restores them and protects them from further destruction. Thirdly, Ficowski is an exegete. As a scholar of Schulz's life and work he becomes not only the one who searches for sources and accounts, but also delivers an interpretative commentary. This aspect of his output is rather meagre, and was diminished by Ficowski himself, who used to say they were only the impressions of a fascinated reader, presenting himself as an amateur. And finally, in later years, there appeared a fourth persona: the polemicist. Ficowski, especially in his book *Okolice sklepów cynamonowych*, often rectifies the statements of scholars and witnesses that he finds misguided, like Artur Sandauer's theories about the suicidal nature of Schulz's death or his involvement in communism, or Andrzej Chciuk's claims about Schulz's Christianity, or the interpretation of Schulz's output by Henri Lewi.⁶⁷

Today, Jerzy Ficowski's unquestionable position as an expert on Bruno Schulz's life and art is established by the output of lifelong research. His achievements as a biographer, an interpret and an editor constitute the basis of Schulzian scholarship, a framework which scholars cannot ignore, even if they do not always agree. However, as far as the texts as concerned, Ficowski has established for himself a different kind of authority. It is a matter of affect. As I have attempted to show in this article, Ficowski established his voice as a biographer on the passionate memory of his enchantment as a youthful reader, which becomes a pattern for ulterior reader responses and the founding act of a lifelong work of research. Passion leads the biographer to yearn to preserve the

⁶⁶ William St Clair sees similarity between biographer and archaeologist in the nature of the material they are working with. On biographical sources St Clair remarks: 'These "primary sources," to which our biographical predecessors accorded such respect, are just a random survival of texts which happen to have been composed and written down by people whose purpose was usually very different from helping me, as a present-day biographer,' William St Clair, 'The Biographer as Archaeologist,' in *Mapping Lives. The Uses of Biography*, Peter France and William St Clair (eds.), Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 222. St Clair in his article examines the following question: 'in the case of biographical writing, should more evidence mean less certainty,' *ibid.*, p. 220, and 'more evidence' is definitely not the case of Jerzy Ficowski.

⁶⁷ In an interview with Anna Grupińska entitled 'Pomyłona chronologia' ('Misguided Chronology') Jerzy Ficowski considers the connection between the tragic objects of his fascination—Bruno Schulz, Gypsies, Jewish culture and the Holocaust—to be accidental. 'I don't want my fascination for Schulz to be interpreted as the reflection of a subconscious sense of guilt, anxiety of conscience and so on. Such an unfortunate assumption was made recently by Mr. Lewi in his insane [*obłądna*] book on Schulz. I call it "insane." How could I call it differently, when he interprets the whole of Schulz's work as a code message about Polish anti-Semitism and he reads *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* as an asylum from Pole murderers' ('*Nie chciałbym, by moja fascynacja dziełem Schulza była interpretowana jako odbicie podświadomego poczucia winy, niepokoju sumienia i tak dalej. Tak nieszczęśliwie napisał o mnie ostatnio pan Lewi w swojej obłądnej książce o Schulzu. Mówię "obłądnej," bo jak inaczej, skoro interpretuje on całą twórczość Schulza jako zaszyfrowany komunikat o polskim antysemityzmie a Sanatorium pod klepsydrą jako azyl przed Polakami-mordercami*'), 'Pomyłona chronologia. Z Jerzym Ficowskim rozmawia Anna Grupińska,' in *Wcielenia Jerzego Ficowskiego*, p. 603. Originally published in the journal *Czas Kultury*, vol. 20 (1990).

rapture of the sympathetic reader, and the shared sense of the preciousness of a delicate subject. This is the most remarkable characteristic of this poet-biographer's voice⁶⁸, very emotionally involved in discovering, gathering and recollecting the traces of his beloved subject.

⁶⁸ Jerzy Ficowski's *W sierocińcu świata. Rzecz o Witoldzie Wojtkiewiczu* (*In the Orphanage of the World. On Witold Wojtkiewicz*), Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Ryton, 1993, a biography of modernist painter Witold Wojtkiewicz, is written with the same passion and tenderness for an artist buried in time even more than Schulz.