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The Edges of the World: Diasporic Metaphysics of Bruno Schulz¹

Abstract

This essay is a theologico-philosophical meditation on Bruno Schulz, focusing on his “love for the marginal”: a special attention paid to *tandeta*, in other words all things trashy, located on the eponymous edges of the world, far away from the center. Contrary to the assumed mode of interpretation, which reads Schulz’s fascination with the “dark forces of life” in terms of the depth subversive toward the surface, I propose a different scheme: an opposition of center and edges/margins, deriving from the Kabbalistic metaphysics of Isaac Luria, which constituted the primary matrix of the Hasidic Kabbalah, known to Schulz as the member of the pre-war Drohobycz Jewry. I then juxtapose Schulz’s intuition of a life thriving on the cosmological margins with Freud’s early theory of the drives, especially his concept of perversion as a “libido on the edge.” In both writers we find a similar echo of the spatial Kabbalistic imagining of the relation between the emptied center and the rich diaspora of life, dispersing and multiplying on the fringes of the “cosmic exile.”

Keywords

Bruno Schulz, Sigmund Freud, Siegfried Kracauer, life, messianic vitalism, kabbalah, perversion, marginality, decenteration

1) This essay is a revised and expanded version of my Polish text, “Życie na marginesach. Hasydzka kabała Brunona Schulza,” in: Agata Bielik-Robson, *Cienie pod czerwoną skalą. Eseje o literaturze* (Gdańsk: słowo-obraz/terytoria, 2016).

But when the prison seemed irrevocably shut, when the last bolt-hole was bricked up, when everything had conspired to keep silent about You, Oh God, when Franz Joseph had barred and sealed even the last chink so that one should not be able to see You, then You rose wearing a flowing cloak of seas and continents and gave him the lie. You, God, took upon yourself the odium of heresy and revealed this enormous, magnificent, colorful blasphemy to the world. Oh splendid Heresiarch! You struck me with the burning book...

Bruno Schulz, "The Spring"

*I opened it. It was the Bible... I raised my reproachful eyes to Father.
"You must know, Father," I cried, "you must. Don't pretend, don't quibble! This book has given you away. Why do you give me that fake copy, that reproduction, a clumsy falsification? What have you done with The Book?"*

Bruno Schulz, "The Book"

In one of the 2009 issues of *Midrasz*, in the conversation with Piotr Paziński, who asks about the possible religious genealogy of Schulz's imagination, Jan Gondowicz, a well-known literary critic, says:

Man is never alone. Everybody has an intellectual genealogy. But some things are not as evident as a kabbalist or Kafkan heritage. Here, in Schulz's case, the sources are much simpler. Perhaps what I am saying does not enrich our image of Schulz, but nonetheless allows to domesticate his most disquieting, monstrous element. Schulz is not a civilized writer, and this uncanniness, which resides in him and makes me shudder, is like an indeterminate shape, a polyp living in a cave. Wherever he talks about creation, there is always either an ear, which floats on the street like a red coral, or some organic wall-papers, which suddenly begin to sprout, or a jumble of intestines turned into gum pipes. Just have a look at the frontcover of Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*, designed by Schulz: a truly uncanny humano-animal amoeba. This monstrous formless form sits beneath his writing which gets impregnated by it, spurned into life. At the top we may have philosophy, mysticism, theurgy, kabbalah, what you want – but at the bottom there sits this dark vital force which wobbles all these amorphous creatures. Through Schulz I can always touch this mystery.²

I would like to make this fragment a point of departure of my interpretation of Bruno Schulz, which will enter into a gentle polemic with Gondowicz's main presupposition that Schulz's fascination with the "dark force of life" is simpler and more fundamental – and as such more universal and originally at the bottom of all things – than his cultural inspirations: Kabbalah, Hasidism, German *Lebensphilosophie*, interfering with it only superficially and as if from above. Though I fully agree with Gondowicz that Schulz's art is a quasi-religious homage paid to the life-giving powers, and as such strikes a chord of a universal myth, I nonetheless do not think that we are dealing here with a natural religion or some primordial chthonic cult of a writer defying civilization. I would therefore propose a more particular reading of Schulz's enthrallment with the other side of life and risk a hypothesis of an influence, which as we know, a detailed research into Schulz's reading library never actually

2) Gondowicz, "Miejsca wspólne," 38–42, 41.

confirmed – namely, the influence from the Hasidic Kabbalah, mostly of the Lurianic variation, which Schulz must have known at least in the form of a folklore rumor. I will claim that this rumor must have been strong enough to impregnate his imagination, into which the seed of the Jewish marginal heterodoxy had fallen sufficiently deep to have grown an idiosyncratic doctrine of Schulz's *messianic vitalism*.³

In Praise of Perversion: The Wayward Hyper-Life

While we cannot be sure what exactly Schulz knew of the Lurianic Kabbalah, which, as can be safely assumed, constituted the default theological lore of the local Drohobycz Jewry, we know for certain that he was vividly interested in psychoanalysis even though he reproached its founding father, Sigmund Freud, for maintaining a too normative and disciplining approach toward the “muddy element of the subconscious.”⁴ Was Schulz unfair to Freud? Perhaps. After all, the same question – about the genealogy of imagination – can also be asked of Freud who, like Schulz, was brought up in Central Europe in between Haskalah and Kabbalah (i.e. the Jewish Enlightenment), on the one hand, and the Hasidic integrism fostering a separate and unique Jewish *Lebensform*, on the other.⁵

Freud's last essay, where he wrestles with his complex attitude toward Judaism, *Moses and Monotheism*, contains a curious opposition which may indeed reflect the duality of those early formative influences. While the rationalistic Haskalah is represented here by the Egyptian Monotheistic God, later on reluctantly adopted by the Jews – the Kabbalistic mythic element finds its expression in the irrational desert Godot named Yahu, the idol of the Midianites, a much less civilized minor Semitic tribe. On Freud's reading, the strange concoction called Mosaic religion resulted from the interference of the wild image of the latter with the clean picture of enlightened monotheism. Freud visibly favors the Egyptian God of the Akhenaton provenance, at the expense of the desert idol of the volcanic energy, who likes to show himself, somewhat garishly, in the tumult of fire and smoke. While the first God occupies the central place, guarded by the highest respect as the invisible and ineffable Holy of the Holy – the other god lands on a contemptible margin; if he is a god, then only a god of the profane, shameful, fallen, and instinctual. I want to emphasize this spatial configuration – center versus margin – as differing from the metaphor of below and above, proposed by Gondowicz, where the great source of life beats at the bottom as a dark undercurrent. Here the tension is built differently: between what constitutes the respectful center on the one hand, and what interferes with it from the outskirts or from the ambivalent sphere of indeterminacy between the sacred and the profane, on the other.

Interestingly, the same tension seems to determine Freud's attitude toward the id in its original wild form: the volcanic libido, without quality and aim, filled with energy free from any objectual fulfillment and limitation: a pure energetic hyper-life exploding in fits of uncontrollable delight far surpassing any mundane image of civilized pleasure. Freud creates this fantastic picture of the original libido in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, where he – ambivalently torn between horror and admiration – opposes it to a disciplined system of instinctual self-preservation called by him a vital order (*Lebensordnung*). A “successful” psychic

3) My essay may thus be regarded as a modest contribution to the vast body of the Schulzian *midrashim* which already dealt with Schulz's dependence on the Hasidic teachings (though not necessarily in the context of the Kabbalistic notion of life. See Błoński, “On the Jewish Sources of Bruno Schulz,” 54–68; Goldfarb, “A Living Schulz,” 25; Lindenbaum, “Wizja Mesjanistyczna Schulza,”; Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji*; and Panas, *Księga blasku*.

4) Schulz, “Ferdydurke,” 483; my translation. Henceforth in the text as FER.

5) On Freud's relation to Judaism, both orthodox and heterodox, see Rice, *Freud and Moses*; Klein, *Jewish Origins of the Psychoanalytic Movement*; and Gay, *A Godless Jew*.

development, says Freud, occurs when the energy of the original anarchic libido becomes intercepted and used by the central system of control, represented by the ego, while the remainder of the first libido, with its chaotic indeterminacy, is pushed to the margins and as such disappears from a “healthy” psychic life. Thus, if Yoseph Hayim Yerushalmi is right by calling psychoanalysis a “godless Judaism,”⁶ we can combine this description with Scholem, who compared Judaism to a “well-ordered house” and then say that in Freud’s rational mind psychoanalysis was indeed devised as a very “well-ordered godless Judaism.” Yet, as Scholem emphasizes, even the best kept house must every now and then open its windows and let in a fresh air, that is, to let in its midst the messianic, Midianite wild, “apocalyptic breeze” without which Judaism, even the most godless one, would turn into a stale Egyptian tomb.⁷

The equivalent of that “apocalyptic breeze” in the well-ordered Freudian house is nothing else but the *original libido*, the true alchemical gold of psychoanalysis. Although Freud, as we already know, had no sympathy for the Midianite fiery god of volcanos, he was not, on the other hand, a typical rigid representative of the Haskalah with its contempt toward Jewish mysticism, particularly of the East-European Hasidic descent. When his Viennese friend, rabbi Chayyim Bloch, showed him a manuscript of his translation of Hayim Vital’s *Sefer Etz Hayim (Book of the Tree of Life)*, containing the earliest written Lurianic doctrine, Freud quickly devoured the pages and in a state of absolute enchantment cried: “*This is gold!*” Presumably, in the scheme of the Tree of Life, crowned with the enigmatic *Ayin/Ein Sof*, flickering between Nothingness and Infinity, and full of the indeterminate creative energy he saw a clear analogue of his own theory of sexuality in which the original flow of an objectless libido emanates into a lower, functional system of instincts and drives – indeed, the sephirotic “tree of life” – thus creating a well-organized psychic existence. We know about it from David Bakan, the much disparaged and marginalized author of the touchingly enthusiastic and trashy little book, *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition*, who was contacted soon after its first edition in 1950, by the above-mentioned Chayyim Bloch: very eager to confirm Bakan’s thesis according to which Freud was indeed very strongly influenced by the Kabbalist teaching.⁸ Bakan’s book does not stop at that, however, it also makes a big case of Freud’s allegiance to Sabbatianism, trying to interpret Freud’s project of the liberation of libido in terms of Tsevi Shabtai’s messianico-antinomian doctrine where Life, the wholly blessed free and happy Life, raises against the oppressiveness of the Law which, in the name of order and control, keeps Life’s anarchic impulses at bay and on the margins.⁹

This hypothesis goes way too far, yet it is nonetheless evident that the Freudian notion of the original libido forms a structural analogue with the Lurianic idea of the anarchically inchoate and infinite life-force which God, in the act of *tsimtsum* or self-contraction, sends into the created world and thus, by emptying himself of energy, renders himself inactive, practically dead. While God, reduced to the dead point, still remains in the center of the universe, this middle is empty, devoid of any creative energy which had dispersed itself in the

6) Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses*, 99.

7) Scholem, “On the 1930 Edition of Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*,” 323.

8) Bakan, *Sigmund Freud and The Jewish Mystical Tradition*, 5; as well as Drob, “*This is Gold*.”

9) Compare, for instance, Scholem’s comment on the Polish follower of Sabbatai Tsevi, Jacob Frank:

Frank will always repeat the double ground motif of his teaching: abolishment of all values, positive laws and religions *in the name of life*. The road to this goal leads through the abyss of destruction. The concept of life serves Frank as the key to the expression of his anarchistic pathos. For him, life is not a harmonic order of nature and its mild ruling; he is not an advocate of Rousseau’s return to nature... *Life is freedom from all binding and law. This anarchic life is the sole object and content of his utopia, driven by a simple desire of a lawless freedom and promiscuity of all things.*

See Scholem, *Judaica* 4, 178; my emphasis. Schulz also uses the anarchist-vitalist formula of Giordano Bruno, translated by him into Polish as “powszechna rozwiązłość rzeczy.”

creaturely world, filling it to its farthest extremes. The same scheme can be found in Freud's vision: the original libido – an indefinite force “without quality”¹⁰ – undergoes a radical contraction in order to transform into various useful energies fueling the functions of psycho-physical life, but there always remains a remainder, a non-functionalized remnant or residue of the original libido, which hides on the farthest margins of the well-ordered existence; Freud himself calls it, in the “side-currents” and “blind alleys.”¹¹ If we are, therefore, to seek the traces of the first original Godhead, in whom living force still burned with the pure flame of joy, we must turn toward the margins: to the trashy, dubious, seemingly dysfunctional, useless, and disorderly manifestations of life, which Freud defines with just one term – *perversion*.

But, is this just an analogue or perhaps something more, a deeper affinity between the meta-psychological and meta-physical register? A small footnote to *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, written in 1901, brings a definition of *metapsychology* as a *reinternalized metaphysics*. Metapsychology is a metaphysics which, according to the Hegelian process of *Erinnerung* (meaning both: recollection and internalization), reminds itself of its birth from the “muddy element of the subconscious”:

A large part of our mythological world view, which persists in the even most modern religions, is nothing but a psychology projected on the external reality. An unclear recognition of psychological factors and the relations in the unconscious is mirrored in the construction of a supranatural being which our science should return to the psychology of the unconscious. In this manner, one could explain the myth of paradise and the fall of man, God, good and evil, immortality, etc., and thus *transpose metaphysics into metapsychology*.¹²

While referring to the above quote, Eric Santner coined a new term – *psychotheology* – in order to denote a certain *extimate* sphere of indeterminacy between the most external and the most internal: between the transcendent and the unconscious.¹³ To interpret the text of metaphysics in the manner of *Traumdeutung* would thus mean to be able to maintain oneself in the indeterminacy between these two *meta* dimensions as both escaping the rational plane of immanence. Could not, therefore, the Midianite volcanic God, preserved in the Kabbalistic image of the infinite energetic Pleroma, be precisely such a projection of the original “magnificence of our drives,” before it got marred by the bare necessities of the vital order and forced to manifest itself only as a side-ways marginal perversion to the central “right path”?

In Freud's early theory of the drives, the poly-perverse remnant of the original libido – “the constituents of which are rarely absent from the sexual life of healthy persons”¹⁴ – can indeed come to the fore only as a *per-versio*: a deviation from the right path or a marginal blind alley of the drive declining to fulfill its central procreative destiny: “In these cases the libido behaves like a stream whose main bed has become *blocked*. It

10) See Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 46; my emphasis:

By an “instinct” [Trieb] is provisionally to be understood the psychic representative of an endosomatic source of stimuli which are in continual flux, as contrasted with a “stimulus,” which is set up by *single* excitations coming from *without*. The concept of instinct is thus one of those lying on the frontier between the mental and the physical. The simplest and likeliest assumption as to the nature of drives would seem to be that *in itself a drive is without quality*, and, so far as mental life is concerned, is only to be regarded as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work. What distinguishes the instincts from one another and endows them with their specific qualities is their relation to their somatic sources and to their aims.

11) Freud, *Three Essays*, 48.

12) Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 258 f.

13) Santner, *On Psychotheology*.

14) Freud, *Three Essays*, 39.

proceeds to fill up collateral channels which may hitherto have been empty.”¹⁵ Freud cannot help but admire the wayward skills of the Young Libido which evades all disciplinary practices that want to turn into a law-abiding procreative desire for the member of the other sex. On the one hand, he appears to endorse the taming of libido’s amorphy and anarchy in the process of binding it in hyper-strong *cathexes* of *Lebensordnung* (thus confirming Schulz’s reservation); on the other hand, however, he does not deny the achievements of perversion which constantly tries to keep the flame of the original sexuality on the margin:

Certain of them [perversions] are so far removed from the normal in their content that we cannot avoid pronouncing them “pathological.” This is especially so where (as, for instance, in cases of licking excrement or of intercourse with dead bodies) the sexual instinct goes to *astonishing lengths* [erstaunliche Leistungen] in successfully overriding the resistances of shame, disgust, horror or pain ... It is impossible to deny that in their case a *piece of mental work* has been performed which, in spite of its horrifying results, is the equivalent of an idealization of the instinct. *The omnipotence of love is perhaps never more strongly proved than in such of its aberrations as there. The highest and the lowest are always closest to each other in the sphere of sexuality: vom Himmel durch die Welt zur Hölle.*¹⁶

This fragment, boldly extolling the “astonishing achievements” of perversion, anticipates the clue and climax of the *Three Essays*: the agon between original libido and vital order, which consists partly in overcoming the ‘natural’ resistances created by the latter, as abomination, shame, fear, and pain. The agon between sexuality [*Sexualtrieb*] with the vital order [*Lebensordnung*] constitutes the great insight of Freud’s early drive theory. It is here that these two powers – the perverse drive fighting to maintain its original indefinite energy and the centralizing-normative tendency of the vital order, attempting to capture and *cathect* it – determine the inner psychic conflict. And although the central goal of libido in this world seems to be settled – its indefinite energy must bow down to the procreative function of Eros – Freud does not sound very enthusiastic about it:

The final outcome of sexual development lies in what is known as the normal sexual life of the adult, in which the pursuit of pleasure *comes under the sway* of the reproductive function and in which the component instincts under the primacy of a single erotogenic zone, form a firm organization directed toward a sexual aim attached to some extraneous sexual object.¹⁷

Already the formulation – “coming under the sway,” *in den Dienst treten* – betrays a note of regret after the loss of freedom and its antinomian creativity, now disciplined and domesticated by the “normal” and “natural” aim of biological reproduction which forms the central goal of the libido disciplined by *Lebensordnung*. The whole evolution of libido in Freud’s account – from oral, through anal and latent, to the final genital stage – is marked by the disciplining and fatalistic “teleology of nature,” aiming at the Schopenhauerian finale: while life briefly triumphs in the joys of Eros, it then quickly succumbs to Thanatos, where the act of reproduction indicates acceptance of one’s own death and continuation of life only in progeny. But what if we downplayed Freud’s tragic teleology and saw the agon between the two modi of life – the poly-perverse libido, on the one hand, and the reproductive drive, on the other – as an ongoing and irresolved battle? What if the “muddy element of the

15) Ibid., 48.

16) Ibid., 39–40; my emphasis.

17) Ibid., 75.

subconscious” – the amorphous life without qualities, on which Schulz so strongly insists – had its lasting place in Freudian psychoanalysis, albeit marginal?

God of Esau, Shekhinah and Matter: Schulz’s Psychotheology

Bruno Schulz’s imagination seems to divide according to the same metapsychologico-metaphysical criterion as in the case of Freud: while the center, guarded by the tradition and the equally respectful *Haskalah*, remains holy but dead – the margins, filled to the brim with the wild, Midianite-Kabbalistic, volcanic mayhem of life will become for him a realm of fascination: restlessly exploring its “astonishing achievements.” In the novella called “The Spring,” this tension – the Freudian agon between *Sexualtrieb* and *Lebensordnung* – takes the form of an antagonism between Franz Joseph, the gray demiurgic lesser God of law and administration, and the dashing Prince Maximilliam, clad in the rebellious red of pure life, imprisoned by the archons, and representing the higher and better God who, in the catastrophic act of creation, became dethroned and erased.¹⁸ Then, in “The Wondrous Era,” there suddenly appears a bolt of fire on the carpet, which makes the young protagonist shout with wild joy: “‘You see!’ – I shouted to my mother, ‘I always told you that everything is held back, tamed, walled in by boredom, unliberated! And now look – such a surfeit, such a flowering of everything, such bliss!’” (FER, 126)

Here we can also see the elective affinity of Schulz with Kafka: while the holy center of tradition is represented by the Fathers, these always “sickened,” sleepy patriarchs from the Castle, the lifeless archons of the archive (as Derrida could have called them¹⁹) – the true Book of Life, the true Original, writes itself on the margins, in everything put aside, decentered, cast away from the normative middle, deformed, yet peculiarly alive: as Kafka’s Odradek or Assistants, or Schulz’s metaphysical freak-show: burgeoning like weeds on the wild cosmic fields. Far away from the center, from the disciplining severe light of the canonical, under which no life can survive, for no one can look Him straight in the face – and live. Only at the farthest extremes of the metaphysical diaspora, in the “regions of grand heresy,” where the cold light of the center does not penetrate and where broken shards of matter run aswirl, life can grow, chaotically, and orgiastically, without divine plan and goal, without sense and legitimacy, truly and joyfully *ohne warum*, “without why.” A Hyper-Life beyond the Law, anarchic, antinomian, perverse, abandoned – and free. As Schulz writes about Gombrowicz, in whom he found a kindred soul: “Gombrowicz showed that it is precisely here, in this rejected and undignified sphere, that life flourishes buoyantly and abundantly, that life can get away perfectly without any higher sanctions and that under the pressure of revulsion and shame it grows better than on the heights of sublimation” (FER, 484).

The life truly free, therefore, does not belong to well-ordered complex organic forms, but to the marginal shreds of matter, scattered in “a territory outside any law” (FER, 31), as the Father calls it in the “Treatise on Tailors’ Dummies.” It lives in the “generation only half-organic, a pseudo-vegetation and a pseudo-fauna, originating in the phantastical fermentation of matter” (FER, 89), which grows on the fringes of the world in oblivion and inattention of “some false and blight spring” (FER, 91). These creatures raise up painlessly and perish equally appeased, pressing their form on matter without force, delicately, almost like a caress, so matter’s plasmatic all-fertility can remain inviolated. Differently than the Demiurge, who informs matter with his powerful stamp (the Hebrew word *teva*, designating the created nature, derives from the word signifying a seal) and is “in love with consummate, superb, and complicated materials,” this second generation of beings, as if self-raised and self-begotten, “gives priority to trash.” The Father says:

18) No wonder, therefore, that Adam Lipszyc, just like Bakan in Freud’s case, detects here a clear Sabbatian-Frankist touch: Lipszyc, *Czerwone listy. Eseje frankistowskie*.

19) See Derrida, *Archive Fever*.

This is ... the proof of our love for matter as such, for its fluffiness or porosity, for its singular, mystical consistency. Demiurge, that great master and artist, made matter invisible, made it disappear under the surface of life. We, on the contrary, love its creaking, its resistance, its clumsiness.²⁰

The Father delivers this lecture to a quite peculiar audience made of the two tailoring ladies, Paulina and Poldá, and the servant Adela, who keeps tempting the Father in more and more perverse fashions, forcing him to commit little filthy things against his will. The Father is in the position of the Demiurge, but in contrast to the old Creator, he is weak, devoid of power, subject to the matter, itself “deprived of all initiative, indulgently acquiescent, pliable like a woman, submissive to every impulse,”²¹ and overcome by her promiscuous anarchy. The priestesses of his “all too heretical doctrine” are the girls who, while fashioning the dress on the wooden mannequin:

Trod absentmindedly on the bright shreds of materials, wading carelessly in the rubbish of a possible carnival, in the storeroom for some great unrealized masquerade. They disentangled themselves with nervous giggles from the trimmings, their eyes laughed into the mirrors. Their hearts, the quick magic of their fingers were not in the boring dresses which remained on the table, but in the thousand scraps, the frivolous and fickle trimmings, with the colorful fantastic snowstorm with which they could smother the whole city.²²

Peeping on them lasciviously, the Father is visited by the mystical vision of the two creations as a sowing enterprise in the Carlylean spirit of *Sartor resartus*: the one creation as it really took place, when it left on the table boring garments of permanent forms, and the other, still possible and new, creation as it still could be, investing in the carnival of cuts and shreds, and in the liberty of matter herself, unencumbered by the authoritarian Spirit, imposing on her from the outside.²³ Just like in Freud, though here much more affirmatively, the truly free game of life is played on the perverse off-side at the margins; in the regions of grand heresy – and, simultaneously, little perversion; in the Kabbalistic fringe metaphysics of Jewish orthodoxy – and in the metapsychology of life’s perverse rebellion against the centrality of the vital order.

The notion of the fringe-margin plays a fundamental role in the sixteenth century Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, the default metaphysics of the Sabbatians, Frankists, and the East-European Hassidic movement, from Baal Shem Tov to Nachman of Breslav, the literary role-model of Franz Kafka. Luria’s path-breaking idea consisted in a radical modification of the Jewish Kabbalistic Neoplatonism, which for the first time made it truly distinct from the Plotinian paradigm. In the Lurianic scheme of emanation, the universe still arises as a projection of divine light, yet the traditional Neoplatonic hierarchy of beings becomes curiously

20) Schulz, *The Fictions*, 33. This sympathy finds its equivalent in Gombrowicz as a “love toward a human, ridiculous, incapable and movingly helpless creature which cannot live up to the infinitely demanding form” (FER, 489).

21) Schulz, *The Fictions*, 31.

22) *Ibid.*, 28.

23) Thomas Carlyle’s 1836 book, *Sartor resartus (Tailor Re-Tailored)*, features a German professor, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (the “god-born devil’s dung”) as a satire on Hegel, but also contains elements of Carlyle’s own metaphysics, deeply and explicitly indebted to his studies on the Jewish Kabbalah. The sartorial metaphor of creation refers here to the Kabbalistic notion of the “garment” (*malbush*) as a clothing-covering of the original *Or Ein-Sof*, the infinite light “without qualities”: creation is thus understood as the process in which the Light fashions “garments” for itself to acquire qualities of shapes and colors. Whether Schulz knew Carlyle’s system or not, his metaphor of the Demiurge as a Divine Tailor seems to derive from the same Kabbalistic lore. On the importance of the Jewish Kabbalah for Carlyle, see Bishirjian, “Carlyle’s Political Religion,” 95–113. On the potential affinity between Carlyle and Schulz, see: Mezo, and Schulz, “The Street of Crocodiles,” 165–67.

– if not simply *perversely* – reversed. For, while the traditional Neoplatonic One is the highest inexhaustible *fons vitae*, the fountain of life, which constantly overflows in its superabundance and never dries up, and while this living water trickles down, like in a champaign pyramid, from top to bottom in gradually lesser amounts – the Lurianic *Ein-Sof*, the Infinite, contracts and empties Itself of the vital power, giving it fully to the created universe; instead of keeping all life force to Itself as the Inexhaustible One, it scatters it on the beings in exile, the cosmic *galut*. In Gershom Scholem’s interpretation, Lurianic *tsimtsum* becomes a symbol of a radical break/cut and because of that an emblem of exilic being: “one is tempted to interpret this withdrawal of God into his own Being in terms of Exile, of banishing Himself from His totality into profound seclusion. Regarded this way, the idea of *tsimtsum* is the deepest symbol of Exile that could be thought of.”²⁴ And when presenting the series of catastrophes that befall creation, starting from the foundational act of *tsimtsum*, Scholem describes the “breaking of the vessels” (*shvirat ha-kelim*) as the moment of disintegration of the Neoplatonic chain of emanations, due to which the condition of exile afflicts all beings, now radically decentered and pushed to the ontological margins:

This “breaking” introduces a dramatic aspect into the process of Creation, and it can explain the *Galut*... . In other words, all being is in *Galut*... . Here we have a cosmic picture of *Galut*, not the *Galut* of the people of Israel alone, but the *Galut* of the *Shekhinah* at the very inception of its being. All that befalls in the world is only an expression of this primal and fundamental *Galut*. All existence, including as it were God, subsists in *Galut*. Such is the state of creation after the breaking of the vessels... . In all the expanse of creation there is imperfection, flaw, *Galut*.²⁵

In contrast, therefore, to the traditional Neoplatonism, where the One remains the eternal center of purest life and thus the highest and immutable point of reference, in the Lurianic doctrine of *tsimtsum* and cosmic exile, life undergoes dispersion and lives on solely in the “broken vessels,” exiled to the fringes by the centrifugal force of the original catastrophe or, in Benjamin’s beautiful phrase, the “storm blowing from the paradise.”²⁶ But margins, fringes, and peripheries should not be thought here as the realm of a diluted cosmic Eros, as it would be the case in the traditional Neoplatonic metaphysics. On the contrary, they are the regions of the cosmic *Galut* where one can find life with a much higher probability than in the emptied center. In the most extreme and catastrophic versions of the Lurianic Kabbalah – as, for instance, in the dark Gnostic rendering of Nachman of Breslav – the divine throne remains dead and empty: the center of the universe is vacant and hence the whole creation decentered and destabilized, ex-iled and ex-centered to the margins. Life exists now *only* on the fringes: not in the dead center, and not in the centripetal regions, where the energy of the Infinite is used for the normative-administrative purposes of creation (as in the Tree of Life, *Etz Hayim* made of ten *sephirot* which channel down and gradually materialize the originally amorphous light to maintain the “vital order” of the universe), but on the farthest peripheries where the Law does not penetrate – in the darkest, per-verted, but also liveliest, *sitra ahra*, “the other side.”

In her book on Schulz’s use of Jewish-messianic motives, Karen Underhill also emphasizes the importance of the category of marginality as expressing his strong metaphysical commitment: Schulz’s love for everything trashy, repressed by the canon, discredited, kitschy, and precisely because of that bursting with free vitality, unlimited by any “central” norm and law. On the one hand, the love of *tandeta* suggest the decadent fall into ruin, which the Talmud designated as the right time for the Messiah:

24) Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 261.

25) Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 45.

26) Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 254.

Schulz's imagery offers the (potentially messianic) modern reality as a world of *tandeta*, characterized by marginality and transience, degradation or rot. This connection between decadence and messianism also has traditional precedents within Jewish theology, and certainly in Hasidic culture. Scholem mentions formulations which suggest that the messiah's self-revelation "will come only in an age which is either totally pure or totally guilty and corrupt. Little wonder that in one such context the Talmud cites the bald statement of three famous teachers of the third and fourth centuries: 'May he come, but I do not want to see him.'" Thus, it is neither counterintuitive nor counter to tradition that messianic anticipation, rather than retreating from, actually accrues to ages of decadence, ruin, and fragmentation.

On the other hand, however, *tandeta* means something more: it itself becomes an object of the messianic inversion in which the marginal becomes a new center:

On the one hand Schulz pushes Jewishness to the margins and proclaims it dead, banishing direct discussion of it from the body of the text. On the other hand, his entire oeuvre works to precisely enshrine marginality, and the Underworld – the land of the dead. Thus in Schulz's work we confront both the subtle identification of Jewishness with death, marginality and misshapeness, *and* the constant recuperation of that which is marginal – of the scrapheap or the shards – and of that which is dead, abandoned or decayed, lying in the tomb awaiting its own Spring (waiting for the living, hungry poet to digest it and make it part of his present). Schulz's hope for poetic and artistic relevance, and for authenticity of perception and expression, centers around adoration of the Underworld and the margin as the sources of creative energy, and, indeed of life energy.²⁷

All true, but perhaps with one small correction: what Schulz truly invests in is not so much the Underworld, the land of the dead, as *die Vorwelt*, the Foreworld, the land of the *de-created* or the beings which are not fully informed with the seal of creation – and, because of that, it is not so much death and decadence that attract him as it is rather life's energy hidden in the forewordly amorphy and anarchy. Schulz's attitude toward Judaism is indeed ambivalent, but perhaps on a slightly different basis than in Karen Underhill's diagnosis: while he associates the Talmudic patriarchy with death – or, as he depicts it in "The Spring," with the lethal breath of Franz Joseph, the All-Father – he also allocates the divine spirit of life in the Kabbalistic myth repressed by the Law which returns to him in its full colorful glory in the Stamp Book, the original *Sefer ha-Zohar*: "You, God, took upon yourself the odium of heresy and revealed this enormous, magnificent, colorful blasphemy to the world. Oh splendid Heresiarch! You struck me with the burning book ... the true book of splendor."²⁸

Thus, if the Messiah is to come, then he (she?) will come only from this clamor of life teeming on the margins; if he/she is to be born, then only from the womb of some unbridled Tłuia, a half-naked cretin living among "the stupidity of weeds" and "all the worst August trash" (FER, 51). Is Tłuia an incarnation of Shekhinah, the divine presence exiled into the world of matter, who wanders in beggar's rags through the distant margins of the Book of Creation? She just as well could be, for: "where is Truth to shelter, where is it to find asylum if not in a place where nobody is looking for it: in fairground calendars and almanacs, in the canticles of beggars and tramps?" (FER, 189). Trash, kitsch, mumbling and noise: such is the matrix from which a Messiah will finally

27) Underhill, *Bruno Schulz and Jewish Modernity*, 117.

28) Schulz, *The Fictions*, 159–60.

be born, who knows, perhaps indeed in a female body²⁹ – a Messiah whom certainly no respected Father of the tradition would ever want to see coming.

The Decentering Maneuver: Towards a Non-Human Literature

Just like in the medieval illuminations, where the artists were allowed to use their imagination in an unlimited way, unencumbered by the dogma, the richness of Schulz's metamorphoses of life is ruled by the same *freedom of the margin*. Or, to evoke a tradition closer to Schulz, it is ruled by the same freedom of the margin which in Judaism belongs to the element of the Haggadah. In his essay on Kafka, Walter Benjamin compares Haggadah to a bush growing richly in the shadow of the law-giving Halakhah, or to a monstrous animal who, so far tamed, one day will not tolerate his submission and will raise his mighty paw against the Halakhic master: the red-hairy paw of Esau, or the libidinal paw of the Midianite Godot of volcanos.³⁰ Precisely the same antagonism and the same hope in the victory of the Haggadic element, though perhaps more camouflaged, appears in Schulz:

Ah, when writing down these tales, revising the stories about my father on the used margins of its text, don't I, too, surrender to the secret hope that they will merge imperceptibly with the yellowing pages of that most splendid, moldering book, that they will sink into the gentle rustle of its pages and become absorbed there?³¹

In this quote from the "Night of the Great Season," the explicit context suggests a Book of Calendar, but it can also mean something else: the Talmudic folios with its characteristic parchment swish – while this additional story, happening in the "thirteenth, excessive and false month"³² would indicate a not yet written Haggadah on the Messiah, which, when incorporated into the Book, would change it forever and destroy its previous order. In the Pesach Haggadah, the most important story about the Exodus from Egypt, the sages tell us to count to thirteen: from one, which symbolizes the *echad* of the One and Only, through twelve, which corresponds to the number of the tribes of Israel, up to thirteen, which signifies the mystery of divine attributes. It is precisely this *thirteen-ness*, the excess, the time-out-of-joint quality of the annex and the margin, which Schulz associates with the divine mystery. It lies in the fringe existence of the thirteenth damned tribe: the creatures of the "new generation," spawned directly from the liberated matter without the disciplining interference of the divine Spirit.

So, it is not a question of the depth, of a *Tiefe-Psychologie*; not a matter of a dark undercurrent of life from the German *Lebensphilosophie*, and not a Lacanian Thing, pulsating darkly from beneath – as its suggested by Gondowicz or, even more explicitly, by Michał Paweł Markowski in his *Promiscuity of All Things*.³³ It is a question of a wholly different map with the thirteenth tribe on its fringes: a topology of the edge, the margin, the wild ex-centric field of creation, from which we can hear a constant mumble of a lively, autogenic and self-transforming matter. This is where Schulz's attention moves to, though it is not a focused attention which would choose matter

29) A hypothesis pondered already by Władysław Panas, especially in his: "Żeński Mesjasz, czyli o Wiośnie Brunona Schulza"; see also Panas, "Przyjście Mesjasza," 33–36; Panas, "Mesjasz rośnie pomału..." 241; and Panas, *Bruno od Mesjasza. Rzecz o dwóch ekslibrisach*.

30) Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," 137.

31) Schulz, *The Fictions*, 87.

32) Ibid.

33) See Markowski, *Powszechna rozwiązłość*.

as its new center. Rather, Schulz's writing undergoes a ceaseless decentration, pushing toward the limits of vision and bursting away from the middle – in which it resembles a technic of a photographer.

In his famous essay on photography, Siegfried Kracauer imagines a Photographer as a messianic redeemer of material reality. In contrast to a painting or a memory image, which are always focused on intentional representation, the involuntary non-intentionality of a photography takes into eternity all the accidental rubbish that just happened to be there in the background, without any rule of selection. Photography, therefore, offers a great *tikkun*, a mass-apocatastasis of the trash/*tandeta* which would never make it through the gate in the Josaphat Valley, but here travels blithely into redemption for free as a passenger without a legitimate ticket:

For the first time in history, photography brings to light the entire natural cocoon; for the first time, the inert world presents itself in its independence from human beings. Photography shows cities in aerial shots, brings crockets and figure down from the Gothic cathedrals. All spatial configurations are incorporated into the central archive in unusual combinations which distance them from human proximity. Once the grandmother's costume has lost its relationship to the present, it will no longer be funny; it will be peculiar, like an ocean-dwelling octopus... This is how the elements crumble, since they are not held together. The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of nature alienated from meaning.³⁴

Kracauer sees this “disorder of the detritus reflected in photography” mostly in the works of Kafka, but – considering all the already mentioned numerous affinities – nothing hinders us from applying his remark to Bruno Schulz. The uncanny, *das Unheimliche*, of the happily alienated rubbish matter – free from meaning, law, purpose, and intention, truly *ohne warum* – emerges constantly in Schulz too, who as we already know, in such alienation-liberation from any *telos* locates his principle of vitality. It is a vitalism of trash, remnant, drop-out, the excremental *Ab-fall* (Schelling) and *Teufelsdröckh* (Carlyle) of matter, exploding with its own purely contingent non-human life to the glory of an equally non-human God, far more uncanny than any “centered” and thus domesticated God of religious orthodoxies. This God – the God of universal cosmic exile – is scary and funny at the same time, a God of a divine comedy or a “panmasquerade,” where all seemingly durable indentities, forms, and laws, which organize creation, ultimately appear only as a carnival sham: not a true gold, but a mere glitter, or just passing changeable “garments-masks.” Schulz makes this comment *a propos* the style of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, but, as Karen Underhill rightly points out, it is fully congenial with the climate of his own works:

A principle of sorts appears in the habits, the modes of existence of this reality: universal masquerade. Reality takes on certain shapes merely for the sake of appearance, as a joke or form of play. One person is a human, another is a cockroach, but shape does not penetrate essence, is only a role adopted for the moment, an outer skin soon to be shed. A certain extreme monism of the life substance is assumed here ... for which specific objects are nothing more than masks. The life of the substance consists in the assuming and consuming of numberless masks. This migration of forms is the essence of life.³⁵

A similar maneuver of decentration, which moves attention away from human affairs into the usually neglected rubbish background, is also characteristic of Benjamin who, inspired by the Kabbalistic “cockroaches” of Kafka,

34) Kracauer, “Photography,” 62.

35) Schulz, *Opowiadania, wybór*, 444–45.

pushes the point of creaturely gravity from man to not fully created – not properly sewn, merely stitched together – beings of the Foreworld (*die Vorwelt*). It is in their marginal condition, in their as Freud would have said, perverse “side-currents” and “blind alleys” of creatureliness, that the liveliest sparks find their shifty domicile, their never “fixed abode” (as Odradek blithely explains his way of living to the exasperated *Hausvater* or *pater familiae*: *ohne bestimmter Wohnsitz*). And it is only through these sparks that we can look for a way to collide our fallen world, *olam ha-ashiah*, with the higher *olam ha-yetsirah*, the world of formation (but also desire) where the original, joyful, and useless, energy has not yet fully expired. While our world, “the world of actualization,” had used up and disciplined the original cosmic libido, by putting it into service (*in Dienst*) of the vital order – the higher world, inhabited by Kafkaesque worthless monsters *sans emploi*, is full of the remnants that still incarnate the original sparks.

This collision is possible, but *only* possible. The role of the catalyst is played here by a man who managed to distance himself from his humanity: in Kracauer, it is a photographer, while in Kafka and Schulz, it is a writer, who wishes to thematize the unthematizable constituting the amorphous marginal presence of the background noise of things (or the Levinasian *il y a*). On these edges of the world, where all disintegrates into chaos and decreation, the creative-demiurgic force weakens and the seal of forms stamps less decisively. But it is precisely *there*, where the greatest messianic hope resides: the hope that the catastrophic demiurgic creation would finally revert and the shards of hard identities and binding laws of the universe – the gorsetting “garments” of forms – will fall apart, wear ultimately thin and once again there will come to the fore the original, joyful, and useless, energy which once had filled the Divine Infinite and which the Cordoverian line in Kabbalah calls *she’a’shua*.³⁶ Even in Levinas, the thinker officially rather unkind to Kabbalistic speculation, this motif of a flickering oscillation between the marginal *il y a* and the true transcendence of the Infinite appears in the crucial moment of his doctrine, turning it into a truly vertiginous antinomian vision.³⁷ It is a role of the writer to abide in this antinomy. It does not consist in lifting the dark Foreworld to our human world of well-ordered identities and solid meanings, but in perceiving and naming the redemptive potential which resides in its comic amorphy:

Here they stopped, tightly packed, bleating imploringly ... humped and horned creatures, encased in their various costumes and armors of zoology ... scared by their own disguises, looking with fearful and astonished eyes through the camouflage of their hairy hides and mooing mournfully, as if gagged under their attires. Did they expect me to name them and solve their riddle? Or did they ask for their first names, so that they could enter into them and fill them with their being?³⁸

If those humped and horned inhabitants of the abyssal Foreworld wait for a writer, a new Adam, so he can solve their riddle and give them names, it is not for the sake of their inclusion into the human world. The role of the writer here is rather to fill in the position of the *true* God: not the archon of law, order, and consciousness, but the real master of creaturely abundance who never “bothered about precision” but created “as he happily went along” (FER, 203); the God who for a moment can be seen in the last paragraphs of the Book of Job where he, “dark, arduous, full of furious love, receives the procession of creatures, the marching nations and luminous

36) “The doctrine of *she’a’shua* finds its roots in Moses Cordovero [the sixteenth century Kabbalist from the Safed school], where it connotes, *inter alia*, the activity of *Ein-Sof* before anything existed [and] relates to the first stirrings of divine thought, the self-contemplation of the Infinite, which represents the beginnings of the desire to emanate”: Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 70.

37) On the recurring ambivalence or oscillation between the *il y a* and transcendence see most of all Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 164.

38) Schulz, *The Fictions*, 133.

parades” (FER, 200). The spark of understanding does not run between man and his law-giving archon, an idol made of human fears as “the guarantee of unsurpassable limits” (FER, 201), but between the marginal, provisory, first-at-hand, as these “creatures-questions,” creatures-unfinished projects, on the one hand – and the vertiginous glory of the Infinite, bursting with garish super-colors and super-aromas.

Freud said memorably: *Wo es war, soll ich werden*. But this injunction should be understood differently than it is usually conceived, in other words as a rule of inclusion of the inhuman id into the sphere of rational ego. It should rather be interpreted as a rule of decentration or, as Schelling had called it long before Freud, *depotentialisation*, due to which consciousness sinks into the background noise of a dedifferentiated matter, in order to learn from it a different way of being.³⁹ A way of being of a remainder, rubbish and drop-out, which, thanks to this turn or adjustment, becomes a “messianic remnant” – an ontological marginality embodied in the idiot cousin Dodo, paralyzed Edzio, the infantilized Retired, or in the Father who again and again escapes from patriarchal duties of *Hausvater* into perverse recesses of his animal metamorphoses. All these heroes, tumbled away from the normative center, suddenly triumph precisely thanks to this reduction: they arise as the scraps of the original, still unexhausted power which once, before the creation, blissfully filled the Pleroma of the Infinite.

39) On the Schellingian category of *Depotenzierung* as a crucial strategy of descending to the level of the unconscious, both for German Idealism and psychoanalysis, see Marquard, *Transzendentaler Idealismus*, 1.

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