

Zbigniew Maszewski, *William Faulkner and Bruno Schulz. A Comparative Study*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź: 2003.

A comparative study of Faulkner and Schulz may seem a project more provoking than solid. The two writers are separated by very different cultural contexts and lived their lives at the geographically opposite outskirts of European modernism. No argument can be made for any direct relation between them nor is it easy to provide substantial evidence of indirect links. The very contrast between the massiveness of Faulkner's oeuvre and Schulz's slender output seems to discourage comparisons. At first glance, in both literal and metaphorical sense, the two artists appear worlds apart. And yet Maszewski's project more than convinces. By putting Faulkner and Schulz in relief against each other the book provides enlightening contexts for their work. Even more importantly, it reveals new and clear lines of coherence within the contours of the epoch traditionally emblemized by Eliot's "heap of broken images".

Maszewski's study attracts with that rare combination of keen intellectual insight and intense esthetic pleasure. The language of his writers, and Maszewski's language too, is not discourse but element, continually pointing beyond itself towards the sphere of possible, unrealizable yet necessary meanings. Immersed in this element both Faulkner and Schulz embark on quest for the mythical Book of Wisdom and Truth. Despite the self-irony and self-conscious theatricality of their work, both insist on the transcendent perspective, on its mysterious origins. Both transform the pervasive sense of futility into a powerful creative impulse. The study focuses on the totality of Schulz's output and that part of Faulkner's prose which appeared before the Polish writer's death in the Drohobycz ghetto in 1942. Maszewski examines the constitutive tension in their work between provinciality and universality against the achievement of the towering, central figures of European modernist literature: James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, and Rainer Maria Rilke. Mann is the artist both Faulkner and Schulz admired and he is given particular prominence in the background of the book's argument.

In the 1920s—Maszewski tells us—Schulz illustrated the catalogue of the private library of his friend Stanisław Weingarten. One of the drawings in this cycle "shows Schulz wearing Pierrot's loose spotted tunic and a pointed hat." In 1920 Faulkner wrote a one-act play *The Marionettes* for a student drama group

at the University of Mississippi. He hand-lettered, illustrated and bound six copies of the play. In the drawing accompanying the list of *dramatis personae*, Pierrot kneels down before Marietta "holding her hand close to his lowered head":

At home in Drohobycz, Galicia and at home in Oxford, Mississippi, Pierrot wears a Protean costume answering the artist's need to pose the question "Who am I" in relation to life and cultural heritage. The costume is invested with recognizable meanings: it suggests alienation, aloofness, sadness, a void to be filled with and "sanctioned" by the substance of the artist's individual work. Faulkner's and Schulz's Pierrots fit their roles as creators and observers, dreamers and readers of visions in which personal and universal aspirations are reflected. (70)

Stressing this shared motif in the early graphic work of the two artists, Maszewski leads his reader to another area of convergence in the writings of both: their preoccupation with visual design. Schulz continued to draw and paint throughout his career; Faulkner gave up drawing early but he kept insisting, as is well known, on the originary impulse of the haunting, vivid image. Mysteriously palpable, it loomed as a hieroglyphic demanding interpretation, initiating the process of compulsive verbal creativity in which figures, scenes, and whole books emerged taking the center stage briefly, only to call forth other figures, other scenes and books in the endless process of reinterpretation and revision, in the unending quest for the elusive yet absolute Form.

Maszewski's *Comparative Study* is a loosely constructed collection of four essay-chapters: the first justifies the project mapping out the grounds of the two writers' affinity. If the centers of modernism lay in the great cities of Europe such as Paris, Berlin, Vienna, even New York, both Schulz and Faulkner were provincials drawing materials for their art from loyalty to, and rebellion against, the limitations and intensities created by their geographical distance from the focal sites of contemporary artistic energies. The work of both is tensed between locality and universality, loyalty to the intimately familiar reality at hand and rebellion against its constraining narrowness pushing the artist out and away into the sphere of the timeless, limitless, and abstract.

These tensions have specific, strikingly akin manifestations: the first centers on the functioning and presentation of female figures in their prose, the second—on the concern with the design, with form and formlessness, fixity and flux, the provisional (even "trashy") nature of any constructed form and the simultaneous imperative need for its absolute status. Finally, both writers demonstrate their proprietary attitude to the works of other writers; they are not only intensely aware of functioning within tradition but recognize the (re)usability and (re)cyclicity of elements of that tradition. Thus Maszewski's study demonstrates the evolutionary continuity of both thought and form from modernist to postmodernist esthetics.

The book contains a helpful, well organized bibliography and in general is a pleasure to read. Its condensed language is demanding but beautifully effective.

Maszewski does not waste his own and his readers' energy on lengthy summarizing and describing; he knows how to subordinate his theoretical knowledge to the needs of his argument in a disciplined way. What is more, he does not let the literary texts disappear in the display of his solid knowledge of cultural and philosophical contexts but emphatically keeps them in the center of his discussion. This makes it possible to foreground the truth which the contextually oriented, contemporary criticism often neglects—that great artists are not only shaped by the cultural currents of their age but, equally importantly, they open up intellectual and esthetic perspectives to be explored by next generations. To my mind, Maszewski's book belongs to the select society of a handful of important works by Polish Americanists. It should absolutely have a Polish language version and I hereby petition the author to undertake the effort of making his work available in his native language.

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