The Vortex and the Labyrinth: Bruno Schulz and the Objective Correlative

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Bruno Schulz and T. S. Eliot both saw the production of meaning in art as a process deeply laden with the construction and conjuring of mythologies. Despite the religion of the *Now* and the *Future,* by which many would characterize Modernism, the recurring gesture of primitivism signals a concomitant yearning for origins. In this essay, I would like to explore the theoretical positions on mythology and meaning in Schulz and Eliot, and consider how they play out in the two authors' artistic work.

T. S. Eliot, in his essay "Hamlet and His Problems", claims:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an *objective correlative;* in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.[1]

There is an emotion in the mind of the artist, then, which the artist seeks to reproduce in the mind of the reader by means of an "objective correlative"—an external thing known to addresser and addressee—that produces the same emotion in both minds. Implicit in this definition is the idea that art is successful as a communicative act only insofar as it conveys the artist's intention—the "*particular* emotion." But Eliot recognizes that the artist can express that intention only by connecting to the knowledge base of the receptor. The artist's question then becomes, How do I know that the art I make now will be meaningful

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1. T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919), *Selected Essays, 1917–1932* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964).

across cultures and across time, in the way that works like *Hamlet* seem to be meaningful?[2]

Eliot's much debated phrase captured the anxieties of artists in his circle and beyond, in an age of burgeoning "-isms" and manifestos. The objective correlative provided an operational description of metaphor with universal meaning. Ezra Pound was developing a theory of universal metaphor anchored in concrete objects well before Eliot wrote "Hamlet and His Problems." That theory is perhaps most clearly articulated in Ernest Fenollosa's work on Chinese ideograms, which Pound translated in 1918:

> The whole delicate substance of speech is built upon substrata of metaphor. Abstract terms, pressed by etymology, reveal their ancient roots still embedded in direct action. But the primitive metaphors do not spring from arbitrary *subjective* processes. They are possible only because they follow objective lines of relations in nature herself.[3]

For Fenollosa, poetry was the process of recovering lost metaphors through etymology. He describes the process of metaphors as "scientific" rather than "logical," which we can take to mean positivistically that metaphors should be based on things that can be observed objectively rather than deduced in the mind. They are meaningful to a community of readers only insofar as they refer to something that many users of such ideograms or metaphors could verify by observation. Thus we can understand Pound's preference always for a concrete image rather than an abstraction. Abstraction is the task of the reader.

From Eliot's poetry we will see that, drawing on the wider notions of "observable phenomena" offered by James G. Frazer and Sigmund Freud, he locates the source of such objective correlatives in a universal mythology. In *The Golden Bough,* Frazer tried to demonstrate that diverse cultures had a common base of fundamental myths that may have differed in detail but were essentially the same in narrative outline. Freud, and eventually Jung, hoped to establish a scientific basis for these correlations through the new discipline of psychoanalysis by

2. One of Eliot's implicit assumptions here is that *Hamlet* is meaningful to everyone for the same reasons that it was meaningful to Shakespeare, and if that is not the case, then it would not be art but accident.

3. Ernest Fenollosa, "From *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,*" (1918) in Donald Allen and Warren Tallman, eds., *The Poetics of the New American Poetry* (New York: Grove, 1973), 26.

demonstrating that all of these myths emerged from allegedly universal features of human development or human nature. "Universality" in art, then, could be achieved by tapping into human nature by reference to these universal mythologies. The master narratives of mythology might be seen as the objective correlatives to which the myths that Frazer identifies, and Eliot appropriates, refer.

Once we see the anthropological context of Eliot's idea of an objective correlative, it begins to look quite similar to Bruno Schulz's statements on mythology. In a frequently quoted passage from his essay "The Mythologizing of Reality," Schulz claims:

> Every fragment of reality lives by virtue of partaking in a universal sense. . . . Poetry happens when short-circuits of sense occur between words, a sudden regeneration of the primeval myths. . . . Not one scrap of an idea of ours does not originate in myth, isn't transformed, mutilated, denatured mythology. The most fundamental function of the spirit is inventing fables, creating tales. . . . [T]he building materials [that the search for human knowledge] uses were used once before; they come from forgotten, fragmented tales or "histories." Poetry recognizes these lost meanings, restores words to their places, connects them by the old semantics.[4]

Words have meaning by virtue of their connection to an "all embracing, integral mythology" or "universal sense" (115). Words, fragments of their former selves, "complete [themselves] with sense," when they are successfully transformed by "poetry" (115). The poet matches words to sense the way an archaeologist pieces together shards of pottery. Schulz's theory, articulated in 1936, combines Fenollosa's idea of poetry as etymology with Eliot's notion of an objective correlative expressed as a universal sense with its locus in primordial myth.

The theories look quite similar, but how do they stand up in practice? Schulz, like Eliot, privileges the role of mythology in art, but Schulz's work reveals that, while he may draw on Jewish and classical mythology, the most distinctive and appealing aspect of his work is his creation of a *local* or *personal* mythology, or, more particularly, the personalization of those received mythologies. Where Eliot and Pound are

4. I have chosen not to capitalize "sense," as it is not capitalized in the original text. My ellipses. Bruno Schulz, *Letters and Drawings of Bruno Schulz with Selected Prose.* Jerzy Ficowski ed., trans. Walter Arndt and Victoria Nelson (New York: Fromm, 1990), 115–16.

looking for origins by juxtaposing the malaise of modern ritualistic behavior to their *recherché* exotica, Schulz, the provincial secularized Galician Jew, is looking inward.

Since this cluster of essays is concerned with Schulz, I will touch on Eliot only briefly. "The Wasteland" might be read as Eliot's clearest attempt to actualize the theory of the objective correlative, as I understand that theory, through the juxtaposition of motifs from a variety of primitive mythic sources with a narrative about modern London high society. Toward the beginning of his poem, Eliot asks:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images [. . .][5]

"Roots that clutch" and "branches [that] grow" refer to the mixture of "memory and desire" (l. 3) mixed by "April," which all of us now recognize as "the cruellest month." The "roots" clutch memory of a time before the "Son of man," before the destruction of the ancient pre-Christian icons. The "branches" evince a desire to grow from the "stony rubbish" of that "heap of broken images." The metaphor is an organic one, but unlike the Romantics, who saw a work of art as a tree sprung whole from the mind of the artist, Eliot proposes that the work must form an organic whole from the rocky, fragmented soil of lost and distant myth.

"The Wasteland," in the sense of *un desert,* is just such a rocky amalgam of ancient fertility myths drawn from Frazer, references to the Bible, Ovid, Homer, *Tristan und Isolde,* "The Fisher King," as they appear in Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* on the Grail myth, probably, Jane Harrison's anthropological studies (published just after the turn of the century) on the ritual origins of Greek myth,[6] and *The Tempest,* which is itself a kind of primitivist fantasy based on Elizabethan travel literature.

The artist's problem is how to create a work that does not become, like the paintings described in the second part of "The Wasteland," as

5. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1964), 49–74, ll. 19–22. Subsequent parenthetical references to Eliot by line number refer to "The Wasteland."
6. Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis, a Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1911), (London: Merlin, 1963).

"withered stumps of time" (l. 104). Poetry can recover those lost connections through meter, as surely as those "withered stumps of time" imply by their cadence and their content Shelley's "legless trunks of stone," referring, in the poem "Ozymandias," to the Romantic myth of ancient Oriental despotism. The way to restore meaning to alienated modern culture, then, is to drink from the source, which, in "The Wasteland," will be the ancient, the Oriental, and the exotic.

A primordial objective correlative will be Eliot's way out of the crisis of subjectivity articulated in the lines:

> We think of the key, each in his prison
> Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison (ll. 414–15)

By repeating the Sanskrit mantra "Da . . . / Da . . . / Da . . ." (ll. 401, 411, 418), fragments of a motto from the *Upanishads,* "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata" (l. 433), Eliot restores the meaning of those words—"give, sympathize, control"—providing an answer to his very modernist problem. If the poet can "give" (*Datta*) the right key, which will cause every reader to "sympathize" (*Dayadhvam*)—to "feel together"—then he will achieve the artist's mastery or "control":

> *Damyata:* The boat responded
> Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
> The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
> Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
> To controlling hands (ll. 419–23)

In these few lines, Eliot superimposes an Oriental text onto the myth of the Fisher King to uncover the origins of and answer to a question taken from F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality,* recontextualized through the poetic image of a prison from Dante. As the boat is controlled by the master's hands, so the reader's heart must respond "when invited" to the artist's "controlling hands," if, indeed, they are truly "expert."

In much the same way that Picasso superimposes African masks on his cubist harem scene in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,* Eliot restores the connection between social representations in modern life and "primitive" myth by putting them in contact with each other. For Eliot, then, and perhaps for Picasso as well, the "mythologizing of reality" might be

said to take place when the "interference" between the primitive and the modern reveals to the reader the objective correlative between the three.[7]

Now, if this conjecture about the use of the primitive or the exotic in the production of meaning in some works of Eliot and Picasso and perhaps other Western European primitivists, is correct, it would be interesting to see how an artist like Schulz might treat a similar theme. Schulz had his own fascination with the odalisque, and employed its imagery to produce a system of meaning that was quite different from Picasso's. Schulz produced several images of collections of female nudes that might be seen as following in the tradition of Cézanne's various *Bathers,* which so fascinated Western European modernists. Unlike the idyllic scenes of Cézanne, however, or the abstractions of Matisse, Derain, or Picasso, Schulz's images usually portray the women in dominant or aloof poses and incorporate images of men—frequently self-portraits—in postures of submission or debasement. Schulz's women are almost always a head above the bent or prostrate male figures, and their tall, thin appearance accentuates the coldness of their gaze.

In the final version of *Les Demoiselles* there are no men, and the title casts the women as prostitutes, putting them in the position of debasement. Picasso's African mask, which mirrors the cubist compression of round space into the intersection of so many planes, serves to erase the selfhood of the women portrayed. A mask conceals the face that would otherwise represent the individuality of the subject. Cubism's compression of space reduces curved faces to faceted masks, leaving only deindividuated women's bodies, the origin of human creation in their primitive and universal sexuality.

One of Schulz's portraits of his friend and sponsor Stanisław Weingarten (see figure)[8] is Schulz's most interesting variation on the "Bathers" theme. Weingarten is seated in profile at a low desk, viewing pictures, perhaps Schulz's own drawings. Behind him is a large tapestry, fresco, or painting in an ornate frame. The background seems almost to be a projection of what is in Weingarten's mind, as if he were looking at the images on the desk and we were seeing the combination

7. "Interference" between text, image and reader in the sense that Mary Ann Caws uses the term in *The Art of Interference: Stressed Readings in Verbal and Visual Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

8. 1919 from Jerzy Ficowski, ed., *The Drawings of Bruno Schulz,* with an essay by Ewa Kuryluk, Adam Kaczkowski, photographer (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990), pl. 115.

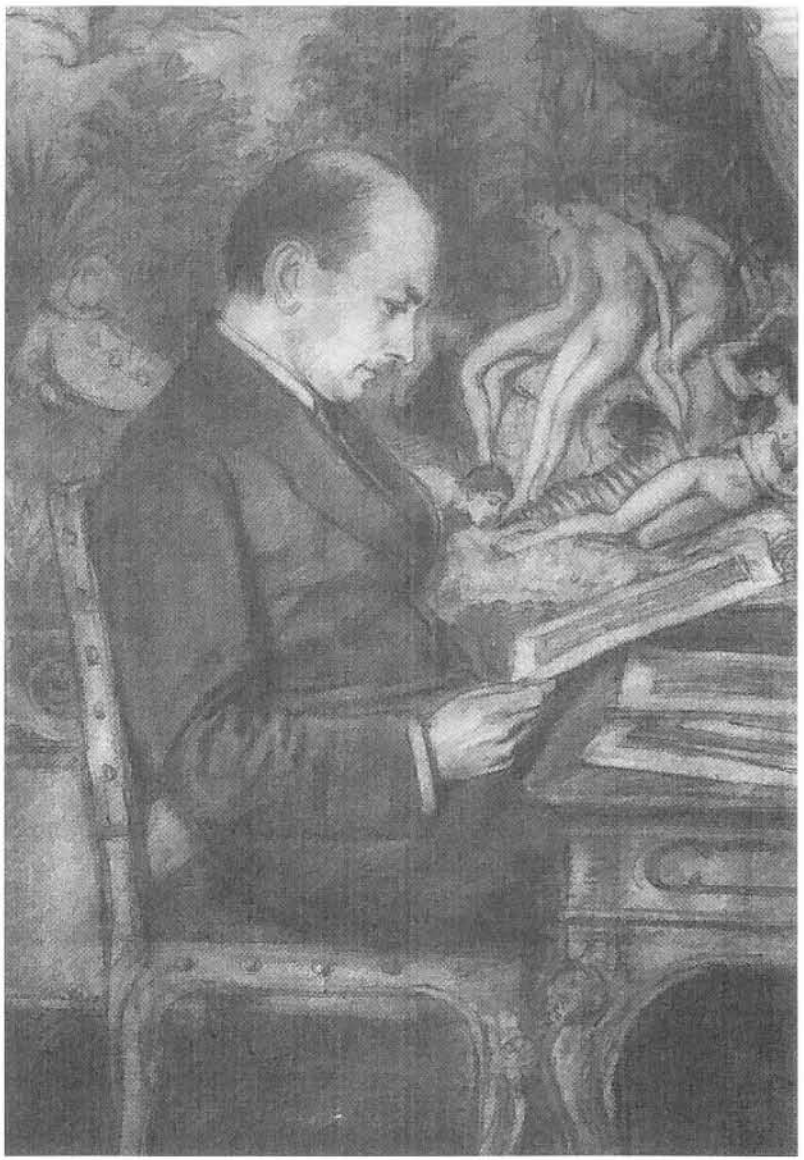
of them projected onto the wall behind him. Indeed, it seems to be composed of many of Schulz's other images. There are three nude women seated beneath a canopy to the right of Weingarten's head and one reclining. The reclining woman is caressed by a wingless Cupid, and another childlike figure perches in the shadows above and behind her. A tiger reclines at the women's feet, and a nude likeness of the artist is pictured licking one of the women's feet, in a submissive posture. Two of the seated women are looking down at the submissive Schulz. One of them is looking at a clown reclining in the left corner of the frame and gazing at the whole scene. Like viewers looking at paintings, the woman in the right corner of the frame sees the clown and the clown sees the women, though no mutual recognition is revealed in eye contact; it is as if the two unidirectional gazes did not add up to a single bidirectional gaze. The whole background is a wooded setting with clouds, trees, and grass.

The tiger, which appears in Schulz's *The Book of Idolatry* (*Xięga bałwochwalcza*) as a submissive half-tiger/half-Schulz chimera,[9] could be viewed as an importation of exotica, like Picasso's mask, but it also functions, along with the reclining clown, as an invocation of the circus, which is one of the primary motifs of *The Book of Idolatry.* This clown is clearly not in his usual attitude of performance. The artist is not a master creator, "expert with sail and oar," but a slave, and the spectator is a clown, turning the act of viewing itself, in which Weingarten is engaged in the foreground, into a kind of performance.

The world of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is monologic, insofar as the frame delineates a sharp division of the viewing (and painting) subject and the represented (and purchased) object. Picasso's women are on the inside of a space defined by his frame, which determines our gaze. Schulz, however, puts himself and his viewer both inside and outside the frame, and then presents his viewer viewing inside that frame to fashion a remarkably complex meditation on the problem of the perception of art by blurring the lines between subject and object. What in this image could be an objective correlative uniting the mind of the perceiver with the mind of the artist, when the perceiver and the artist become both subject and object inside the nested frames of the work?

Yet despite this blurring of objectivity and confusion of the simple

9. Ficowski, *Drawings,* pl. 19, 21, 28.



Portrait of the artist's friend Stanisław Weingarten. From *The Drawings of Bruno Schulz,* pl. 115. Copyright © 1990 by Northwestern University Press. Introduction, selection, and list of engravings and drawings copyright © 1990 by Jerzy Ficowski. English translation copyright © 1990 by Northwestern University Press. Photographs copyright © 1990 by Adam Kaczkowski. Reprinted by permission.

relation of an objective correlative, Schulz, like Eliot, seeks to restore "withered stumps of time," as he writes in "The Night of the Great Season":

> Everyone knows, that in the course of ordinary, normal years, whimsical time sometimes bears from its womb other years, peculiar years, degenerate years, which, like a sixth little finger on the hand, grow a thirteenth, defective month somewhere.
>
> We say "defective," because they rarely reach their full maturity. Like an infant delivered too late, it lags behind in growth, a hunchback month, a half-withered shoot more conjectural than real. (91)[10]

As I have argued extensively in my article "A Living Schulz: *Noc wielkiego sezonu,*" this image is not some individual artistic fantasy or exotic fable that Schulz would have had to dig up from an arcane source but a myth from his everyday life.[11] Without research, Schulz finds myth immediately in the Jewish calendar, in which a thirteenth "defective month" is periodically intercalated to keep the months in line with the seasons. Schulz can feel exotic enough in the myths of his childhood without ever leaving Drohobycz.

Schulz's most sustained fictional meditation on form and myth, which is in some ways an analogue to "The Wasteland," is the "Traktat o manekinach, albo wtóra księga Rodzaju" from *Sklepy cynamonowy* (*Cinnamon Shops*). Since this is a *księga* we should take it not as the second chapter of Genesis but, like a tome of Zohar, as a part of the "oral Torah," or the body of myth outside the Hebrew Bible, itself speculated on for centuries by rabbinic scholars. Schulz probably did not have intimate direct knowledge of Zohar or Talmud or Maimonides in Hebrew and Aramaic, but he could have read them in German, and it would have been difficult to avoid absorbing their style and fragments of their substance from the conversation of Orthodox and Hasidic Jews in Galicia at the time of Schulz's youth. Schulz is to those biblical scholars what Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose* is to the scholar Richard Janko, who has attempted to reconstruct the second book of Aristotle' *Poetics* from related texts.

In the "Tractate," Jakub, the narrator's father, a fabric merchant, pro-

10. All citations in the text from Schulz are from *Opowiadania, wybór esejów i listów,* Jerzy Jarzębski ed., Biblioteka Narodowa, ser. I, no. 264 (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1989), and are my translation, unless otherwise indicated.
11. David A. Goldfarb, "A Living Schulz: *Noc wielkiego sezonu,*" *Prooftexts* 14.1 (1994): 25–47.

poses to re-create life in a way that glorifies matter over form. Jakub begins his argument as a *reductio ad absurdum,* proclaiming the opposite of what he wishes to prove as his first principle, declaring: "If, casting aside the respect due to the Creator, I wished to play at a critique of creation, I would shout: 'less content, more form!'"[12] There is a great temptation to read this slogan as Jakub's actual argument, and to read it further as Schulz's view, because Jakub is prone to making such proclamations, like Joshua on the ramparts. In this case, however, adopting the genre of the "Tractate," Jakub assumes the posture of philosophical argument, *as if* he "wished to play at critique," and employs a favorite Socratic gesture even if he does not carry it through to its conclusion. If this were an actual *reductio,* Jakub would attempt to demonstrate that his original proposition—that form is somehow superior or primary with respect to matter—was logically consistent with its antithesis and thereby demonstrate the falsity of the original proposition and the truth of the opposite proposition—that matter is primary substance.

But as Jakub shouts his claim, his simultaneous action indicates the true direction of his argument: "My father shouted at precisely the moment when his hand was unsheathing Pauline's white calf from the imprisonment of its stocking."[13] The hand is extracting the matter of the body—in a pose of deference, if we imagine the scenes in Schulz's masochistic drawings—from the stocking that imposes its idealized form on it and imprisons its true substance.[14] Jakub's heresy consists in precisely this idolatrous ascription of divinity to matter over form. This juxtaposition reveals that Jakub's speech is itself a posture, or imposed

12. *Gdybym, odrzucając respekt przed Stwórca, chciał się zabawić w krytykę stworzenia, wołałbym:—mniej treści, więcej formy!* (39).
13. *wołał mój ojciec, akurat w momencie, gdy dłoń jego wyłuskiwała białą łydkę Pauliny z uwięzi pończoszki* (31–32).
14. See Ficowski *Drawings,* pl. 53. Bożena Shallcross has made the very interesting argument to me that this leg which Jakub extracts is still a youthful and idealized leg, as opposed to, say, a deformed, maternal, or perhaps *pałubiasta* leg, and that, therefore, the stocking might not represent form as opposed to matter but something transparent that only enhances the form that is there. If the stocking were indeed an enhancement, though, I do not see why Schulz would refer to it as an "imprisonment." The objection brings out the fact, however, that the women Schulz portrays are almost always idealized in this way, and that a "real," maternal reproductive female figure is almost entirely absent from Schulz's mythological system. I would still argue, then, that the opposition of "stocking" and "leg" represents the distinction between matter and form, but I would add that Schulz's idea of "matter" in the case of the feminine body admits of a certain blind spot to its own idealization.

form, that the primitive act of worship of the flesh contradicts. Jakub's utterance is entirely at odds with his performance.

Jakub's argument, taken as a theory of representation, is very much in line with Pound's preference for the concrete over the abstract. An abstraction is always removed from an original thing in Pound's view, much the way an ideogram comes to stand for an idea only after it has been transformed from a direct representation of a physical object. Original meaning is in things, and poetry reunites our concepts with those things.

As Jakub resumes his argument, static form is further revealed as a prison, inside which pliable matter is "beating its fists on the walls" (39).[15] Static form is a kind of *pałuba woskowa* (39), which has been translated as "wax figure,"[16] in accord with the context of Jakub's description of a carnival wax museum, but the idea of pałuba is invested with mythic significance as a "hag," "witch," the effigy of a hag or witch, or a "monstrosity" of sorts, brought into literary currency by Karol Irzykowski in his novel of that title. The purpose of a wax figure is to produce an absolutely lifelike image, erasing the underlying matter and making it seem like something that it is not. In response, Jakub declares of raw matter, "We, in opposition, love its creak, its stubbornness, its *pałubiasta* awkwardness" (36).

Unlike Eliot's "hollow men," which take the form of primitive fetish objects and African masks, the products of Jakub's second creation are mannequins, familiar objects in any Jewish tailor's shop, and the wares of the Jewish *tandetnik,* or "junk dealer." He imagines man recreated in the image of a mannequin that could be taken apart and reassembled from its fragments to serve any passing purpose (35). Unlike the Demiurge, who "was in love with durable, perfect and complex materials," Jakub declares, "We will give priority to *tandeta*"—the flea-market, vulgar and carnivalesque, and in one shade of its meaning pałubiasta (35). The complementary process to "mityzacja rzeczywistości" in Schulz might be seen, if I may coin a word in Polish, as the *tandetyzacja formy*—the reclaiming of power over form by its vulgarization.

15. *Czy słyszeliście po nocach straszne ucycie tych pałub woskowych, zamkniętych w budach jarmarcznych, żałosny chór tych kadłubów z drzewa i porcelany, walących pięściami w ściany suchych więzień?* (39).
16. Celina Wieniewska seems to translate each occurrence of this difficult word differently or, in some cases, to skip over it entirely, erasing the status of pałuba as a keyword in Schulz. See Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles,* trans. Celina Wieniewska, introduction by Jerzy Ficowski, introduction trans. Michael Kandel (New York: Penguin, 1977).

One interesting example of this in the story is the image I have mentioned of wax figures as forms imprisoning matter. Now we need only think of P.T. Barnum's famous sign "This way to the *egress*" to recall how the old-fashioned carnival or circus used Latin to give the sideshow exhibit an air of science. In addition, as Bohdan Budurowycz has argued in his article on the figure of Drohobycz in Schulz, Latin was particularly identified in Schulz's Galicia with Austrian bureaucratic language,[17] so Schulz's use of Latin in a circus context would have the additional effect of satirizing the language of state authority. Jakub calls these wax figures *Figury panoptików*—"figures in a *panopticon,*" which, while referring to the carnival sideshow in which "everything can be seen," simultaneously refers to Jeremy Bentham's model prison, in which one guard could sit in a tower and look into the cells arranged in a circle around him, controlling all the prisoners at once, so that they would believe themselves to be under surveillance at every moment, without the necessity of having a guard posted at the door of each cell. Matter is imprisoned in wax form, just as the wax statues are like prisoners in the ironically named panopticon, and the apparatus of state control—the language of Austrian bureaucracy—is *tandetyzowany,* or revealed for its bankruptcy by being relocated in the circus. Forty years before Michel Foucault made us all familiar with the panopticon,[18] Schulz saw the poignancy of this image and recognized that the panopticon was not just a practical design for a prison but a mode of representation itself.

These few examples suggest that Schulz is stating a much stronger claim than Eliot when he states that *all* words, not just poetic speech, are fragments of old mythologies to be recovered. As such, we might understand those fragments as the matter so vaunted in Jakub's "Tractate," when applied to Schulz's art. Eliot juxtaposes eclectic fragments of myths from Frazer, Weston, and Harrison to illustrate the ritualistic elements of London society. Schulz occasionally alludes to the exotic, as when he refers to the sources of Jakub's birds or the scent of Oriental spices, but that exotica is the product of a childlike fascination. There are no "footnotes" that Schulz could provide for those particular references, as Eliot does in "The Wasteland." Schulz manages to find the truly exotic, what S. I. Witkiewicz called "the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence," in so many commonplace discourses that he has no need to import them from Africa. Schulz reveals that every word can be regenerated into its full mythic form, like the fragments of a hologram, each of which contains the whole image.

17. Bohdan Budurowycz, "Galicja w twórczoći Brunona Schulza," *Bruno Schulz, in Memoriam, 1892–1942,* trans. Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, (Lublin: Fis, 1992), 13–14.
18. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1979).