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Onto-theo-logy  
According to  
Bruno Schulz

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The short story “Spring” (Wiosna)<sup>1</sup> plays out against a curious background. That background ensures that the element of fantasy in the story is not a mere confabulation, so that the reader encounters a poetry based in reality. I would like to risk extracting from the story this element wherein Bruno Schulz’s imagination takes flight, revealing the fabric on which he draws this memorable scene.

The central focal point toward which my analyses will be directed is a thing. A thing (re) and its reality, i.e., that which causes it to be and causes it to be a thing. A thing together with the space in which it exists. The title of

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from Schulz’s story “Wiosna” (Spring) unless otherwise noted. All translations of works quoted are my own unless otherwise noted (TWD).

my analysis refers to Martin Heidegger and his famous diagnosis of the essence of metaphysics in his essay entitled “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics.”<sup>2</sup> Read in the context of the philosopher’s later work, that diagnosis points toward the insurmountably onto-theo-logical nature of our thought (the mysterious project described in *Contributions to Philosophy* is also, according to my interpretation, onto-theo-logia<sup>3</sup>). It should come as no surprise, then, that the way Schulz thinks about reality has exactly such a nature. At the same time, however, the particular shape of that onto-theo-logia is unusually thought-provoking.

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There are many indications that Franz Joseph I was the Antichrist.

The Antichrist appears when the earth feels upon it the first steps of the Messiah. And the Messiah comes when time is entering into fullness. “At the time when [Franz Joseph] appeared on the world scene [...], the world had reached some happy threshold in its development.” Together with the Emperor and King came the fullness of time. The end of the world appears in the full ripeness of form. The world of forms that peel away, overripe forms that slip off of things, is a world that is constantly being reborn, fluid in its transformations. Franz Joseph felt this

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2 M. Heidegger, *The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics*, [in:] *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Chicago 2002, pp. 42-74.

3 Ł. Kołoczek, *Bóg Heideggera. Onto-teo-logiczny wymiar “Przyczynków do filozofii”*, Kraków 2013.

ripeness of the world as a danger. He himself ruled over order and harmony, who had made his domain “a world captured in the rules of prose, in the pragmatics of boredom.” “That demon lay down in his heaviness on things and restrained the upward flight of the world. Franz Joseph I filled the world with the neatly ruled lines of forms and rubrics, regulated its movement through patents, brought it under control procedurally, protected it from heading off the rails into the unanticipated, the chaotic, or anything wayward.” He appears to be all-powerful: “the world in those days was encircled from all sides by Franz Joseph I and there was no way of getting past him. He rose up on all horizons, from all corners emerged that ubiquitous and unavoidable profile, closing the world and locking it like a prison.”

Archduke Maximilian was the main, secret opponent of this official housekeeping, and his most serious and unforgivable fault was that he had “rosy cheeks and radiant azure eyes; all hearts rushed toward him, and larks, chirping for joy, crossed his path and placed him again and again in tremulous quotation marks – a happy quotation, written festively in cursive and warbled gleefully.” After the death of the Emperor’s brother, as a sign of mourning the color red was forbidden. Thereafter Maximilian’s color, red, became a recognizable sign of the frail opposition. After all, it could not be explicitly shown that even the power of a demiurge was unable to eliminate the color red from nature’s rarely visited domain. “Why, sunlight potentially contains it. You have only to close your

eyes in the spring sun to absorb wave after wave of it under your eyelids.”

But it was also the color of spring. The story begins with the words: “this is the story of a certain spring [...] that simply took seriously its literal text, that inspired manifesto, written in the brightest, festive red, the red of sealing-wax and calendars, the red of colored pencils and the red of enthusiasm, the amaranth of happy telegrams from over there [...]” Spring is Franz Joseph’s most formidable enemy. This spring. Because in truth, “within each [spring] ... is everything,” but “later those exaggerations and those culminations, those accumulations and ecstasies come into bloom,” come out into the open and take form. At the same time, that spring was being faithful to itself; it “wanted to finally become established, to explode into the world in a general and final spring.” It revolts against the harmony of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and against nature, in a “happy coup d’état.”

When spring “takes its literal text seriously,” it means that “she learns how to read it 100 different ways at once, to improvise on the spot, to syllabize in all directions.” “She reads that text backwards and forwards, losing the meaning and taking it up again, in all versions, in a thousand alternatives, trills and twitters. Because the text of spring is entirely labelled in speculations, in insinuations, in ellipses, marked in dots without letters on empty sky-blue, and in the free spaces between syllables birds insert their capricious speculations and their guesses.”

The revolution of spring is thus a revolution of heresy against orthodoxy, uprising against the cosmos, a gesture of *natura naturans* directed toward *natura naturata*. And at stake in this carnage are things. Things ready to shake off their forms as those flake apart, things forced into uniformity and vulgarity.

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Spring owes its exceptionality to a revelation, which emerged “completely ready-made, fully equipped and dazzling, from Rudolf’s stamp-album.” A revelation, meaning “a vision suddenly revealed of the blazing beauty of the world” connected to a message, a mission relating to “uncaptured possibilities of being.” “Vivid, ferocious and breath-taking horizons appeared on the door-post, the world trembled and flickered at its joints, leaned forward dangerously, threatening to break away from all limits and rules.” The revelation contained an order declaring war against the despot who had sat down on the whole world. The stamp-album was the book containing a procession of creatures not subject to the Emperor. “The world manifested as a thousand arms, flags, and banners raised to swear an oath, manifested as a thousand voices, of allegiance not to Franz Joseph I, but to someone much, much greater.”

Who is that someone? He is the Messiah that the story entitled “The Brilliant Epoch” (*Genialna epoka*) tells about: “On that day the Messiah comes even to the shore of the horizon and looks at the earth from over there.

And when he sees it thus white and quiet with its sky-blues and musings, it can happen, that the boundary will be lost in his eyes, the bluish stripes of the clouds will lie down beneath him as a passageway and without knowing himself what he is doing, he will come down on to Earth. And Earth in its reverie will not even notice the one who has come down on to her roads and people will awaken from their afternoon nap and not remember anything. All of history will thus be obliterated and it will be as it was in time immemorial, before history began” (“The Brilliant Epoch,” III).

The narrator of “The Brilliant Epoch” does not tell about the coming of the Messiah as if it were something he sees in a prophetic vision. The phrase “on that day” means: beyond official time, beyond the reach of the Emperor’s rule. Józef – the one in “The Brilliant Epoch” – experiences that earlier, before the arrival of spring. “It was toward the end of winter. [...] – I have always told you that everything is obstructed, walled off by boredom, repressed. And now, look, what an overflow, what a blossoming of everything, what bliss...” (“The Brilliant Epoch,” II). This experience of abundance in spite of total obstruction must be a result of that unseen step by the Messiah outside the boundary of his sphere. For the Messiah does not belong to the domain of the demiurge, to the area of what is arranged in conformity with order. The Messiah is the demiurge’s opponent, the opponent not of a creator but of a craftsman, who creates according to patterns and rules. Józef, affected by the coming of the Messiah,

begins to draw, turning out one drawing after another, in an inspired and uncommonly prolific state. “With every passing hour, visions arose in ever greater numbers, they swarmed and crowded space, until one day all the roads and paths teemed and flowed in processions, and the whole country branched out in wanderings, dispersed into lengthening parades – endless pilgrimages of beasts and animals” (ibidem).

When later the petty thief whom Józef is telling about the Messiah sees these drawings that have arisen in panic and ecstasy, he says: “You might say [...] that the world went through your hands, that it might dally there and shed its skin like a magical lizard” (“The Brilliant Epoch,” IV). And still later, when he held Adela’s slippers in his hand and, in a messianic gesture, took them with him, he speaks a truly Talmudic wisdom: “The six days of creation were divine and clear. But on the seventh day, he felt an alien thread under his hands and, horrified, took his hands from the world, though his creative fervor was supposed to last for many more days and nights. O, Józef, beware the seventh day...” (ibidem). The seventh day is the day, when God happened on the Messiah and took his hands off creation. This is the knowledge that Shloma announces, limping slightly as he leaves– for he has wrestled with Jahweh and come away from that oppressive struggle victorious. Liberation from the rule of the demiurge is possible, but only under the condition that one joins the messianic sect.

The figure of the Messiah refers back to a primeval myth, which Schulz retells in his own words. This myth also featured in the teachings of Marcion, a Christian heresiarch of the second century C.E., who saw in Jahweh, the God of the Old Testament, a mighty, evil demiurge, and in Jesus of Nazareth a Messiah, not the vengeful warrior foretold by the prophets, however— but the messenger of a good God, albeit one wholly alien to Jewish tradition and scriptures.<sup>4</sup>

This conflict between God and Messiah organizes Schulz's way of thinking about things. One cannot simply say about a thing that it exists. Rather, things happen within the framework of this divine controversy: submitting to the power of the demiurge, they arrange themselves in an orderly fashion, fitting snugly into the appropriate drawers and compartments, their forms becoming smooth and stretching around the whole unruly element hidden in them. But when the fullness of time comes, as probably happens on sunny afternoons, the Messiah crosses the boundary of his transcendence and makes forms peel off of things, so that creative chaos peeks out from them.

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If the whole controversy deals with things, then what are they? Can their essence be expressed? Can their existence

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<sup>4</sup> On the subject of Marcion and St. Paul in the context of messianism, see Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul (Cultural Memory in the Present)*, trans. Dana Hollander, Stanford 2003, pp. 55-62, 131-133. Taubes states, citing a book by Theodosius Harnack (*Luthers Theologie*, Erlangen 1862), that Marcion exerted a powerful influence on modern thought, particularly on Luther.

be removed from its shell? A thing like a stamp-album might appear to be an ordinary thing, not worth a second look. But this spring makes out of ordinary things something extraordinary. Or, better: it shows the hidden dimension of ordinary things, the dimension that in the moment of its revelation tears the thing out of its ordinariness and makes it an exceptional thing.

Spring reveals its deeper nature at twilight.

“Have we reached the heart of the matter? [...] We are at the end of our words, which here become delirious, nonsensical and irresponsible.” No, there is one more step that is required! A step into the mystery of twilight. “Only beyond our words, where the power of our magic does not reach, does that dark, ungraspable element rustle.” Let us enter the deep. “What do you mean, into the deep? We understand that quite literally.” “When the roots of the trees want to speak, when a great quantity of the past has gathered under the sod, old stories, prehistoric histories, when under the roots there accumulate too many panting whispers, unarticulated pulp and that breathless darkness that comes before a great word [...] then we are suddenly at the goal, on the other side of things [...]” In the deep “internal labyrinths, storehouses and granaries of things” branch out. Things shrouded in history and myth. “At the lining of things” – “the swarm and pulp, peoples and generations, bibles and iliads multiplied thousands of times over,” “everything we have ever read, all stories we have heard and all those that we have dreamt since childhood

– without ever hearing about them– here, and nowhere else, is their house and fatherland.”

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And what is spring in relation to that? Spring is the element that plays out in between the deep and the world. Between what is above, beyond the roots, and what is surging in the ground (“Because it’s only on top– it must be said once and for all– that we are a palpitating, articulated cluster of melodies [...] – in the deep we scatter back into black murmuring, into the din, the multitude of unfinished stories”). Spring calls things forth from black forgetfulness toward the light (“For what is spring, if not the resurrection of stories”). It brings myths to life. But these stories in the lining do not exist in articulated form; they are rather heavy rumblings, “shapeless stalks, asymmetrical hulking forms,” they are “obscure texts.” Spring brings them out toward the light, toward the word. The obscure pulp of myth becomes exposed at its roots, but in that light is revealed not merely at the roots but with its green branches, young and unaware of its antiquity. Hitherto unarticulated history reaches the level of the word and spins itself as a new story, oblivious to the fact that it has been told an infinite number of times, but in different words.

Spring is an element that separates out the black depth of unarticulated stories and the world of manifest things, and assigns them to each other. These two poles of spring stand in opposition to each other. Spring – this element

spitting out of itself both extremes – keeps them in the distance, almost in separation, rendering the one so distant and obscure that it becomes mythical and fantastical, while revealing the other in so literal a fashion that it appears to be the only true reality. This happens every spring. But that one spring, that “was truer, more dazzling and vivid than other springs,” disclosed the hidden side of its nature. A nature that involves not only maintaining the distance between earth and world, but also maintaining the two extremes in unity. Only the dark side of spring – the side that is revealed at twilight – allows us to experience and discover the “abyssal” dimension of the reality of things. Myth is thus shown to be a fundamental part of reality; reality lurks in myth.

Spring – this element in between myth and reality – in this exceptional case, that is, this spring that “took its literal text seriously,” becomes populated by creatures who have abandoned their previously existing real dimension: Józef, Blanka, Rudolf’s stamp-album, and by creatures who have abandoned their previously existing mythical dimension: Mr. de V., the archduke, and the army of wax figures. But does this crossing of boundaries and joining together of the mythical-real community, the human-non-human collective, herald the existence of a new quality, neither merely fantastical nor merely real? There is room for doubt, for Schulz’s story is a fantastical tale, and it therefore seems located entirely in the realm of myth. This exceptional spring is thus also mythical, as is that black abyss full of myths plunged between the roots.

Another thing that is mythical – if we agree that the story is just a fairy tale – is the world of Schulz’s narration. Mythical, and thus lacking reality. Stamp-albums outside of the story are simply stamp-albums, and wax figures nothing but wax figures.

But that is only true if the story is read in the context of a reality that has been separated entirely from myth. The reader, submerged utterly in the domain of the demiurge, cannot escape from that domain and if he is allowed to read this fairy tale at all, then it is strictly as a fairy tale. At the same time, I am making an attempt to “take seriously the literal text” of Spring. And it is my conviction that that signifies a fundamental revaluation: a relinquishment of the status of reality accorded to what is only the real pole of spring, and the relocation of reality in the event of spring itself, that is, in that sphere between the merely-mythical and the merely-real. In my reading, the plot of the story is real, while a tobacco shop in the Austro-Hungarian Empire is revealed to be an abstraction of reality, the result of a process of displacement of reality’s fictional foundation. In this reading the everyday realm saturated with common sense is not real at all and cannot be the measure for deciding what is real and what is not. It is rather the husk of reality – a shell whose essence has escaped.

The story is thus not a pure confabulation, but a way of protecting the reality inside a thing. In other words, it signals toward the truth that every street-organ from

Schwarzwald, though it play the same melody, is a refuge for personal stories, or that a stamp-album is capable not only of revealing the totalizing mechanisms that create our everyday world, but also of opposing them, using the mythology it carries concealed within itself.

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Spring is the time of revolution, and spring is the dispute between earth and world. What is spring, if it is both the battleground of demiurge and Messiah, and of earth and world? Is it, in fact, a thing – a thing among other things? We are inclined to say no. But if it is not something, then what is it? And if it is something, then how? How can we think the spring described by Schulz?

The fourth chapter of the story begins with the following reflections:

*I understood then why that spring had thus far been so empty, hollow, and barren. Without knowing it was doing so, it had subsided within itself, gone silent, retreated into the deep – made a space, opened itself up to pure space, empty sky-blue without opinion and without definition – an astonished, naked form for receiving unknown content. Hence that sky-blue neutrality, as if awoken from a dream, that great and, as it were, indifferent readiness for everything. That spring held itself in preparedness – desolate and capacious, it presented itself at our disposal, madly out of breath – it was waiting, in short, for a revelation.*

Nothing in this description matches our common experience of this time of year. Why does it subside within itself? Why does it go silent? Does it really retreat into the deep, into the earth, spring – the time of regeneration and sprouting up from the earth?

But perhaps spring is anticipation of things to come. It is “an astonished, naked form,” which does not peel off of things at all, because it is anterior to things. It therefore has no predilection toward any particular thing. Spring is indifferent to the content that arises within her. “Indifferent readiness for everything.” But in this indifferent readiness she abides in preparedness, presenting itself at our disposal.

Clearly someone like Józef is needed, who brings to that anticipation the contribution of his stamp-album – perhaps not expecting the result – and emancipates spring from its emptiness, into the abundance of creation. Józef – hero of “The Brilliant Epoch” – is necessary, to catch, “tense like a bow,” his “splendid drawings” from this space as it changes colors on sheets of printed paper.

But spring thus becomes used, dragged down to the level of a thing, and finally mistaken for one. That is the punchline of “Spring.” When Józef’s intentions begin to waver, he sighs: “Ah, something is rotting and shattering in the heart of spring.” In the end, Józef realizes that he has gone too far: “I imposed my own direction on that spring, I put my own program underneath her unbound

efflorescence and wanted to bend her, to steer her according to my own plans.” Spring demands the poet listen intently, but she will not be abused; she demands he harmonize in readiness, but not that he step over into megalomania.

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It is natural for my thoughts to return to those texts of Heidegger’s, in which the thing appears in the context of the Rectangle: gods, mortals, heaven and earth.<sup>5</sup> That figure, though divergent in some details, also appears in Schulz. Of course it does not appear directly; the idea is not unambiguously articulated. Nonetheless it constitutes – as I have already stated – the background on which Schulz’s stories are drawn. Of the essence is that empty spaciousness that withdraws into itself; it is not an area left unobstructed by things, but is readiness and standing at our disposal. That spaciousness occurs in between deep-rooted, unarticulated myths and the light-struck world of articulated melodies. It also occurs in between the age-old battle of demiurge and Messiah and people, who basically sleep through their lives in an afternoon nap, but sometimes a few of them experience dazzlement and enact one of their scenarios on this stage ready for every kind of form.

The Heideggerian problem of onto-theo-logy is related above all to the grounding of being. Heidegger finds that metaphysical thinking about being always grounds be-

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5 See e.g. Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller, Amherst 2000; *The Way to Language*, [in:] Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, New York 2008, pp. 393-427.

ing in two ways: firstly, in general, and secondly, in what is highest. The infirmity of metaphysics lies in the fact that it never thinks both ways of grounding in their unity, never asks about what is shared between them. The poetic thought of Schulz experiences that unity in the form of spring, that is, in the element that gives things meaning.

**translated by Timothy Williams**