

Title: Galician Mythmaking: Bruno Schulz, Nachman of Bratslav and the Hasidic Storytelling Tradition

Author: Karen Underhill, University of Chicago

This paper will consider the work of Polish-Jewish writer Bruno Schulz in the context of the Hasidic Jewish storytelling tradition. It asks the question: can Schulz's work be considered a modernist adaptation and inheritor of certain philosophical and poetical techniques that characterized that Jewish, and specifically Galician, literary tradition? And if so, how would placing this modernist Polish writer within an additional Jewish literary heritage shed new light on his modernist project, and his experimental poetics? Additionally, it will ask: in what context could an assimilated Jewish writer of Schulz's generation have been exposed to the heritage of the Hasidic tale, and why would it have held interest for writers of this generation?

Specifically, the paper will focus on a comparison of Schulz's short stories and artistic philosophy with those of Hasidic storyteller Nachman of Bratslav. Nachman wrote – or verbally narrated – his tales a century before Schulz; but I will focus on an abundance of overlapping elements between the literary philosophies of both writers, and the challenges they faced in their respective projects to revive myth or mythic narrative, in a modern context. Both writers see it as their task to remythologize reality, and this through the creation of a new genre of mythic tales, that take their inspiration from private, individual experience. Interestingly, for both writers, strategies for creating a narrative space that feels and becomes “mythic” include the elimination of much markedly Jewish content – the transformation of their respective Galician landscapes into a symbolic landscape that eludes either historical or ethnic pigeonholing. What is the significance of this decision? What can it tell us about the confrontation, for these writers, of myth with modernity?