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JOSEPH VISITS HIS DEAD FATHER: BRUNO SCHULZ'S SANATORIUM POD KLEPSYDRA.

There is not the tiniest bit of our ideas which does not stem from mythology, which is not unformed, crippled, transformed mythology
—Schulz essay on myth

Bruno Schulz (1892-1942) is one of the trio of avant-garde writers of pre-war Poland, along with Gombrowicz and Witkiewicz, who are still widely read today. He has been called a "magic realist" and a polish Kafka. An impoverished high school teacher of art, he first began publishing short fiction in his forties, most of which was collected in two slim volumes, The Street of Crocodiles (Sklepy cynamonowe, 1934) and Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass (Sanatorium pod klepsydra, 1937).

Their central theme is the presentation of his father, a loving, but also ambivalent description of the last years of the textile merchant of Drohobycz (1848-1915) and especially of his relations with his son, called Joseph in the stories. These are not chronologically arranged, but represent independent efforts to describe and assess the central figure in the author's life.

Far from creating a realistic and historically accurate portrayal of his childhood world, as might be found in Proust or Thomas Mann's Buddenbrooks (1901), Schulz transforms the autobiographical base of his work into myths of origins, life-work, illness and death, which are strikingly original and beautiful even in the unchained literature of the twentieth

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century. For example, his father’s physical and mental decline is expressed in a number of magical transformations into lower-life forms—like a bird, cockroach, or crab—and thus after his death the son can visit him in a sanatorium where the father reconstructs a feeble image of his former existence.

An initial distinction should be made between mythology and mythopoesis, the recreation of ancient myths by artists in the postarchaic stage. As Harry Slochower writes, "while mythology presents its stories as if they actually took place, mythopoesis transposes them to a symbolic meaning." This is what Bruno Schulz, like James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922) or Thomas Mann in the *Joseph*-tetralogy, does in more or less consciously retrieving ancient archetypes for the purpose of illuminating his own life story and, by implication, the situation of many a young intellectual or artist in the bourgeois family.

One of the archaic myths which Bruno Schulz employs in his poetic reconstruction of the father-son relationship is a visit to the underworld, the land of the dead. Unlike other myths, such as metamorphosis, the myth of a visit to the land beyond death is contained in a single story, "Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass" (Sanatorium pod klepsydra), the title story of his second book.

One of the great archetypes of world literature, such visits range from the Greek Orpheus and Odysseus and the Babylonian *Gilgamesh* through Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Goethe’s *Faust* (Part Two), to many modern examples. The purpose of the perilous journey may be to visit or rescue a deceased loved one, as in the cases of Orpheus and Gilgamesh, to get advice about some specific earthly project (Odysseus), or to find out about man’s fate after death (Dante), or even about the future on earth. Schulz’s Joseph visits the land beyond death for the first reason; it may be noted that normally the dead person to be visited or rescued is erotically linked to the visitor—either a wife or a lover. While the visitor in some myths meets the "fathers," the great heroes and famous men of history, he seldom seeks out his own biological father in the underworld.

Whereas the entry to this world in the great models of world literature was either down, beneath the earth’s surface (as in

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