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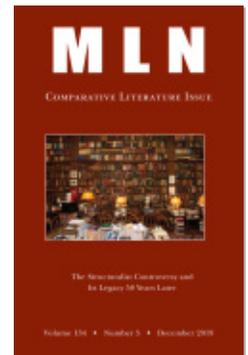
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A Sensory Vision of the Word: Bruno Schulz, Martin Buber, and The Ecstatic Body



*Lauren Benjamin*¹

But is the myth a phantasm? Is it not a
revelation of the ultimate reality of being?
Is not the experience of the ecstatic a
symbol of the primal experience of the
universal mind? Are not both a living, inner
experience?

We listen to our inmost selves—and do not
know which sea we hear murmuring.

—Martin Buber, *Ecstasy and Confession*
(Ecstatic Confessions 11)

The tangled descent may be deep, dark, and perhaps even bottomless, but there is no cause for alarm, no need to beg off just yet. “Don’t be afraid,” the narrator of Bruno Schulz’s strange tale instructs, “Give me your hand, please We are on the other side, we are in the lining of things, in darkness basted with intricate phosphorescence” (121). Here in these depths, stories and histories accumulate, ferment, and germinate in an underbrush of “gloom and roots”; were it not

¹This paper has benefited from the comments of many diligent readers, a few of which I would like to thank here: Maya Barzilai, Anne Goldman, Niklaus Largier, Thaine Stearns, and Yeshua Tolle. A summer spent in Kraków under the kind tutelage of fellow Schulzian Karen Underhill also greatly informed my work here.

for these strange woods, the narrator asks, “where else would writers have taken their concepts, where else would they have gathered the courage to invent had they not sensed behind them these reserves, this capital, these hundredfold accounts with which the Underworld vibrates?” (121). Through his autobiographically-inflected narrator, Schulz suggests that writing is not invention but mystical cultivation discovered through the senses. In describing the descent’s “darkness basted with intricate phosphorescence,” Schulz participates in a modernist tradition of invoking the sensory language of Christian illumination for narrative purposes, a visionary tradition that also appealed to his contemporary, the Jewish thinker and writer Martin Buber. This connection is particularly evident in Buber’s 1909 collection *Ekstatische Konfessionen* (Ecstatic Confessions), which contains several centuries of multi-denominational writings on the subject of what Buber defines as the ecstatic visionary experience.² But where Buber hears a mysterious sea murmuring, as evidenced in the epigraph above, Schulz senses stories.

This article considers three of Schulz’s stories published together in Polish in the 1934 collection *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą* (Sanatorium under the Hourglass) under the rubric of what Buber terms “the ecstatic.” I argue that Buber’s collection provides an entry point for deciphering the distinctly Christian undercurrents found in “Księga” (The Book), “Genialna Epoka” (The Age of Genius), and “Wiosna” (Spring), the last of which contains the descent into visionary darkness quoted above.³ The visionary quests of Schulz’s narrator, Józef, bear a strong resemblance to medieval Christian writers of ecstatic literature, as exemplified by the first-person narratives Buber compiled for his collection. My argument focuses on the Christian tradition for two reasons: first, Christian ecstatic visions insist on a uniquely attuned relationship to the body and a oneness with the Godhead, a distinction that parallels the role of Józef’s sensory body in his visionary experiences; and second, while aspects of Schulz’s mysticism have occupied scholars for decades, these readings have repeatedly insisted on the

²Hereafter references will be listed as *EC*. All translations from the German are Esther Cameron’s.

³“Genialna Epoka” is perhaps better rendered as “The Brilliant Epoch” or “The Wondrous Era” but I have decided to honor Madeline Levine’s translation for consistency’s sake. I have used Levine’s translations throughout, except where otherwise noted, and have included the Polish original where there is some inconsistency or nuance not contained in the translation. Page citations refer to English version first and the Polish second.

fundamental *Jewishness* of Schulz's mysticism.⁴ That is, while I agree with these scholars that Schulz, like Buber, was profoundly influenced by Hasidism, kabbalah, and Jewish mysticism, I argue that considering these stories in the light of Christian ecstasy forges new links between sensory perception and visionary experience in Schulz's work.

Following Buber, I understand the ecstatic as a mystical experience of moving beyond or outside of oneself. This movement is always already a destabilizing one; in fact, the Greek term—which denotes the condition of being out (*ek*) of a stationary place (*statis*) or standing away from oneself—once referred to insanity or bewilderment.⁵ In Schulz's stories, this sense of danger is imminently present, partially augmented though it is by a messianic hope of return to an "age of genius." Schulz was far from alone in repurposing—directly or indirectly—from this medieval well: "ecstatic" mystical testimonies can be found in many of Schulz's interwar contemporaries, most notably Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann, and Robert Musil.⁶ However, my aim is not to trace the literary influences of Schulz, or to beg the question of imitation. Rather, Buber's philosophical ruminations on ecstasy in his introduction to the collection both reflect and help to elucidate Schulz's own concept, expressed in his oft-cited essay "Mityzacja rzeczywistości" (The Mythicization of Reality), of a primordial word. In both sets of visionary texts (Schulz's and those included in Buber's collection), the allegory for "seeing" a vision or "feeling" the presence of the divine comesling with physiological seeing and feeling. For Schulz, Christian ecstatic literature provides a template for crafting spiritual insight as sensory experience: depicting the ineffable in sensory terms makes possible the evocation of a sacred, communal, and primordial word.

⁴Interesting explications of Schulz's ties to the Jewish mystical tradition abound elsewhere. See, for example, Jan Blonski's "On the Jewish Sources of Bruno Schulz" and Dieter De Bruyn and Kris Van Heuckelom's collection of essays (*Un)Masking Bruno Schulz: New Combinations, Further Fragmentations, Ultimate Reintegrations*, which has several essays on Schulz's relationship to the Kabbalist tradition and Jewish mysticism more broadly. Karen Underhill's excellent chapter "Ecstasy and Heresy: Martin Buber, Bruno Schulz, and Jewish Modernity" is particularly enlightening, though it focuses more on Buber's Hassidic tales. See also, Underhill's forthcoming *Bruno Schulz and Galician Jewish Modernity*.

⁵"ecstasy, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/59423. Accessed 29 March 2019.

⁶See Paul Mendes-Flohr's editor's introduction and notes in *EC*. It should most certainly be noted that Rilke and Mann were perhaps Schulz's greatest influences. (See *Letters and Drawings of Bruno Schulz*.)

Visionary Genius

As numerous scholars have noted, Schulz's childhood in the Galician town of Drohobycz, located in present-day Ukraine, undoubtedly had a profound impact on his art.⁷ The stories that appeared in the 1934 collection *Sklepy cynamonowe* (translated into English in 1963 as *The Street of Crocodiles*) and, three years later, *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą* (Sanatorium Under the Hourglass)⁸, transcend the confining reality that a purely socio-historical reading would imply, but, nevertheless, these tales indeed form a sort of mythical *roman à clef*.⁹ As Schulz notes in a letter to poet Julian Tuwin:

At that time I harbored in my mind a sort of utopia about an “age of genius” [*genialnej epoce*] that supposedly existed in my life once upon a time, not in any calendar year but on a level above chronology, an age when everything blazed with godly colors and one took in the whole sky with a single breath, like a gulp of pure ultramarine. (*Letters* 51, 46)

For Schulz, this “age of genius” (*genialnej epoce*) expresses itself as somewhere beyond reality and yet also with a very direct correlation to it. As such, the boy narrator of *Sanatorium* and *Cinnamon Shops* both is and is not Schulz himself, just as the town the narrator inhabits both is and is not the Drohobycz of the author's past. In both cases, more than passing resemblances are easily noted—for example, the narrator's father figure is aging and unwell, much like Schulz's father was for the majority of his childhood, and the “Street of Crocodiles” of *Cinnamon Shops* is almost directly lifted from a commercial district in Drohobycz.¹⁰ However, such parallels can only take us so far, as the narratives of Schulz's tales quickly reveal a break with realism as such. In order to present the reader with an “age of genius” viewed through the landscape of his youth, Schulz takes on the language of a visionary tale rife with elements of fantastical mythology.¹¹

Drawn from Schulz's childhood experience with Ephraim Moses Lilien's graphic works, “The Book” centers on an eternal, “authentic”

⁷See, for example, Jerzy Ficowski's *Regions of the Great Heresy*.

⁸Hereafter referred to as *Sanatorium*.

⁹David Golfarb convincingly argues that Schulz's obsession with childhood was not necessarily exclusive to his own childhood, but rather a state of Kantian ecstasy owing more to metaphysics than nostalgia, for “there could be no biographical materials on the utopian childhood Schulz describes” (28).

¹⁰In his painstakingly crafted biography of Schulz, Jerzy Ficowski even suggests that Schulz's written description of the sun in several stories corresponds with the actual experience of walking through the Drohobycz market square (93–95).

¹¹See Schulz's 1934 letter to Tadeusz Breza in Ficowski, ed. *Letters and Drawings of Bruno Schulz*, in which he expresses a desire to “show [Breza] Drohobycz and its surrounding and see the landscape of my youth afresh through [his] eyes” (53).

text that exceeds the narrator's capacity to describe it.¹² It is important to note that there are two words for "book" in Polish: *książka* refers to any book, while *księga*, the title of Schulz's story, refers to a holy or otherwise precious book, such as the Bible. Appropriately then, Schulz's narrator even notes that his act of naming it "The Book" (*Księga*) is preceded by "a silent capitulation before the immensity of the transcendent [*nieobjętością transcendentu*] . . . of the thing without a name" (83, 103). The Book is something concrete yet ultimately unknowable—a text with the power to extend beyond its existence and gesture to the sublime. In light of this, Józef's first encounters with The Book are recounted with appropriate reverence:

Sometimes Father would get up from the book and walk away. At those times I remained alone with it and the wind passed across its pages and the images rose up

And when the wind quietly paged through those sheets, blowing away colors and shapes, a shudder ran through the columns of its text, releasing from among the letters the formations of swallows and skylarks. Thus did page after page fly away, scattering and sinking gently into the landscape, which it saturated with color [*syciła barwnością*]. (115–116, 104)

Clearly, this object—if it can be called that—is no mere book. At once alive and variable, The Book has the ability to both reflect and challenge the everyday reality of language and the nature of things. Shortly after this description of a landscape brightened by The Book, the narrator notes that he may have "forgotten about The Book forever were it not for that night and that dream" (84). This dream, we soon learn, is the stuff of The Book itself, fluttering magically beneath Józef's closed eyelids. For weeks afterwards, he searches and searches, only to find one "incompetent forgery" (*nieudolny falsyfikat*) after another until he spots the family maid, Adela, browsing "a large *in folio* sheet" (85–86, 106). This folio is, once again, The Book.

In "The Age of Genius," Schulz replaces the authentic book with the authentic creation; as Józef brings these visions to the page, they subsequently come alive in bursts of color and movement. Here, Józef is compelled to draw "hastily, in a panic" (*w pośpiechu, w panice*) in the margins of old newspapers and magazines "neck-breaking zigzags, sud-

¹²Karen's Underhill's forthcoming monograph, *Bruno Schulz and Galician Jewish Modernity*, deals extensively with (and includes Underhill's translation of) Schulz's recently discovered essay on Lilien, which I address at the end of this essay. As Underhill rightly notes, the language mirrors that of the three stories I consider here, making it clear that Lilien's work "is evoked in mythologized form in the short stories 'The Book,' 'Spring' and 'The Age of Genius'" (156).

denly knotting themselves into anagrams of visions” (96, 120). As if in a fever, Józef creates and creates, ultimately showing his drawings to a shifty thief named Shloma who deems them “irrefutable, apposite, final,” adding that “they strike, like lightening, to the very heart of the matter” (102). For Schulz, such primordial mystical illuminations clearly bear repeating, as they reassert themselves again and again in these fantastical narratives.

Gradually, the act of “seeing” a vision gives way to the language of physical sight, and Schulz literalizes the allegorical vision. In “Spring,” the third story in *Sanatorium*, The Book reemerges as a coveted stamp album owned by Józef’s friend Rudolph. Upon viewing the album for the first time, the narrator experiences what he calls “the revelation . . . the flaming beauty [*rozpłomienionej piękności*] of the world” (110, 138). In the stamp album—and a stamp of Franz Józef I in particular—Józef glimpses an outside world that exists as he sees it and soon comes to believe himself the only true owner:

Many signs pointed to the fact that it [The Album/Book] was addressed to me as an especial mission, a dispatch, a personal commission. I knew this from the fact that no one considered himself its owner. Not even Rudolf, who acted more as its servant . . . He looked with envy at the reflection of distant worlds that meandered in a quiet color scale across from face. A distant glow from those pages in which his soul had no share reached him only when reflected from my countenance. (112–113)

The pages of the text shine and are filled with “a quiet color scale” that imprints itself on Józef’s face, much like The Book marks itself on his eyelids the fateful night before it is rediscovered. Similarly, in “The Book,” “colors” and “shapes” emerge from the pages and the landscape is “saturated . . . with color” (*syciła barwnością*) (116, 105). Far from being an inconsequential bystander, Józef’s body becomes an active participant in the mystical experience through its capacity to see, recognize, and be imprinted upon.

In these experiences, physical sense is rendered instrumental in establishing a relationship between an internal world and the external world of the vision. The visionary nights of “Spring,” for example, are accompanied by the scent of jasmine and lilac while the hand-drawn birds of “The Age of Genius” imbue the landscape with “cherry sweetness, the cherry song of the goldfinches” filling the air “full of lavender” (*powietrze pełne lawendy*) (135, 124). Elsewhere God’s wisdom, as evidenced in The Book, is described as “gleaming with hypercolor, giving off a hyperaroma [*nad kolorum, zawiąłoby nad aromatem*]” and is turned with “trembling fingers” (112, 140). The fever of creativity

itself, which serves as the stabilizing event in what is dubbed the “Age of Genius,” is accompanied by a full bodily experience of smells, sights, textures, tastes:

Winter was coming to an end. The days stood in puddles and embers had their palate full of fire and pepper. Glittering knives cut the honey pulp of the day into silver slices, into prisms, their cross sections full of colors and spicy piquancy. But the clockface of noon accumulated all the radiance of those days in a meager space and showed all the burning, fire-filled hours.

At that hour, unable to accommodate the heat, the day was shedding sheets of silver metal, crackling tinfoil, and exposing layer by layer its core of solid radiance [*litego blasku*]. (95, 118)

Here time itself is represented with a body: its qualities are marked by such tactile images as “silver slices” and “crackling tinfoil,” while its flavors are like “honey pulp” that seems “full of fire and pepper.” One would be hard pressed to discover a more synesthetic verbal experience; indeed, the reader is pulled along with Józef, tasting and smelling as the visions emerge. Schulz goes on to note that, “as if this were not enough, chimneys were emitting smoke, forming wreaths of glistening steam,” underscoring the impossible fullness of the sensory landscape (95). Bursting with these colors and flavors, time regresses into a Schulzian space filled with “solid radiance” (*litego blasku*), and in this apex of sensuality visionary travel becomes possible.

Somewhat paradoxically, what seems to be a concurrent disavowal of the body—much akin to that of an ascetic monk—also accompanies these visionary experiences. Józef is so enraptured with his vision of The Book that, burning “in silence from ecstasy to ecstasy,” he forgets to eat (91). The text implies that The Book provides the only nourishment necessary, rendering physical needs irrelevant. Again, in the midst of furious creation and “prey to [his] inspirations,” Józef does not notice Adela when she brings him food, despite the fact that she is dressed “in her holiday best” and smells “of spring” (99). Amidst the flurry of imagination, sight, smell, and taste are subsumed. Józef commits his “age of genius” to paper as if possessed:

I stood there, arms outstretched in inspiration, with extended, elongated fingers I was pointing, pointing in anger, in fierce exaltation, as tense as a signpost and trembling in ecstasy.

My hand led me, alien and pale, dragged me along behind it, a stiff, wax hand, like great votive hands, like the hand of an angel raised in an oath. (95)

Józef here, “tense as a signpost,” retains the use of his body, but he also exists as a conduit through which the visionary experience flows.

He barks “alien, hard curses” in a “changed voice” and the drawings he create emerge “as if under a stranger’s hand” (95–96). The reference to votive hands, like those found in Christian churches, aligns the narrator with the distinctly Christian trope of being possessed by the Holy Spirit: the drawings find their way to paper as if divinely curated, with no forethought or intentionality on the part of Józef. The disembodied “I” aligned with the signpost and votive hands emerges as both animated and lifeless, embodying the paradox of marshalling the language of sensory perception to move beyond the sensory world.

Schulz’s explorations of vision throughout these stories manifest an uneasy tension that both affirms and denies the body. In one sense, Józef explores the visionary world with his body, and sensory perception becomes a crucial element of discovery. He produces a bodily engagement with the visions themselves, which manifests in the language of the senses. On the other hand, though, Józef becomes a saintly, disembodied figure comparable to an angelic statue through which the mysteries of vision are transmitted. A conventional reading of the monastic tradition that Schulz implicitly cites here might aver that the sensory world must be disavowed in order to move toward the spiritual and divine. In fact, such positions are not as binary as they might seem: in denying the body food and sensory experience, such work centers the body and repeatedly confirms its profound capabilities, thereby arriving at a (not always easy or desired) enmeshment of bodily and spiritual worlds that is at the heart of ecstatic vision.

Ecstatic Vision

Published in 1909 by Eugen Diederichs, a prolific champion of esoteric and mystical texts in the early twentieth century, the collection *Ecstatic Confessions* reveals a distinctly modern preoccupation with visionary experience. In these assembled texts from pagan, Christian, Jewish, Eastern traditions, compiler Martin Buber found a template for communicating the ineffable, a way to showcase his lifelong concern with what Israel Koren calls “a solution to the question of multiplicity and unity within reality” (32).¹³ In his introduction to the first edition,

¹³As evidenced by Paul Mendes-Flohr’s title *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, scholars commonly separate Buber’s early work on mysticism from his more well-known work on the dialogic, beginning with the publication of *Ich Und Du* (I and Thou) in 1923. For some scholars, this is a matter of taking Buber at his word, since Buber himself repeatedly disavowed his early writings on mysticism. However, as Koren shows, the philosophical questions that preoccupied Buber in compiling the source texts of *Ecstatic Confessions* (namely, unity and dispersal, divineness, and the ineffable) threaded through his later works as well.

Buber identifies his collection's shared aim as "the placing outside [i.e. the written text] of something inward [i.e. the visionary experience]" despite the ineffability of such an event (3). "Ecstasy," he notes, "stands beyond the common experience. It is unity, solitude, uniqueness: that which cannot be transferred. It is the abyss that cannot be fathomed: the unsayable" (6). The "unsayable" experience is rendered in written form in an attempt to understand the ecstatic vision, a paradox that remains central to Buber's interest in ecstasy. That is, in curating these texts, Buber privileges writers who acknowledge language's imperfect representation of experience at the same time language becomes a necessary medium for communicating that experience.

While Buber is perhaps best known for revitalizing Jewish mysticism and championing Hassidic tales, as evidenced by collections like *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (The Tales of Rabbi Nachman), published in 1906, and *Die Legende des Baalschem* (The Legend of the Baal-schem) from 1908, his interest in Christian imagery and narrative reflects a particularly Jewish preoccupation in the modernist period. In the Hebrew-language context, Shachar Pinsker notes that "the whole category of religious experience, as articulated in this period by figures such as William James, Vladimir Solovyov, Lev Shestov, Rudolph Otto, Hittel Zeitlin, and Martin Buber tended to detach the concept from any one religious tradition and make it a capacious category," thereby making Christian symbols and imagery available for Jewish modernists (357). In addition to decoupling religious imagery from specific religious identity in much the same way as their non-Jewish peers, Jewish writers also specifically sought out Christian themes in order to express their modernity. As Neta Stahl's work on the trope of a "Jewish Jesus" shows, Jewish writers looked to the figure of Jesus to construct a new, modern self-image as distinct from an old and outmoded Judaism. Becoming modern, for Jewish writers and artists, is synonymous with reinventing what it means to be Jewish in terms that are not *specifically* Jewish but implicitly argue for a more capacious and outward-looking Judaism. That is, though it might seem strange for Jewish artists and thinkers to engage in Christian mysticism, Buber and Schulz participated in a wider (Jewish) trend to embrace Christian thought as distinct from the Christian religion itself.

In Buber's work, as in Schulz's, an uncomfortable dichotomy manifests in the juncture between old and new Judaism, between the cultural traditions of an ostracized Jewish community and the secularism of an emerging Jewish intellectualism. Though Schulz rarely inserted specific Jewish elements into his fiction, his visual works bear witness to

the Hasidic community that peopled Drohobycz, and certain mystical elements (such as illuminated letters) seem, at least on the surface, more Kabbalistic than Christian.¹⁴ For Karen Underhill, this tension “reflects an unexpected reaffirmation and recuperation of Jewish identification” (“Ecstasy and Heresy” 45). However, the depiction of ecstatic confession as intimate as the word confession requires is not generally a part of Jewish tradition: as Paul Mendes-Flohr notes, very little Jewish literature is included in *Ecstatic Confessions* due to the fact that Hebrew’s sacred status in Judaism does not easily allow for a repurposing into intimate, everyday ecstatic narrative. Schulz’s work in and affirmation of Polish as a mystical tongue reveals an insistence on the vernacular that makes mystical literature possible. Expressing Józef’s ecstatic visions in a secular, vernacular language, Schulz joins company with Jewish modernists writing their way into a new Jewish tradition built on religiosity without religion. This orientation towards the mystical offered an alternative to the binary choice of either traditional observance or assimilation through modernist occult spirituality.¹⁵

Modernism’s broader interest with magic and the occult—including theosophy, spiritualism, and metaphysics—has been thoroughly detailed by scholars of the twentieth century.¹⁶ Like it did for Rainer Maria Rilke, whose works of “precision and purity” Schulz described as so influential to his artistic development, medieval mysticism provided an entry point to this tradition for many writers and artists (*Letters* 133). As Niklaus Largier notes, Rilke’s readings [on Angelus Silesius, Meister Eckhart, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Teresa of Avila, Katharina of Siena Heinrich Seuse, and John of the Cross] might give a nice picture of a reading list of mystical texts in the early twentieth century” (“Mysticism and *Kulturkritik*” 2). Schulz’s admiration for Rilke places him in contact with this tradition and, in the absence of a concrete Schulz archive, shows the sorts of texts that were circulating among Schulz’s peers and in his milieu.¹⁷ Given mysticism’s symbolic recurrence in

¹⁴Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that both Christian and Jewish mysticism draw from and bear resemblances to Islamic mysticism. See Ian Richard Netton’s *Islam, Christianity and the Mystic Journey: A Comparative Exploration*.

¹⁵In a similar vein, Karen Underhill identifies in Schulz’s writing a “third position,” which she defines as “a category of Jewish writing in the Polish language separate from both that of the assimilated or acculturated writers . . . and also from the emerging cohort of Zionist or ‘Palestinocentric’ Polish-Jewish writers” (“Ecstasy and Heresy” 36).

¹⁶See, for example, Leigh Wilson’s *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* as well as work by Roger Luckhurst, Alex Owen, Leon Surette, Timothy Materer, and Helen Sword.

¹⁷The vast majority of Schulz’s correspondence, and close to the entirety of his library, has been destroyed or lost; thus, there is little concrete evidence of *anything* Schulz read.

Schulz's oeuvre, any discussion of Schulz needs to consider the tradition of visionary literature and its affordances, including what Buber names as saying "the unsayable." That is, Buber's preoccupation with what he calls the "unsayable" also reflects and furthers an emerging European artistic interest in the inner experience of ecstasy, a tradition in which Schulz actively participates. While it is impossible to know what Schulz read given the dearth of evidence, putting Schulz alongside medieval visionary literature illuminates the complex role of sense, sensory perception, and the primordial Word in Schulz's tales.

In medieval mystical literature, writers marshal the language of sensory perception to describe visionary ecstasy. Christian visionary literature of the Middle Ages—the period from which the bulk of *Ecstatic Confessions* is drawn—is rife with expressions of bodily sensation.¹⁸ Although one may be inclined to imagine the medieval mystic as an ascetic man or woman with little need of the physical senses, we actually see that in their written texts "the artificial evocation of taste, touch, and smell form a sphere of exploration and education of the senses and passions in a specific way" (Largier, "Praying" 77). In Buber's anthology, for example, Mechtild Von Magdenburg, speaking from the voice of God, compares the soul to the taste of a grape, the fragrance of balsam, and the radiance of the sun (*EC* 52). Angela Di Foligno refers repeatedly to "the eyes of the soul" and Julian of Norwich opens a "spiritual eye" (99, 95). Again, in a text by Alpais of Cudot, the author's soul trembles, much like Józef's hand trembles when it is possessed by a mystical creativity in "The Age of Genius." In fact, the texts included in *Ecstatic Confessions* refer so frequently to the language of sight, the fragrances of spiritual love, and the touch of God, that a catalogue of the many instances here would be repetitious. What is important to note are the ways in which this language is applied, and to what ends.

A long history of sensual and religious experience tells us that the two are interconnected, even to the point of conflating allegory and physical sensation. Many critics trace a long religious tradition of an engagement with the senses back to the Greek exegetic practice of "the five spiritual senses," the invention of which "allowed for the creation of a space of experience, exploration, and amplification of the emotional as well as the sensory life of the soul" (Largier, "Pray-

¹⁸For a fascinating account of the concept of sensation and its relationship to consciousness, see Daniel Heller-Roszen's *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation*, which traces the history of sensation in order to conclude that premodern cognition and sensation were intimately aligned.

ing” 80). That the soul has senses is an assertion with a specific set of consequences. Most notably, these senses are analogous to our five physical senses, but they also traverse the boundaries of the corporeal world. Echoing this, several texts in *Ecstatic Confessions* reference an inward and outward vision, or a sort of “second sense.” Consider, for example, this passage from Hildegard Von Bingen:

But from my childhood, since before I grew strong in bones and nerves and veins, I have constantly beheld this vision in my soul . . . And when I see this in such a manner of my soul, I also perceive it according to the changes of the layer of clouds and other created things. Yet I do not hear it with outward ears, nor receive it in the thoughts of my heart, nor with any contribution of my five senses, but rather in my soul alone, while my outward eyes are open, so that I never suffer in them the weariness of ecstasy, but gaze upon it waking by day and in the night. (*EC* 43–44)

The visionary experience touches on both physical and metaphoric (or spiritual) senses: first described through the metaphor of sight as “this vision in my soul,” the author simultaneously incorporates a link with the physical sense by referring to “outward eyes” that remain open. Though this vision exhibits a clear grounding in the material world—it is perceived “according to the changes of the layer of clouds and other created things”—there is a break with reality as such when the narrator of these visions transcends her corporeal being and “sees” with inward eyes that do not fatigue the outward ones. Similarly, Mechtild Von Magdeburg notes that “[i]n the greatest strength she [the visionary] comes out of herself, and in the greatest blindness she sees with the greatest clarity” (52). This paradoxical experience of seeing offers a unique metaphor for the intertwining of spiritual and physical sight. While it may seem that that sensory experience is marshalled merely for allegorical effect, its prominence and detail suggest that the physical body is in fact a necessary component of ecstasy.

The language of the body is crucial to the depiction of the visionary place, but coexists with a disavowal of the corporeal world. Like Schulz’s visionary Józef, the experience of ecstasy in Buber’s collection is often accompanied by a lack of physical nourishment. A nun from Elsbet Stigel’s sister-book notes that “except for her bodily needs she [the visionary] ate and slept a little” (85). Another author in the same sister-book notes that in her visionary state she “had no hunger nor thirst nor desire for sleep” (85). The spirit breaks with the body’s need for external sustenance at the same time it is able to feel pain, see, touch, taste, and hear in order to chart the visionary experience. In this way, the uneasy Cartesian mind-body split is worked out through

a kind of mingled secondary body-soul; in order to accomplish the visionary task, the body works itself inward and merges with the soul to produce an existence that relies on the language of the physical—if in name only—as much as it does the spiritual. According to Buber, this “self-liberating soul” has no need “for nourishment, and no poison can touch it. It experiences itself as a unity . . . because it has submerged itself entirely in itself, has plunged down to the very ground of itself, is kernel and husk, sun and eye, carouser and drink, at once” (2). Interestingly enough, the same sister who had “no hunger nor thirst nor desire for sleep” awakens from her visionary state to feel “for the first time . . . that [she] had a body” (85). Such a descent into the self is not merely a descent from the physical; rather, its absorption of sense into soul is also a crucial component of inward authenticity.

This mingled selfhood frequently manifests as the burning light and color of revelation. In Schulz’s text, the entire collection of *Sanatorium* begins with an “invasion of radiance” (*inwazja blasku*) brought on by The Book (83, 103). By rubbing the pages with a wet fingertip, the narrator’s father causes The Book to come alive, whereby “one’s gaze descended, fainting, into the virginal dawn of divine colors, the wondrous dampness of the purest azures [*w dziewiczy świt bożych kolorów, w cudowną mokrość najczystszych lazurów*]” (83, 103). This inward movement of the eye toward a “divine” sight recalls the inner visions of Mechtild Von Magdeburg and Julian of Norwich: all three utilize the language of vision to describe an inner light. With The Book’s emergence, the landscape becomes “saturated . . . with color” (*sycita barwnością*) and continues to burn in the narrator’s memory “with a bright flame” (84–85). He also notes that pages of drawing in “The Age of Genius” “glowed brightly in the sun” and “breathed radiance” (98, 103). This emission of “radiance”—more literally a “vivid and bright colorfulness” (*barwnością*)—is, it seems, the stuff of the visions themselves and appears to be the cause of Józef’s visionary experience. The descent into “The Age of Genius” accompanies a landscape rife with fire and brightness, as “the curtains that, engulfed in flames, smoking in the fire, poured down gold . . . The slanting, burning rectangle lay on the carpet, undulating with radiance” (95). The narrator notes that this “pillar of fire” (*stup ognisty*) gives him a sense of being ill at ease, presumably because he is overwhelmed with the visionary experience that this brightness exemplifies. “Can I cope with this flood by myself,” he immediately wonders aloud, “can I encompass this deluge? How can I, all by myself, answer the million dazzling questions with which God is in undating me?” (96, 120). The connection between light and

God is by no means a unique one; just as Józef knows to connect the light of the book to demands from God, so too did Christian confessions of ecstasy abound with visions of God's light.

This vivid and beatific brightness—most commonly viewed as the antithesis of Hell's darkness—is a common medieval trope that appears with great frequency in the visionary texts of the Middle Ages. In Buber's collection of ecstatic confessions, an explosion of light often manifests as the light of God either inhabiting the visionary or pulling the visionary toward the ecstatic experience. Gerlach Peters, a mystic from the Netherlands, describes her vision as light itself, remarking, "Now I see; I see the light that shines in the darkness" (*EC* 96). And Sofia von Klingnau, a nun writing in Elsbet Stagel's sister-book, records a sister's visionary experience as seeing "a light, beautiful and blissful beyond measure" which surrounds her and then enters her body to illuminate and transform her" (83). Von Klingnau's text continues to describe the experience of seeing one's bright soul in a way that transcends mere metaphor, though it presents itself as a "parable": "It was a round, beautiful, and illuminating light, like the sun, and was of a gold-colored red, and this light was so immeasurably beautiful and blissful that I could not compare it with anything else And it seemed to me that a splendor went out from me that illuminated the whole world, and a blissful day dawned over the whole earth" (83). Here we see an excellent example of what Buber terms the unity of the soul with the world. By virtue of a divine brightness, the visionary experiences the macrocosm of the external writ on the soul.

This experience, blissful though it may be, is also terrifying for Schulz's Józef, as he equates the "pillar of fire" with a host of metaphorical questions. After noticing that his friends and neighbors cannot assist him with the answers, he answers with creation, drawing "hastily, in a panic," while "blinded by the radiance, my eyes full of explosions, rockets and colors" (96). A connection to this ineffable experience with the divine creates an uncomfortable testing of bodily limits; while Józef is given a glimpse into the mysteries of the divine, the price he pays is being "blinded" and feverish.

In each case, the experience of "light" is more than mere visual experience—it incorporates the entire body. In this way, the visionary experience joins an immaterial body with sensory experience in an attempt to create something new that is paradoxically within and without. It exists in unity, as a whole. As Apsis of Cudot remarks:

For in all its [the soul's] actions and movements it is wholly present. Whatever it touches, it touches as a whole and all at once, and all at once it

experiences and apprehends soft or hard; warm and cold it distinguishes with the fingertip as a whole; what it smells, it smells as a whole and absorbs fragrances with all its being; what it tastes it tastes as a whole, and as a whole distinguishes each taste; what it hears, it hears as a whole and as a whole recalls the sounds; what it sees, it sees as a whole and as a whole remembers the images. (*EC* 46)

The ability of the soul to incorporate both physical and spiritual touch is thus shown to be a function of the soul's unity. It is not surprising, then, that the point at which the body ends and the soul begins is an unclear one: one must learn to see with inward eyes, but not at the expense of losing one's physical sight.

As Alpis of Cudot attests to, the visionary experience is one of unity. One is united with God in the same way spiritual and sensory experiences are united. For Józef, this entails the language of sensory experience as more than just a metaphor for the visionary experience—the visionary experience itself is a bodily one. If, as Schulz and the ecstatic visionaries suggest, a mingling of worlds is necessary for holistic experience, Józef's episodes of visionary insight are more than mere spiritual endeavor. They speak to a philosophy that melds the physical and spiritual possibilities of existence and does not highlight one form of seeing—or one sense—over another.

What No Tongue Can Express: Sensation and the Ineffable Vision

And then what of the art of depiction—the medium by which all of these individuals seek to communicate their sensory, sacred experience? How does the very act of writing connect to this ecstatic body, or can it? Lying parallel to a sometimes-contentious relation between body and spirit in these texts is the tension between language and the ineffability of visionary experience. For Michel Serres, language anesthetizes experience and is a way in which the sensory subject “retires the senses in a black box” (58). Following this proclivity, ecstasy, for Buber, “is the abyss that cannot be fathomable: the unsayable” (6). One writer in Buber's collection describes how the visionary “saw and heard what no tongue can express” (65). Another describes visionary truths as “inexpressible treasures, which cannot be comparable to anything” (97). How then to rectify the fact that it is by virtue of language alone that I read these authors and write about them today?

In an oft-cited 1936 essay entitled “The Mythicization of Reality,” Schulz describes language as “man's metaphysical organ” and argues that “to name something means to include it in some universal Sense”

(*Letters* 115–116).¹⁹ For Schulz, the Word may have been subjected to our base whims of “everyday speech . . . adapted to practical needs” and “handed down to us as a handy code of communication,” but that does not mar its deepest function (116). For the word “in its common usage today is only a fragment” of its “former, all-embracing, integral mythology” (116). The job of poetry is to render this True Word manifest. In this way, Schulz subverts the negative theology of the ineffable by arguing for a primordial Word that “strives for its former connections, wants to complete itself with Sense” (115). Unwilling to adhere strictly to a traditional notion of the Word divorced from, and secondary to, religious experience, Schulz rewrites the Word to incorporate a deep-seated and primordial spirituality capable of speaking the ineffable “Sense.” Buber makes a similar concession in describing the ecstatic visionary as someone who, driven by “the flame of the Word . . . does not fling down the Word as fodder for the words, but bears witness for the Word” (8). Both Schulz and Buber argue for a true Word rooted in myth and agree that there exists a sacred, freeing language underlying the sterile language of mere information and communication.²⁰

In the medieval visionary texts of Buber’s collection, a similar progression toward a true Word distinct from mere language takes place. The mystic Hildegard Von Bingen professes that “the words in this vision are not like the words that sound from the mouths of human beings, but like a vibrating flame” (*EC* 44). At other times, the language of the vision is given as if from God himself, as Alpais of Cudot notes, “what I say, I see as I say it, and I say it as I see it” (45). In each case, the Word moves *through* the human, and the human does not manipulate mere words. This sensory experience is echoed in Józef’s search for the authentic text, which “unfolds while being read [*rozwija się on podczas czytania*], its boundaries open to all currents and fluctuations” (127, 114). Moreover, the “age of genius” itself is, for Józef, an expression of the divine, for even a small event may be the result of “a higher order of being . . . trying to express itself” (13). Schulz’s “Sense” returns here in full force: this text does not merely reflect the meaning of a potentially divine author—its twin arms of Word and Sense *are* the divine author.

¹⁹I have used the translations in the English language *Letters* with the exception of the title; “Mythicization” more accurately reflects the Polish neologism.

²⁰There are clear parallels here with Walter Benjamin’s concept of “Geschwätz” or “chatter” and the post-World War I reaction of many modernist writers against the instrumentalization of language.

This is precisely what separates Schulz from an author like Kafka, who beautifully offers the illusion of a position without suggesting a way out of terror. As Walter Benjamin writes, when speaking of Kafka, “we can no longer speak of wisdom. Only the products of its decay remain” (“Letter to Gerhard Sholem” 565). Kafka, it may be said, was a prophet without prophecy; Schulz, on the other hand, for all his irony and interest in *tandeta* (kitschy trash) was very much preoccupied with creating prophecy in the form of the primordial Word.

Much to the chagrin of his more politically minded peers, this neo-Romantic focus on prophecy risks extracting Schulz-as-prophet from its historical time and place. In a series of open letters published in *Studio no. 7* in 1936, writer Witold Gombrowicz accuses Schulz of ignoring the concerns and opinions of the common man and woman in favor of an elitist concern for ephemeral “truth.” As evidence, he cites a likely fictional encounter with a “certain doctor’s wife . . . met by accident on Line 18” (“Letters” 123). This proverbial stand-in for the masses discounts Schulz as “either a sick pervert or a poseur, but most probably a poseur,” to which Gombrowicz challenges Schulz to respond (“Letters” 123). And respond he does:

I know what you’re thinking, what a low opinion you hold of our life. And that pains me. You compare it with the life of the doctor’s wife, and that life seems real to you, more firmly rooted in the soil, whereas we, creating up in Cloud-cuckoo-land and devoted to some chimera under hundreds of atmospheric pressures of boredom, distill our products that are useful to almost no one. (“Letters” 124)

In his description of what separates the proverbial “doctor’s wife from Wilcza Street” from artists such as himself and Gombrowicz, Schulz also utilizes the metaphor of scientific experimentation to assert “the avant-garde of biology is thought, experiment, creative discovery. We, in fact, are this belligerent biology, this conquering biology; we are the truly vital” (124). Contrary to Gombrowicz, who privileged ordinary women and chance encounters over the sublime, Schulz was very much concerned with eternal truth, however elusive. The art of “Cloud-cuckoo-land” appears to be ungrounded—particularly for writers like Gombrowicz—but this “belligerent biology” is, in fact, firmly rooted in the essential.²¹

²¹For Benjamin Paloff, this element of Schulz’s work is characteristic of the spatial-temporal in-betweenness that he terms “intermediacy”; like other Eastern European modernists of the interwar period, Schulz’s work “uses language’s capacity for aural and etymological association to deparitcularize the particular at the same time as it articulates mythic associations as experiential, narrative fact.” Both on the ground and

Until 2015, there was little evidence for seriously considering the political context of Schulz's aesthetics, but a recently discovered 1937 essay by Schulz on the artist Ephraim Moses Lilien provides a uniquely frank discussion of Schulz's commitments as they relate to Jewishness and Zionism.²² In this essay, Schulz describes the political as "but a rationalized surface, the external expression" of the tangled undergrowth of "collective consciousness" and "mythical depths," those same depths that give rise to stories and dreams (316). Unlike Buber, who saw Jewish modernity as intertwined with Zionism, and Gombrowicz, who neatly separated the political and what Schulz calls "Cloud-cuckoo-land," Schulz's approach to modernism's call to "make it new" was a community-centered aesthetics rooted in mythology. He explains:

The artist fulfills these resolutions not on behalf of himself alone, but in the name of the collective, and with the powers and resources of that collective. Art does not consist of the subjective; the artist always operates in an objective medium; effects shifts within already existing accumulations of content and cultural tension. The more subjective he is, faithful only to himself, the more representative he is. (cited in Underhill, *Bruno Schulz and Jewish Modernity*, 316)

Echoing Barthes, who wrote that "a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it," Schulz locates the individual as an expression of the collective; in mining the depths of his automythology, the messy substrate of his "age of genius," Schulz positions himself as a "representative" of his larger community (11). This community is both specifically Jewish and universal: through Lilien, whose graphic work helped develop a Zionist aesthetic, Schulz describes cultural Zionism as built from a "universal pathos that gives winds to all the powers of the spirit" (322). Where Zionism fails, in Schulz's view, is in its attachment to a literal homeland in Palestine and its movement away from universal solidarity, myth, and the spirit.

Unable to adequately describe the "splendiferous thing" that is "The Book," Schulz instead recreates the affair of *The Book* for the universal reader—Jewish and non-Jewish alike—to experience in narrative form, merging the author and reader in what his Lilien essay terms "the collective." As a sort of introduction to the form, the story of "The Book" promises to be written exclusively for a "true reader" who "will understand when I look them deep in the eye and to my very depths begin to shine with that radiance" (83, trans. modified). For Schulz,

in the air, such writers necessarily blur distinctions between inward and outward, self and other, real and fantasy. Intermediacy, Paloff continues, "shows us the real world . . . through the mist of epic naivety that erases its boundaries" (85).

²²See Karen Underhill, *Bruno Schulz and Galician Jewish Modernity*.

art does provide blueprints for living, and though it is born of the same stuff, it does not have the rationality of politics. What art does possess is a unique ability to draw the strings of the mythic tighter and tighter, thereby leaving the ultimate secret “in a tangle.”²³ Józef’s visionary expressions are the threads of these fundamental secrets; Schulz appeals to the reader to trust and understand him as only a “true reader” can in an attempt to lessen the burden of the ineffable. The “we” who handle it is crucial to this figuration: reaching toward transcendence, Schulz suggests, represents a communal project.

Viewing the stories of *The Book* alongside Christian visionary literature illuminates the crucial role of the sensory body in Schulz’s aesthetics of “the collective.” In negating both extreme exteriority and interiority, Schulz traverses the chasm separating reader and author and opens up a new space in which the imagination remakes the world. Such new spaces are “the phenomenon of representation and vicarious being,” his narrator notes in “*The Book*,” evoking a notion of second genesis that was central to the genre of visionary literature (92). In fact, the practice of prayer in the Middle Ages, as many of Buber’s ecstatic visions testify, transcends mere Augustinian visionary polarities and utilizes the language of sensory experience in order to evoke a bodily response in the reader.²⁴ This “praying by numbers” is “an art of figuration that is meant to inform the workings of perception, to alienate sensation from its everydayness, and to immerse them in artificial states that both negate and reveal the natural and historical face of the world” (Largier, “Praying” 88). Gone are false splits of inward and outward experience, sense and spirit, reader and writer. It seems appropriate, then, that Schulz chooses to appeal to his reader on the first pages of *Sanatorium* in language that evokes sight, touch, and sensation. “In that brief and mighty glance, in the transitory squeezing of their hand,” the narrator prophesies, “they will grasp, accept, recall—and they will half close their eyes from rapture at that profound reception. For do we not all hold one another’s hands in secret under the table that divides us?” (83,

²³In a 1935 essay for S.I. Witkiewicz, Schulz situates his work loosely under the heading of “autobiographical narrative” (*powieść autobiograficzną*) and acknowledges “the unending exegesis” of any creative endeavor: “Art, for that matter, does not resolve that secret completely. The secret stays in a tangle. [*Pozostaje on nierozwikłany.*] The knot the soul got itself tied up in is not a false one that comes undone when you pull the ends. On the contrary, it draws tighter. We handle it, trace the path of the separate threads, look for the end of the string, and out of these manipulations comes art” (*Letters* 111, 101).

²⁴See Bernard McGinn’s “Visions and Visualizations in the Here and Hereafter” for an excellent discussion of the history and evolution of the medieval visionary imagination.

trans. modified). Though the secret stays in a tangle, this sensory experience engenders a linguistic communion—however temporary, however fraught—that lies outside of the constraints that abound in this world. Glances, touches, imagination, and the Word: a sensory journey for a tangled book.

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