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The Holocaust between Pop Literature and High Literature: Maxim Biller's *Inside the Head of Bruno Schulz*

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Maxim Biller, one of the most prominent, but also most controversial German-Jewish authors, is an important figure in modern Holocaust literature. After a short introduction to his early journalistic and literary oeuvre dealing with the Holocaust, we will focus on his novella *Inside the Head of Bruno Schulz* from 2013. A short outline of the story will be followed by a detailed analysis of the role the Holocaust plays in this story, especially with regard to the two protagonists, Bruno Schulz and Thomas Mann. It will be shown that the pop-literary provocations that dominate Billers' early works, are now displaced by clear tendencies towards a high literary, artistic standard, which are characteristic for the developments of modern Holocaust literature in general.

KEYWORDS: Holocaust literature; Jewish literature; Maxim Biller; Bruno Schulz; Thomas Mann

1. The Holocaust in the works of modern, esp. Jewish, authors

One of the most characteristic features of literature today that deals with the Holocaust in comparison with what might be termed traditional Holocaust literature is the considerable increase in the representational devices and the functional scope of the subject. This may, on the one hand, find its expression in tendencies to sentimentalise or alienate the events of genocide, and, on the other, in their diminishing or even their total absence. In many works, especially since the 1990s, a lack of images of death camps, gas chambers, or the torture of Jews is in evidence. These modern works increasingly focus rather on the role of the Holocaust in modern society, investigating, for instance the way people today think about the Holocaust and its significance for individuals and their place in society. Andrzej Bart's *Fabryka Mucholapek* (2008; *The Flytrap Factory*) in which he orchestrates a fantastic trial against the controversial chairman of the Judenrat of Litzmannstadt ghetto, taking place in Łódź today, and the novel by Czech author Jáchym Topol's *Chladnou Zemí* (2009; English transl. *The Devil's Workshop*) on the problem of Holocaust tourism in our time are examples of this approach in Polish and Czech literature respectively.

The works of young authors of Jewish descent in search both of their own identity and their origins form a special case. Regardless of whether their parents or grandparents were Holocaust victims or not, they tend to be unable to avoid this subject in their works.¹ In their attempts to express their questions, doubts, uncertainties and emotions, they began to employ new literary and textual forms that transgress the limits of the so-called higher, serious literature. Formerly more or less taboo literary forms, genres and devices, such as comics, crime fiction, pulp fiction and vulgar language among others, began to be used in connection with the subject of the Holocaust. All this contributed to the broadening

¹ Especially on the problem of modern Jewish autobiographical writing, v. Hiemer, 2019.

of the concept of Holocaust literature.² The oeuvre of Maxim Biller is a particularly interesting example of modern Jewish literature in striking new paths in dealing with the Holocaust.

2. The Holocaust in Maxim Biller's works

Biller, born in 1960 in Prague, had acquired the reputation for divisiveness as an author within Germanophone literature early in his career. This is due, among other reasons, to his Russian-Jewish descent; his emigration in 1971 as a 10-year-old boy, three years after the Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring; his socialisation in the Federal Republic of Germany; the complex process of his searching for identity; his confronting both the German and Jewish establishments. Having grown up between these conflicting poles, Biller was unable to bypass the subject of the Holocaust in his works. From the very beginning, he treated this subject in his own way.³

This is already visible in Biller's essayistic texts, with which he began his journalistic career in 1987 as a columnist for the lifestyle magazine *Tempo*. The somewhat provocative title of his column was *100 Zeilen Hass* (*100 Lines of Hatred*). In his texts, Biller was indiscriminate in his criticism. Nothing and no one was spared his caustic sarcasm, not even the Holocaust. Strictly speaking, the target of his criticism is the way modern German society deals with the genocide. In a text from April 1995 with the rather discordant title *Happy Birthday, Holocaust!*⁴ the object of derision is both the Germans' lukewarm attempt at dealing with their contemptible past which sees them not only failing to admit their role of perpetrators, but also saw them claiming the role of victim, and Jews' readiness to be co-opted by the Germans for their aims (v. Biller, 2017,

2 Many of the problems concerning the concept of Holocaust literature and its development in the last decades are treated, among others, in: Ibler, 2014 and Ibler, Ohme, 2021.

3 For more information about Maxim Biller and his works see, among others: Codrai, 2015; Sina, 2020; Strümpel, Kraaz, 2021.

4 English in the original.

328–331). Another essay published in November 1996, when, after the end of *Tempo*, Biller's column had moved to the weekly *Die Zeit*, ridicules the German practice of Holocaust remembrance, which seems strange to him

Odd, inscrutable Germans: First, using all their talent, they kill almost all the Jews, and then they even feel bad about it. I wonder who would have really expected them to grieve fifty years after the hurried closure of Auschwitz the death of some million people, with whom they had barely any connection except for a rather old Testament, so fervently as if their own parents had come to harm (Biller, 2017, 388).⁵

In this essay with the taboo-breaking title *Heiliger Holocaust (Holy Holocaust)*, Biller even goes so far as to suspect that the Germans' obsession with the Holocaust relates to their quest for identity, perhaps regarding the "Holocaust-trauma as the mother of a finally German national consciousness". They should, however, "(...) understand that a friendly, open nation can never originate from horror, but only from a dream" (Biller, 2017, 390).

Biller's early journalistic essays are full of sarcasm, derision, and irony. Here, the effect on the reader is just as important as the approach to the problem. This is typical of lifestyle magazines and brings Biller close to the field of pop literature. His broad verbal swipes at the social and cultural establishment, at authorities presumed and authentic, at conventions and traditions; his clear, aggressive and offhand diction, his orientation towards a younger readership gave him, however, a special place on the German cultural scene of the 1990s and 2000s and, as many of these features find a place in Biller's literary works, he therefore became a primary target of attacks from literary criticism. Again, his allegedly irreverent method of dealing with the Holocaust triggered a great deal of reproach.

This is especially applicable to one of Biller's earliest literary texts, the narrative *Harlem Holocaust*, which first appeared in the collection

5 Translations from German by R.I., unless otherwise specified.

Wenn ich einmal reich und tot bin (1990; *When I am Rich and Gone*), the scandalous story of an American-Jewish novelist and professor of linguistics, and two Germans who translate and publish his works in Germany. The relationship between the old American guest and the two younger people, a woman and a man from Germany, is problematic. The professor is fond of posing as a Holocaust survivor, although his family emigrated to the USA in the early 1930s and thus escaped the genocide. His Holocaust novels are largely ignored in America, whereas they are extremely successful in Germany, not least thanks to the efforts of the two Germans whose support was originally inspired by a deep sense of guilt and a sincere philosemitic attitude. Despite their co-operative nature and their humility in the face of the Jews' cruel fate, they are repeatedly mortified and offended by the American writer: the woman passively accepts his sexual assaults, and the translator who likewise is unable to resist the professor's aggression faces a mental breakdown.⁶

The story is narrated by the translator and takes place in the 1980s. It shows various aspects of the way the Holocaust may be used, misused and abused by professed anti-Semites and others. The American-Jewish author of Holocaust novels has adopted the role of his literary characters, playing the survivor, which helps him to act out his sexual fantasies and his sadistic inclinations. The two Germans' philosemitic attitudes transpire to be either naïve and unreflecting or even anti-Semitic in origin, as is the case with the translator and his ambivalent family history. Biller's literary approach to subjects such as the Holocaust, remembrance, suffering and guilt, anti-Semitism and philosemitism is original and innovative, and from the perspective of the early 1990s even provocative and taboo-breaking. There were fierce reactions from literary critics who reproached Biller for treating a serious topic in an inappropriate and offensive way, and thereby trivialising it. The vehemence of the critical attacks is presumably connected with the unusual form of representation, which would have been accepted with respect to subjects of minor importance, but not to problems of such a tragic enormity as wars and extermination.

6 For a detailed interpretation of *Harlem Holocaust* v. Ibler, 2021.

This form shares many traits typical of pop literature such as the connection of elements of the author's past with clearly fictitious elements; a rather simple, lucid style of speaking rich in colloquialisms; a plot alternating between mundane, commonplace dialogues and action, and scenes of a shocking vulgarity and brutality, especially regarding sexuality.⁷ In German literature, such forms of representation had been known from the works of the pop authors of the 1960s and 1970s, but not from works dealing with the Holocaust. In Holocaust literature innovative concepts, including popular cultural approaches, had first been tested only a few years earlier in America (see particularly Art Spiegelman's comic *Maus*), but they were still to lose their air of scandal at the beginning of the 1990s. Biller, however, did not exclusively tread the path of pop literature in his early prose. In *Harlem Holocaust*, as well as in his other early stories, he links popular-literary provocations with incipient stages of a downright classical narrative profile and artistic discipline.

3. *Inside the head of Bruno Schulz* (2013)

In Biller's further literary development, a clear maturing of the artistic level may be observed, although the provocative and scandalous element and the blurring of the boundaries between life and art also play a crucial role in his later oeuvre. Biller's novella from 2013 *Im Kopf von Bruno Schulz* (*Inside the Head of Bruno Schulz*; for the English translation, see Biller, 2015) represents a significant attempt to bring into line these two levels while striving for a new literary concept in response to the Holocaust. In this short narrative, Biller leaves the well-trodden path of drawing on subjects related to his own life and his own realm of experience. The plot is set in the now-Polish town of Drohobycz in 1938, when it was in Ukraine. Drohobycz is the home town and residence of the Polish-Jewish writer Bruno Schulz, today considered an outstanding writer of Polish literary avant-garde of the 1930s, above all known for

7 See, among others, introductory works on popular literature, such as Hecken, Kleiner, Menke, 2015; Dawidowski, 2019; Irsigler, Petras, Rauen, 2019.

his story collections *Sklepy Cynamonowe* (1934; *The Cinnamon Shops*) and *Sanatorium Pod Klepsydrą* (1937; *The Hourglass Sanatorium*). Bruno Schulz, Biller's protagonist, was murdered by a Gestapo officer in 1942 at the age of fifty. Although there are also clear plot and stylistic borrowings from Schulz's works that verge on surrealism and magical realism, Biller, after all, is less interested in Schulz as a writer, but much more in his circumstances. Between 1924 and 1941 we know Schulz earned a living as a middle-school teacher of crafts and drawing. He felt dissatisfied with his job, as it stood in the way of his literary ambitions. Schulz therefore lived a rather dull life. With the German Nazi regime constituting an increasing threat to peace in Europe, Schulz plunged into an existential crisis.

The story opens with an episode from Schulz's biography for which, however, reliable sources are missing. In 1938 Schulz is said to have written a letter to Thomas Mann, who at that time lived in Zurich. In this letter Schulz is supposed to have asked Mann for an evaluation of a narrative he had written in German, and for help in gaining access to a Western readership. Since there is no trace of this letter, we do not know exactly what Schulz wrote. It is also unrecorded whether Mann received and read the letter, and whether he responded. The very mystery regarding Schulz's letter inspired Maxim Biller's novella.

4. The story (a short outline)

From the very beginning of the text we are confronted with Schulz's difficulties in writing the letter. Initially, he is wary about how to apply to the Nobel laureate he so admired:

"My highly esteemed, greatly respected, dear Herr Thomas Mann," wrote a small, thin serious man slowly and carefully in his notebook, on a surprisingly warm autumn day in November 1938—and immediately crossed the sentence out again. (...) "My dear sir," he wrote. "I know that you receive many letters every day, and probably spend more time answering them than writing your wonderful, world-famous novels. I can imagine what that means! (...)" (Biller, 2015, 9).

After a short lament over his own unsatisfactory circumstances Schulz comes to the main point of his letter:

My dear Dr Thomas Mann! Although we are not personally acquainted, I must tell you that three weeks ago a German came to our town, claiming to be you. As I, like all of us in Drohobycz, know you only from newspaper photographs, I cannot say with complete certainty that he was not you, but the stories he tells alone—not to mention his shabby clothing and his strong body odor—arouse my suspicions (Biller, 2015, 10).

The alleged Thomas Mann who teased the inhabitants of Drohobycz is one of the central motifs of the work. The scenes in which this *doppelgänger* appears, alternate with partly surrealistically devised situations from Schulz's everyday life, such as his meetings with his pupils, who are repeatedly depicted as birds tapping with their beaks at his window or flying through his basement room. The blending of humans and animals is a device characteristic of Bruno Schulz's own works. The pupils/birds often function as intermediaries between Schulz, who frequently skips classes, and his school, especially his colleague Helena Jakubowicz, with whom Schulz is in a sado-masochistic relationship, one of the few pleasures that help him forget the complexes and fear that fill his existence. Thomas Mann symbolises true, authentic success for him and he therefore ardently desires to write a novel, and to experience literary success. The appearance of the man pretending to be Mann, but embodying the exact opposite of Schulz's mental image of him, however, causes him insecurity and increases his sense of dread.

The putative Thomas Mann is conspicuous by his odd, rude behaviour from the very beginning of his stay in Drohobycz. He flings cutlery about, for example, when eating. Since people love the stories the stranger tells them, they are ready to forgive his quirks. When they ask him the reason he has come to their little town, his answers are different each time and always unconvincing. At one time he asserts that Drohobycz is a good place for him to glean material for a planned pogrom story. His comments are full of anti-Semitic polemics. With cynicism and amusement he argues that the Jews themselves are guilty of the pogroms simply because they settled in Drohobycz. Rather outlandishly, rather than

staying in a normal hotel room, he also chooses to stay in the hotel manager's bathroom. He additionally forces the manager to strip naked and pull him in a carriage through the town. All these eccentricities are tacitly accepted by the inhabitants. Bruno Schulz considers their unsociability to be one of the main reasons for their compliance. He even includes himself and is also willing to pull the stranger's carriage naked beside the hotel manager. On top of that, in the bizarre assembly taking place in the manager's bathroom after the tour, where numerous inhabitants of Drohobycz have gathered naked and are brutally beaten by the putative Thomas Mann, who accuses the Jews together with the Nazis of being responsible for the poor state of the world, Schulz, too, begs to be beaten. The stranger, however, refuses this, reminding Schulz of his incomplete novel. When the work is done, he will be burnt by the Nazis together with his manuscript.

After this experience, Bruno Schulz doubts whether he still should pursue his request to Thomas Mann, but again his fear impelled him to finish his letter. At this point a new character is introduced into the story: the former internist Dr Franck, another odd character. Having witnessed a conversation in which a Nazi instructed the putative Thomas Mann to compile a list of the names of all Drohobycz's Jews, Dr Franck, who, like Schulz, fears Nazi occupation of the town, makes the case for keeping in with the stranger, even being ready to offer him his accommodation. Schulz, meanwhile convinced that the *doppelgänger* is a Nazi agent, writes that he regrets the abuse of the so-called real Thomas Mann's good name. Angry with the Germans for their presumption in determining the fate of others, Schulz concludes his letter by asking Mann to support him in his literary ambitions in the German speaking world.

Schulz then sets out to visit Helena, again naked. He had been told by his pupils that Helena had a date with the Nazi who had instructed the putative Thomas Mann. Before this, however, she wants to see Bruno. Clearly Bruno fails to arrive at Helena's home. In the dreamlike final scene, there is the glow of fire in the sky above Drohobycz, and he realises that the town is on the brink of disaster.

5. Biller's novella and the Holocaust

We see from this summary that Biller's readers are faced with a serious story told in a new, inventive way. The story is based on real historical and biographical material intertwined with grotesque, absurd and even fantastic elements.⁸ The main cause for this interweaving is the narrator's extremely subjective point of view, a cause indicated in the title. The world presented in the novella is a world seen through the eyes of Bruno Schulz, a man full of complexes, fear and self-doubt. In the light of the problems we are dealing with here, several questions need to be addressed: what role does the Holocaust play in the text? Does the work belong to what we refer to as Holocaust literature? What features bespeak such an attribution? What new literary approach does Biller choose to deal with the Holocaust, compared to his former works?

There is a broad consensus in research that the antecedents of the genocide are also important subjects in Holocaust literature. The life of Bruno Schulz, especially his tragic end, is not only symbolic of the fate of countless Jews who lost their lives even before the actual Holocaust, i.e., in acts of violence or caprice the Nazis inflicted on them rather than in concentration camps and death camps, but is also symbolic of the fear, humiliation and uncertainties Jews had experienced since the Nazis' rise to power. It is particularly this oppressive, menacing atmosphere in Drohobycz in the late 1930s the reader senses throughout the text. The Holocaust is, however, also present in foreshadowing and allusion.⁹

The first hints at anti-Semitism as a significant motif in the novella come from the putative Thomas Mann when he tells of the pogrom story he plans.

One evening (...) the alleged Thomas Mann also told us (...) that he wanted to collect material for his next novella here in the town of

⁸ Malcolm Forbes (2015) calls Biller's novella "a stunning blend of biography and fiction".

⁹ "There are dark hints and deliberate anachronisms, Holocaust symbolism in the wrong time and place" (kjD, 2013).

the Jagienka-Łomska pogrom.¹⁰ The novella, he said with an almost sadistic chuckle, would be about the abduction and murder of a little Christian girl, just as had been the case in the real pogrom (Biller, 2015, 20).

The *doppelgänger's* open hostility towards Jews is given expression by his cynical comments and his disorderly conduct towards his interlocutors, all of whom are Jews. Even more striking with respect to the Holocaust are the dark thoughts vented by Hania, Bruno's sister:

She stroked his head and whispered that in the next war more than just their own house would be burnt down – that was as certain as the destruction of the Second Temple, and she hoped there would be more left of her and him, and the children and Jankel than a few ashes (...) (Biller, 2015, 22–23).

The most overt images presaging the Holocaust are found in the eerie bathroom scene. The interior of this room already evokes imaginings of gas chambers:

This bathroom (...) contained no washbasins, no lavatory, no bathtub, only several showers fitted into the bare concrete ceiling, two benches and a long rail with clothes-hooks hanging from it (Biller, 2015, 30–31).

Shortly thereafter, “the manager Hasenmass's bathroom was full of metallic blue smoke” (Biller, 2015, 33). Here the *doppelgänger* begins a sadistic orgy lashing the inhabitants of Drohobycz. The total lack of self-control the putative Thomas Mann exhibits in this scene has its parallels in the unfettered sadism with which the Nazis tortured the Jews and others they considered inferior or unworthy of life:

10 This is a deviation from the historical facts. The Jagienka Łomska pogrom took place in Odessa in 1821 (v. Orthofer, 2015), not in Drohobycz.

He whipped the men, then the women, then even the children, and if there had still been traces of reluctance to be seen at first in his long, masterful and treacherous face, as it kept emerging in the hazy cigar smoke, he seemed to be coming to enjoy all this whipping, pushing and cursing (Biller, 2015, 34).

That the figure of the *doppelgänger* in Biller's novella is closely intertwined with the idea of the Holocaust again becomes clear when his conversation with the presumed Nazi agent is overheard by the Zionist and Jewish atheist Dr Franck who reports on lists of Jews the *doppelgänger* would have to compile, or on the agent's prophetic words towards Dr Franck: "I like your people's prayers, and the *Shema Israel* is particularly fine. It would be a loss if there were no one left to recite it" (Biller, 2015, 44). These words have a strong impact on Dr Franck. He recognises that Nazi Germany presents a real danger for the Jews of Drohobycz too. He therefore sees the necessity of keeping in with the *doppelgänger*, i.e., of co-operating with the Nazis.

The novella's final scene shows the image of a fiery glow in the Drohobycz night sky with engine noise, the approach of tanks and the shrill shouting of military commands. This image denotes the transition from the sphere of foreshadowing and predictions to the world of the real horror: to the Second World War and the Holocaust.

6. Bruno Schulz, Thomas Mann, and the Holocaust

After its publication, the novella evoked a strong response on the part of literary reviewers. The reviews were largely positive, if not enthusiastic, but the critics' interpretations of Biller's text differed widely. Some understood the title *Im Kopf von Bruno Schulz* as a largely literary working of Schulz's life and partially of his oeuvre, as several passages in the book refer intertextually to Schulz's stories, such as the magical, dreamlike scenes blending the images of pupils and birds (v. e.g., Neshitov, 2013; Krüger, 2013; Jacobsen, 2014). Biller rejected this analysis, stating that he only had a cursory knowledge of Schulz and his work. It was rather the mysterious letter Schulz wrote to Thomas Mann that

stimulated his imagination and literary creativity.¹¹ Other interpretations see the German Nobel laureate as the second, if not the true hero of the work (v. e.g., Granzin, 2013; Wolff, 2013; Praschl, 2013). This may be substantiated by the fact that Biller as early as his student days was interested in the life and work of Thomas Mann, expressing the view in his master's thesis that there is evidence of anti-Semitism throughout Mann's oeuvre. Critical comments on Thomas Mann are to be found in many of Biller's journalistic and literary works, such as in his 'self-portrait' *Der gebrauchte Jude* (2009; *The Used Jew*). Indeed, the anti-Semitic tendencies in Mann's thinking and writing shine through in many parts of *Im Kopf von Bruno Schulz*. The prominent role the writer plays in the narrative also becomes apparent in his double representation as, firstly, addressee of Schulz's letter, a rather passive, latent and mute function, and, secondly, the *doppelgänger*, whose vigorous, raucous rude behaviour makes him the driving force of the action. Beginning, however, with the insight that to a great extent Biller mixes biographical data with fictitious elements, we must conclude that the story's protagonists Bruno Schulz and Thomas Mann rather occupy an exemplary, symbolic function. During the reading it becomes increasingly clear that it is the imminent, unstoppable cataclysm becoming apparent in the background that reduces the personages to the level of mere marionettes within the story. In other words: the true protagonist of the action is the imminent catastrophe, and the two writers play representative roles in it.

The figure of Bruno Schulz represents a poor Polish-Jewish intellectual who wants to escape from the limitations of the rural backwater, although he has neither the means nor the connections to do so. Schulz is going insane as he increasingly despairs of his hopeless personal situation and the lunacy of the wider world. In his perception reflections of

11 In an interview with Christine Watty, Biller said: "(...) I don't know anything about him [Bruno Schulz]. I read his letters, I read his stories, some of them, I think, are absolutely brilliant, others are a little bit too wordy, too poetic. (...) I was interested in this man's fate who (...) in a moment when it should have been clear to everyone in Central and Eastern Europe that the Germans would soon be waging, nevertheless just wrote to a German author, hoping for help from him, who, however, was at the time in exile" (Watty, 2013).

reality, therefore, alternate with figments of his imagination. This mixture is taken up by the narrator who with no critical distance reproduces Schulz's thoughts. Biller creates his novella's special world by using both facts from Schulz's biography and motifs from his literary works.

We have no impression, however, that Biller is especially interested in Schulz's complex character as such, nor that he really intends to address Schulz's literary work. His main concern seems rather to give an insight into the way a split Jewish personality thinks and acts, and to represent the extreme mental state of many Jews on the brink of the Holocaust, to whom were often attributed traits such as resignation to their fate, lack of resistance and the inability to react to the suffering they were forced to endure.¹² Biller's image of Bruno Schulz as a fearful, servile, masochistic and powerless person embraces all these features. In this sense it is not by chance that the tragic climax at the end of the story, the beginning of the war, prevents Schulz from being served his masochistic punishment by his colleague and *domina* Helena. Another punishment Schulz begs for is that at the hands of the *doppelgänger*. The sadistic pretender's reaction, however, consists not in the torment of the masochistic Bruno, but in its denial. The real and much more terrible punishment would follow only when he reached his goal in life, the completion of his novel. This punishment would be administered by the Nazis.

As we can see from the novella, Schulz's focus is totally on Thomas Mann. Although it takes him a deal of effort, suffering as he does from feelings of inferiority, he finally manages to write his letter to Mann. Mann is an ideal to him, a shining, inspiring exemplar. In the eyes of Bruno Schulz, Mann is the embodiment of enlightenment, success, urbanity and absolute integrity, and in this regard he is also a representation of an ideal Germany. This image, however, changed with the onset of the Nazi era, when Germany began to reveal its increasingly ugly face. In Biller's novella, the *doppelgänger* is a defender of this

12 To Hammelehle (2013) Schulz's masochism appears "like the bitter, burlesque distorted picture of the European Jews' efforts to assimilate and submit themselves", Schulz furthermore "represents that part of the European Jewry which sought refuge in allaying itself when faced with the beginning of the mass murder."

ugly, i.e., corrupt, crude, presumptuous, unenlightened Germany. In this sense, the doubling of Thomas Mann, “inside the head of Bruno Schulz,”¹³ is the consequence of the fact that Schulz fails to come to terms with the contradiction between the ideal and reality. The circumstances in Germany at that time showed many features that foreshadowed the path to the Holocaust. These features manifest themselves in the *doppelgänger’s* character: in his sadism, his hubris and arrogance; his greed for power; his corruptness and ruthlessness. It is no coincidence that most of the scenes presaging the Holocaust are related to the activities of the *doppelgänger*.

7. Pop literature vs. high literature

Since the Holocaust plays a crucial, albeit unpreponderant role in Biller’s *Inside the Head of Bruno Schulz*, it is appropriate to refer to the novella as a work of Holocaust literature. Such an attribution is much more expedient than to classify it as a biographical work, as some critics did. What type of Holocaust literature is it? How does the author deal with the genocide, and what is he aiming at? As stated above, Biller’s early works on the Holocaust topic are characterised by a clearly populist approach. Biller was even one of the first German writers to write about the Holocaust; rather casually, irreverently, and provocatively, in the way he treated nearly all his literary subjects. Over time, however, he increasingly manifested his high literary, narrative ability. This faculty was, indeed, rudimentarily recognisable from the very beginnings of his creative career. In the course of time, however, a clear shift in the ratio of the two approaches took place: the provocative element gradually faded into the background, but it was never eliminated completely. *Inside the Head of Bruno Schulz* transpires to be a skilful, highly artistic narration which nevertheless continues to use rudiments of populist

13 “Whether the fake Thomas Mann exclusively exists as a vision inside the head of ‘Bruno’ or whether this monstrous figure has a real life within the logic of the novella’s world, too, remains open” (Granzin, 2013).

writing, or, in other words, it is the special mix of artistic and popular approaches to the subject that brings out the uniqueness of his work.

One of the most frequently used devices in popular literature is also found here: the mixture of factuality and fictionality. It is, however, no longer Biller's own biography that provides the basis for the story as we know it from his early works. The story now begins from and develops in a landscape taken from pre-war life in the Polish provinces and the biography of one of the greatest Polish writers of the 20th century. The little factual detail that inspired the writing of the story, the presumed correspondence between Bruno Schulz and Thomas Mann, may easily be expanded into a fictional configuration as it is shrouded in mystery and speculation. In this regard, it is interesting that in developing his plot Biller uses another feature typical of popular literature: the denigration of his figures, which also casts a slur over the real personages behind them. This provocative act affects both Bruno Schulz and Thomas Mann, two widely acknowledged figures in their national literary canons, writers who enjoyed international literary prestige. Although the reduction of Schulz's character to a fearful, servile, masochistic Jew and the depiction of Mann as a Janus-faced German, virtually embracing two contradictory personalities, primarily aims at a more complex and profound insight into the problem of guilt and responsibility concerning the Holocaust, Biller ventures the consequences of such an approach knowing that he risks a scandal among intellectuals. The third populist device is the radical manner of expression manifesting itself mainly in scenes of sex and violence, especially in the depictions prefiguring Nazi excesses. That all the features mentioned are never gratuitous is above all thanks to the refined literary skills Biller evinces in the novella.

Inside the head of Bruno Schulz is an unequivocally artful, elaborate narration with a multi-layered structure and a simple but skilful composition. The story is told by an extradiegetic narrator who is extremely close to the protagonist Bruno Schulz, not only describing his actions, but also echoing his thoughts, wishes and fears. An important structuring principle is the text of Schulz's letter to Thomas Mann, which is shown in essential phases of its formation. The outstanding importance of the inner processes of writing, thinking and feeling among other things

may also explain the meaning of the title. It refers to the depiction of Schulz's inner world and the subjectivity of the plot. By accenting psychic processes, dreams, fantasies, emotions, and fears as driving forces of the narration the work adopts crucial influences of surrealism¹⁴ and magic realism.

As may be seen from *Inside the Head of Bruno Schulz* and also from a great many other works of Holocaust literature, there is a clear tendency that has developed in recent years, away from very open-provoking intentions towards a distinctive literary standard and the use of artistic devices. Popularism is no longer a strategy of scandal, but rather a part of an artist's overall objective. Maxim Biller, in whose works the Holocaust played a dominant role from the very beginning of his career, has undergone this development in his own oeuvre. This development, moreover, is a clear indication of the fact that the readers' standards have also undergone a serious change in this regard.

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