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MAX BLECHER'S CENTRAL EUROPEAN AFFINITIES

GABRIELA GLĂVAN[1]

ABSTRACT. ***Max Blecher's Central European Affinities.*** Max Blecher's connections with the Central European literary imaginary, which scholars have established through readings that place Blecher in the proximity of authors such as Bruno Schulz or Franz Kafka, could be revisited not only comparatively, but also by tackling some key issues in his work and biography that may confirm the writer's belonging to this vast intellectual territory. Provincial spaces, marginality, uncertainties regarding identity, existential confusion, immaturity, the pervasiveness of objects and of the artificial, they all reveal a perspective upon literature that may function, in the absence of a geographical belonging, as a bridge and connection between worlds that mirror each other's essence and difference.

Keywords: *Central European literature, identity, the province, periphery, Jewishness*

REZUMAT. ***Max Blecher – afinități central-europene.*** Conectarea lui Max Blecher la imaginarul central-european, consolidată critic prin asocieri cu Franz Kafka sau Bruno Schulz, poate fi rediscutată nu doar din perspectivă comparativă, ci și prin explorarea unor aspecte ce-i pot justifica direct apartenența la acest vast teritoriu intelectual. Provincia, marginalitatea, incertitudinea identității, confuzia, imaturitatea, invazia obiectelor și a artificialului revelează o viziune literară ce poate funcționa, în absența unei apartenențe geografice, ca punte și conector între lumi ce-și expun în oglindă specificul și diferența.

Cuvinte-cheie: *literatura central-europeană, identitatea, provincia, perifericul, evreitatea*

Max Blecher cannot be included in a literary geography of Central Europe without the necessary mention that his potential belonging to this imaginary framework could only be justified by an affinity that transcends a territorial

[1] **Gabriela GLĂVAN** is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, the West University in Timișoara, Romania where she teaches Comparative Literature. She authored a book on Romanian modernism in 2014 and a monograph on Franz Kafka's short stories in 2017. Glăvan has published numerous academic studies on modernism, the Avant-garde and postcommunism and is a contributor to several cultural magazines. Email: gabriela.glavan@e-uvt.ro

principle. In his fundamental essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe", Milan Kundera defines Central Europe as "the part of Europe situated geographically in the center – culturally in the West and politically in the East" (Kundera 33). This connection to a Central European sensibility is confirmed by certain stylistic features and thematic structures that directly favor Blecher's inclusion in a Central European context alongside writers such as Bruno Schulz or Franz Kafka. Beyond their aesthetic affinities, these writers are connected by their common Jewish heritage, which imprints a self-reflexive identity marked by fragility and constant sense of crisis and uncertainty.

Comparative interpretations connecting Max Blecher to Bruno Schulz have facilitated the inclusion of the Romanian writer in an extended perimeter of Central European literature (cf. Berechet, 80). This coincides with the efforts of some Romanian critics from the seventh and eighth decades of the twentieth century to place the interwar writer in a central canonical position in the Romanian literary history. In *Romanian Literature between the World Wars*, Ovid. S. Crohmălniceanu, one of the most prominent critics of the period, integrates Blecher in the same "family of writers" (Crohmălniceanu 543), as Schulz, Robert Walser and Kafka, who share a modern artistic consciousness, narrative techniques, and perceptions that reflect "in paroxistic forms the sick consciousness of their time, living in a perpetual 'acclimatized nightmare'" (ibid.). With no further insistence on the common ground of these authors, Crohmălniceanu indicates some relevant similarities between Blecher, a Romanian writer from the provincial city of Roman, and the three writers with whom he shared "a faculty to inhabit misfortune" (544). Over a decade later, in 1980, Nicolae Manolescu added important details to the same critical position, namely that the common ground consists of a unity of vision and that "the perspective upon the world is the real connection" (Manolescu 561).

In a more recent approach, Dumitru Tucan (345-356) argues in favor of a comparative perspective that allows for a parallel reading of Bruno Schulz's visionary prose and Blecher's oneiric and introspective fiction, summarizing at the same time the most prominent Romanian critical approaches to the Polish writer. He argues that "the main critical reading of Schulz in Romanian culture was […] 'existentialist' or mediated by Blecher's imaginary" (Tucan 347) due to the authoritative critical voices that set the tone for the potential association between the two writers. The revival of an existentialist code within the interwar Romanian literature, which materialized in various dialects of authenticity and experiment, coincides, as Tucan also noted, with an opening of the Romanian critical discourse towards themes and cultural issues coherently discussed in Western criticism. This clearly favored a strong connection to the trends and critical directions of the moment, at a time when Romanian culture was greatly

challenged by increasing political control. Blecher was rediscovered and re-read decades after his initial critical validation, and his canonical status started to be consolidated by leading literary critics, such as Manolescu.

A certain predilection for immaturity, kitsch, the melancholy of the province, and a vision of the world as artifice and decor are just a few of the aspects that connect Blecher's literature to Bruno Schulz's fantastical and obsessive writings. Another and even more prominent feature defining the works of both writers is what Jerzy Ficowski called "the pictorial character of Schulz's prose" (1998, 514) – both Blecher and Schulz created deeply visual fictions, projected in images, frames and tableaux. Bruno Schulz's artistic career, including his activity as a painter, well known due to the temporary and rather unfortunate protection he received from SS-Hauptscharführer Felix Landau, for whom he worked in the final year of his life. Blecher's belief in the ultimate power of images is clearly stated in *Adventures…*: "Ordinary words lose their validity at certain depths of the soul. Here I am, trying to give an exact description of my crises, and all I can come up with are images" (Blecher 10).

The stories of *Cinnamon Shops*, translated by Ion Petrică and published in Romanian in three editions (1976, 1997, 2004) so far, together with those from *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, resonate both stylistically and thematically with Blecher's *Adventures in Immediate Irreality.* Although Blecher and Schulz were contemporaries and both published in the 1930s, it is unlikely that they were aware of each other's activity or read each other's writings. The aesthetic vision they shared, a certain transfer between the biographical, geographical, and the literary, a string of shared typologies, metaphors and concepts can be invoked in a comparative exploration of the two writers. Adriana Babeți gives a brief synopsis of the major themes of Central-European literature, underlining the modern character of these representations: "paternity, immaturity, masochism, impossible masculinities, sexual deviations, misogyny, incest, physical and psychological vulnerability, sickness, agony, the obsession with the void, with the 'neutral', and with the unreal, self-hate, lust for self-annihilation, metamorphosis, guilt, the aestheticization of vital energies" (Babeți 81). The obsession with form and matter recurrent in the writings of other Central-European writers, such as Witkiewicz or Gombrowicz (Babeți 81), the overwhelming and melancholic familiarity of the small provincial town (Roman, for Blecher, Drohobycz, for Schulz), the shadow of small shops, fermenting obscure desire, the proliferation of the artificial décor, stridently fake, an active fantasy of violent destruction and death, all these elements articulate, as comparative explorations have already shown (Tucan; Glăvan), a similarity of vision that connects them in a larger spectrum of the cultural space they both intellectually belong to. That territory is Central-Europe, the land of men

"without qualities", as Robert Musil suggested in the title of his seminal novel, of identity crises, often manifested in explosive forms, trademarks of a space that has Vienna as its absolute center.

The strongest connector encouraging comparative readings of Blecher and Schulz is the oneiric nature of their writings. Depicted in dramatic tones, the dusty, anonymous provincial streets shelter strange people and uncanny events. Towns emerge from memory, their geography expanding like fantastical fairy tales, exposing unusual places and their mysteries. Completely immersed in the overpowering melancholy of margins and peripheries, the adolescent narrators of Blecher and Schulz detail their adventures into the unreal. A parallel reading of Blecher's *Adventures in Immediate Irreality* and Schulz's short stories reveals their affinities for a complex modern thematic spectrum defining Central European literature as well. This spectrum postulates the fundamental need for finding oneself through a perpetual effort of interpreting the outside world, despite its uncertainties and constant metamorphoses. Blecher places this search under the sign of sickness and existential malaise; with Schulz, the inner world of his characters flourishes in hallucination, mystic experiences and dreams.

A potential connection of Blecher's works to a Central European imaginary does not rely solely upon the proximity with the mystical and fantastical territories of Schulz's fiction or, in an extended comparative endeavor, upon a certain consubstantiality with the alienated vision of Kafka's works. As Tucan argues, "B. Schulz's literature is read in Romania almost exclusively through a Blecherian detour" (Tucan 349). Connecting Blecher to the spirit of Central European literature could rely on a comparative approach to Schulz in order to prove the consistence and viability of this association. Probably the most often invoked similarity of vision derives from these writers' approach to the issue of "matter", integrated into a subjective philosophy concerning, in Blecher's case, the fundamental essence of the outside world, and, in Schulz's case, the process of creation and the competing authority of imagination against divine work. The adolescent narrator of *Cinnamon Shops* highlights the extravagant theory proposed by his Father, an old, ailing, alienated man whose retreat from life and the real world is defined by delirious verbal explosions. Father is, therefore, "the fencing master of imagination" (Schulz 30), a fearless heresiarch prophesizing his visions in a *Treatise on Tailor's Dummies, or the Second Book of Genesis*, included as such in the textual corpus of *Cinnamon Shops*. "My father never tired of glorifying this extraordinary element – matter" (Schulz 35), the boy confesses. Unlike Blecher's protagonist, who feels threatened and violently overwhelmed by all surrounding matter, Father sees the unlimited potential of creativity in relation to it:

> Creation is the privilege of all spirits. Matter has been given infinite fertility, inexhaustible vitality, and, at the same time, a seductive power of temptation which invites us to create as well. In the depth of matter, indistinct smiles are shaped, tensions build up, attempts at form appear. The whole of matter pulsates with infinite possibilities that send dull shivers through it. (Schulz 35)

Father's divagations touch upon essential dichotomies (such as life and death), claiming there is a vast range of creative methods besides the "classical" ones, thus questioning not only divine creation but artistic endeavors as well:

> 'There is no dead matter', he taught us, 'lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life. The range of these forms is infinite and their shades and nuances limitless. … [I]f the classical methods of creation should prove inaccessible for evermore, there still remain some illegal methods, an infinity of heretical and criminal methods. (Schulz 35)

In his delirious state, Father reaffirms his critique of the divine creation: the almighty Demiurge favored noble materials as fundaments of creation, while "we shall give priority to trash. We are simply entranced and enchanted by the cheapness, shabbiness, and inferiority of material. […] In one word, Father concluded, we wish to create man a second time, - in the shape and semblance of a tailor's dummy" (Schulz 36). This second-rate universe, fermenting shapes and forms in a perpetual state of decay, should not be disconsidered. The prevalence of the artificial, of backdrops, waxwork and props is openly reaffirmed:

> Figures in a waxwork museum […] even fairground parodies, must not be treated lightly. Matter never makes jokes: it is always full of the tragically serious. Who dares to think that you can play with matter, that you can shape it for a joke, that the joke will not be built in, will not eat into it like fate, like destiny? (Schulz 38).

For Blecher, the essence of his memory, of past experience shaping his perception of the real, is captured within humble, kitsch objects that quantify his inner turmoil and restless identity quest.

> In small insignificant objects – a black feather, a banal little book, an old snapshot of frail, long-forgotten figures with the suffering that comes of serious internal ailments written all over them, a dainty ashtray made of green porcelain in the form of an oak leaf and forever smelling of dead ashes – in the plain, simple memory of old man Samul Weber's thick spectacles […] I find the melancholy of my childhood and the futility of [the] world. (Blecher 33)

Both Blecher and Schulz aim at capturing the essence of the material world and its myriad forms, hence their focus on the concept of "matter." Their philosophical allegories differ, though. While Schulz's Father conjures matter in a mystical "treatise", invoking the Demiurge, his fallible creation and imperfect imagination, Blecher's teenager protagonist deplores his captivity in the endlessly aggressive realm of objects and of the artificial. Blecher's matter is personal and universal at the same time, yet besides the writer's constant return to the unreal, which encodes one of the major notions of the Avant-garde, it does not transcend the borders of literary experiment. Schulz's visions seem, to a certain degree, opaque and impenetrable, harboring mystical propensions, encouraging a mystical reading as well. Despite their divergent structural anchors, both writers inhabit the same aesthetic realm. Their subjective mythologies emerge from the fundamental belief in the evanescent, protean nature of the real, imagined as a foreign, often hostile continent prone to strange metamorphoses. The parallel reading of their works is revelatory not only from a comparative perspective, but also from a perspective that connects Blecher to the cultural essence of Central Europe, which lies at the core of Schulz's work. In one of his most penetrating observations, the young protagonist of *Adventures into Immediate Irreality* desperately declares:

> I was surrounded by hard, fixed matter on all sides – here in the form of balls and sculpture, outside in the form of trees, houses and stone. Vast and willful, it held me in its thrall from head to foot. No matter where my thoughts led me, I was surrounded by matter, from my clothes to streams in the woods running through walls, rock, glass. (Blecher 77)

An unusual connector between the worlds of Blecher and Schulz, which could function as a unifying allegory, is the image of a horse drawn carriage inviting to bold adventures and a fearless outlook on the future. As Jerzy Ficowski explains in his comprehensive exploration of Schulz's life and work, this image was ever present in both his drawings and literature: "A fascination with the image of a horse-drawn carriage never left Schulz, and it found expression in numerous drawings and stories even in his mature artistic period" (2003, 37). Blecher invokes this vector of escape and refusal of the real in indirect terms – it is the father of his adolescent protagonist who dreams of traveling all over the world in a magical carriage: "Once, when Father was reminiscing about his childhood, I asked him what his most fervent secret wish had been and he told me that what he had longed for most of all was a miraculous carriage that would take him around the world […]" (Blecher 57). Years after that moment, the desire to escape, travel and live great adventures nourished the boy's

imagination, offering him the chance to acknowledge that "beyond bedeviled places teeming with fits and vertigo […] the earth has its benevolent places, places whose walls seem to have harbored the dream of a carriage roaming the world" (57).

Travel, adventure, roaming the city and walking down empty streets at night or dawn reflect the prevalence of restlessness and a sheer curiosity towards the eerie and unfamiliar. Schulz and Blecher adhere to the same code of estrangement from the familiar, a trait they share with Kafka. By turning all known objects and places into unsettling decors, Blecher's young wanderer into the unreal recreates the outside world according to his own inner life. Schulz's mythologies of the small provincial town, although similarly luxuriant, follow a more vital line. In the story of Pan, a dirty vagabond seems to be defecating in the wild, untamed vegetation of a secluded street. Nature protects him, amplifying his grotesque mimicking and gestures. Blecher's town idiot is equally repulsive in her habit of showing her sex to people passing by, but she remains displaced and unfit. She used to perform this act "with a panache which, were the intention different, would have been called 'a model of elegance and style'" (Blecher 38).

Schulz dissolves urban geography into a canvas of oneiric projections. The periphery has a greater potential to become blurred and permeable, therefore it is the fittest environment for welcoming the unreal. The young boy, narrating his daytime reverie, walks along with his mother, witnessing the metamorphosis of the streets around them:

> The suburban houses were sinking, windows and all, into the exuberant tangle of blossom in their little gardens. Overlooked by the light of day, weeds and wild flowers of all kinds luxuriated quietly, glad of the interval for dreams beyond the margin of time on the borders of an endless day. (Schulz 11)

Blecher's "cursed places", where his senses were dramatically stimulated to the point of dizzying sickness, were also contaminated by the ineffable essence of dreams. One of them is located in the town park, in a clearing at the end of an abandoned path: "It was a wild, isolated spot, as lonely as could be. The heat of the day felt more enervating there, the air I breathed more dense. The dusty bushes blared yellow in the sun in an atmosphere of utter solitude" (Blecher 6). *Cinnamon Shops* abounds in descriptions of familiar surroundings turning strange and barely recognizable: "in the black thickets of the park, in the hairy coat of bushes, in the mass of crusty twigs, there were nooks, niches, nests of deepest fluffy blackness, full of confusion, secret gestures, conniving looks" (Schulz 62).

Despite the fact that the core of their works displays similar modern archetypes and narrative devices Blecher and Schulz share a unique propension for estrangement within the banality of the "immediate" real. This subtle strategy has been critically exploited under various terms, but I consider it important to note that this is a creative element that defines the works of Kafka as well, along with a significant part of Central European literature. Alienation within the familiar has become a trademark of Mitteleuropean poetics, shaping the modern literary canon. Although he belongs to a smaller culture outside the imaginary borders of Central Europe, Blecher could be integrated into a paradigm that allows a more generous inclusion, based on affinities and shared cultural vectors.

Blecher's exasperation with the apparently infinite proliferation of objects, backdrops and, generically, the artificial, echoes Schulz's fascination with the aberrant fertility of people and nature as well. It is Aunt Agatha that proves to be the archetype of abnormal fertility, as she possessed an "almost self-propagating fertility, a femininity without rein, morbidly expansive" (Schulz 15). For Blecher, the abundance of flesh transgresses the semantic field of the human and is presented in glorious terms as dead animal meat: "When I got to the marketplace, I found men unloading meat for the butcher shops, their arms laden with sides of red and purple beasts glistening with blood, as tall and proud as dead princesses. The air was redolent with flesh and urine" (Blecher 66).

A comparative reading of Blecher and Schulz cannot function as the sole argument for placing the Romanian author in the cultural framework of Central Europe. The thematic range, the main allegories, the oneiric tone of confessions, and the obsessive mapping of the unreal are essential elements that place Blecher in the proximity of a Central European imaginary, also displaying various Eastern undertones. The most important connector, though, is Jewishness, a spiritual and artistic matrix that becomes obvious throughout Blecher's works, although not on a declarative level.

M. Blecher was born in Botoșani, the son of a Jewish family living in the Moldavian town of Roman. Doris Mironescu, Blecher's biographer and a prominent scholar of his work, vividly recreates both the atmosphere of the provincial town where the writer spent most of his life and his family history. With rich European roots and unexpected ramifications, Blecher's family was a favorable environment for the education of a young man with medical talent who later wanted to study abroad, in Paris. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when Max Blecher was born into the family of Lazăr Blecher, owner of a ceramics and glass shop, Roman was a small provincial town, well connected politically and economically to the resources of modern life. The Jewish community consisted of approximately 5,000 members, most of whom followed the tradition of small family businesses or generational crafts and

manufactures and lived harmoniously alongside the Romanian majority. Andrei Oişteanu completes this description with significant details. Quoting historian Carol Iancu, he points out that three quarters of the Jewish population of Romania lived in Moldova at the beginning of the last century (Oişteanu 190) and the traditional Jewish crafts were tailoring, tanning, shoemaking, plating, clockmaking, the number of craftsmen being much larger than that of merchants. There were also liberal professions, such as physicians and attorneys. In another significant study, Andrei Oişteanu argues that in Central Europe, "Jewish intellectuals […] would not channel their efforts toward isolation (by founding institutions meant to preserve their cultural identity), but, according to the principles of Enlightenment, toward integration into the dominant culture" (Oişteanu 2013, my translation). The young Blecher did not proceed any differently, as he sought the company and validation of central figures of the culture of the majority (Arghezi, Bogza), more than that of the ethnic minority he was born into. It was not a refusal, but a gesture of opening towards others. Milan Kundera, in *The Tragedy of Central Europe* emblematically defines the formative role of Jewishness in this area:

> indeed, no other part of the world has been so deeply marked by the influence of Jewish genius. Aliens everywhere and everywhere at home, lifted above national quarrels, the Jews in the twentieth century were the principal cosmopolitan, integrating element in Central Europe: they were its intellectual cement, a condensed version of its spirit, creators of its spiritual unity. (Kundera 35)

Although Jews did not enjoy equal rights in the first decades of the twentieth century in Romania and were denied citizenship until 1923, the community of Roman had the freedom to found several important institutions, such as the theater, schools for boys and for girls, and several charitable societies (Mironescu 37). The Blecher family enjoyed prosperity and business success, due to the small ceramics factory they inherited from their paternal grandfather Saul Blecher. The writer recalls scenes and details concerning this family venture along with some painful recollection from his adolescent years in *The Lightened Burrow*. It is still uncertain if Blecher spoke Yiddish (the Blecher family considered themselves part of the Ashkenazi community, although the writer's maternal grandfather was a Sephardic Jew). However, following Mironescu's arguments and Dora Wechsler Blecher's various confirmations, one may safely assume that Max Blecher took part in the most important rituals of the Jewish community of his town and was raised and educated in close connection to the values and spirituality of Jewish culture. Despite all

these, the Jewish element is not directly present in a legitimizing manner in Blecher's work, but rather as part of his fictional imagination. The grandfather, reciting the prayer of the dead, the sewing machine shop[2], "the miraculous, the ecstatic figure of Walter" (Blecher 25), the house of Samuel Weber and his sons, Paul and Ozy, are the few clues that may suggest a Jewish component in *Adventures in Immediate Irreality*. The novel is an elaborate oneiric fictional construct containing numerous biographical references, unfolding in the anonymous melancholic setting of a small provincial town. In real biographical terms, though, identity unrest includes issues of ethnic belonging. At one point between the autumn of 1933 and the spring of 1934, when he used to sign his articles under pseudonyms, Blecher wrote an undated letter to his friend, painter Lucia Demetriade Bălăcescu, whom he had met at the C.T.C. sanatorium in Techirghiol. In the post-scriptum of this letter (Mironescu 142), Blecher questioned whether it would be appropriate to sign the introductory text to the artist's exhibition catalogue with his real name: "Ci-joint le «papier», je crois qu'il serait mieux tout de même de signer Mihail Bera ou Minu Bera ou bien Emile Zola, ou n'importe comment, sauf M. Blecher, qui fait trop hébraïque, peut-être" (Blecher 148). In the end, the writer signed the introduction as "M. Blecher."

The 1930s brought a climate that was not favorable to Jewish writers, as Z. Ornea shows in his complex and pertinent analyses, in his volume *The Thirties. The Romanian Extreme Right*. The critic argues that "the extreme right press was scandalized by the way morals were being vitiated by literature" (Ornea 440), and recalls the arrest and incarceration of Geo Bogza, a culminating point in the rabid campaign carried out by this press against writers such as Arghezi, Eliade, Bonciu, I. Peltz or Mihail Celarianu. On 8 April 1937 Ovidiu Papadima published an article in the *Sfarmă Piatră* magazine, where, in an antisemitic rage specific to some of the press of those times, he included Blecher among the writers that allegedly undermined the morality of the general readership:

> It is claimed in all the Jewish[3] newspapers and publications that Haimovici Bonciu and Blecher and their ilk are simply geniuses, so that the Jewish trade should work in literature just as well as it does in all the other areas where we are methodically robbed (qtd. in Ornea 451).

[2] In his biography of Blecher (2018), Doris Mironescu mentions that Iancu Wexler, the president of the Jewish Community in Roman, told him that during the writer's adolescence, on Ștefan Cel Mare Street, across the road from Lazăr Blecher's shop, there was a Singer store selling sewing machines.

[3] The author used the pejorative antisemitic term "jidovești", meaning "Jewish", but with an important negative connotation.

Although Blecher lived far from the epicentre of the capital, protected by the shade of the province, the favorable reviews announcing the publication of his first novel, *Adventures in Immediate Irreality*, drew the attention of those that would soon contribute to the instauration of terror and criminal hatred. With a few notable exceptions, such as the study published by Paul Cernat (2001) in a volume dedicated to the contribution of Jewish writers to Romanian literature, Blecher's Jewishness, although frequently invoked, is a biographical detail which still has a lot to reveal.

Similarly to Bruno Schulz, who, in Karen Underhill's view, can be seen as "a writer who goes to some length to de-ethnicize and de-contextualize his writing, seeking its entry into a non-marked community of European letters that shares a broadly modern, cosmopolitan sensibility" (Underhill 30), Blecher primarily counted on his quality as a writer, keeping the ethnic component of his identity private. Although the Romanian society of those times with its political unrest, its antisemitic asperities and cultural wars, did not spare Blecher, he perceived it differently than his friends Geo Bogza or Mihail Sebastian who were the direct victims of purist and antisemitic attacks. Blecher's Jewishness, the matrix of his particular integration into the literary modernity of the Romanian interwar period and of a certain type of belonging to Central European culture, remains a transparent framework that allows its numerous nuances to reveal themselves freely.

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