May 2013

Through the Carnival Looking Glass: A Carnivalesque Reading of Bruno Schulz's A Street of Crocodiles and Guy Davenport's A Table of Green Fields

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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Abstract

Bruno Schulz’s *A Street of Crocodiles* (1934) and Guy Davenport’s *A Table of Green Fields* (1993) feature a collection of short stories whose depicted events occur within the realm of dream and nightmare. Their stories transgress the boundaries of fiction and reality, and do not adhere to traditional literary forms of narrative. They present worlds where inhibitions are let loose, and allow for the expression and pursuit of desires that would normally be hindered by societal hierarchies and moral codes. A carnivalesque reading of the texts, based on Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival, allows for an active engagement between reader and text, and provides a better understanding of the dreams, fears, and desires expressed within each respective work.

Keywords

Bruno Schulz, Guy Davenport, carnival, grotesque, metamodernism, *A Street of Crocodiles*, *A Table of Green Fields*, Mikhail Bakhtin, Andre Furlani
Dedication

To my family,

for all of your love, support, and understanding.
Acknowledgments

This thesis has been a difficult journey, which would have never been possible without the help, support, understanding and inspiration from the following people:

First off, I would like to express the utmost gratitude to Dr. Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu, for his excellent guidance, unwavering support, for making sense of my nonsense, and for agreeing to go through this hectic journey with me. Thank you for pushing me to finish, for all of your help, and for letting me crash when I needed to, and for always getting me back on track. I am eternally grateful for all that you have done.

I would also like to thank all of the wonderful professors at both McMaster University and Western University who opened up a multitude of possibilities and perspectives for me through many wonderful courses, and an astounding variety of material. I appreciate all of your hard work, which inspired me to keep going and pursue my interests. In particular I would like to thank Dr. Nina Kolesnikoff, Dr. Jane Wilson, Dr. Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu, and Dr. Luca Pocci.

These past few years have been very challenging and I would like to thank Dr. Darby, Sylvia Kontra, and Teresa Aconito for their patience and understanding, as well as all of their hard work in accommodating me during a very difficult period. I appreciate all of your hard work and am grateful to you for all that you have done.

To my wonderful family, both near and far, I want to thank you for your love and support, your words of wisdom, your enthusiasm, and your encouragement. I would also like to thank my family in Poland, particularly Ciocia Ela and Ciocia Sylwia for your help in gathering material, and for all of your wonderful suggestions. And, of course, much love and thanks to my wonderful mom and dad for never giving up on me and for your constant reassurance and inspiration. To my little brother, thank you for making me smile in difficult times, for making me laugh when all I could do was cry, and for pushing me to finish what I started.

To all of my wonderful friends, near and far, thank you for sticking by me and for your support through this topsy-turvy journey. I am deeply grateful for all of your pep talks, the long phone calls, conversations, walks, and for your constant presence as my own personal cheerleaders as I struggled to make it through this experience alive. To my wonderful housemates, thank you for putting up with my ceaseless banter and for listening to my ideas, for your advice, for your support, and for pushing me when I needed it. Much love goes out to you, Peanuts!

And finally, I would like to send out a very big thank you to Watson, for sticking by my side when I was a mess, for making sense of my ideas, for making my London experience the best that it could be, and for never letting me down. Thank you for being the bosom friend you are.
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Introduction

At first sight, pairing the works of Bruno Schulz and Guy Davenport, specifically that of selected stories from *A Street of Crocodiles* (1934) and *A Table of Green Fields* (1993), does not seem to carry a credible comparative potential. Their biographies, to start with, have little in common.

Schulz, born in 1892 in the town of Drohobycz, then belonging to the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia and, after the First World War, to Poland, was a timid artist and writer who supported himself by teaching drawing and handicrafts at a local school (Foer vii). Drohobycz would remain his home until his death at the hands of a Gestapo officer, Karl Günther, in 1942. However, besides being the place of his birth and death, Drohobycz and its inhabitants were also the setting for Schulz’s literary works, most notably *Sklepy Cinamonowe/Cinnamon Shops*, later titled *The Street of Crocodiles*, and *Sanatorium pod Klepsydra/ Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*. Aside from these two collections of stories, Schulz also wrote book reviews, political essays, and produced numerous drawings and sketches, some of which he reproduced in the *cliché verre* method for a visual volume of his work, titled *Xięża Bałwochwalcza/The Book of Idolatry* (Goldfarb xiii).

Guy Davenport was born in 1927, in Anderson, South Carolina. Unlike Schulz, he did not remain stationary in his home town, nor was his fiction based on the people and events of his personal life. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Duke University

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1 From here on I will be referring to Schulz’s work by their English titles.
in 1948. He followed this with a Bachelor of Literature from Oxford in 1950, and went on to receive his Doctor of Philosophy from Harvard University in 1961. From there he went on to lecture at several universities until his retirement in 1991. However, aside from his role as a professor, Davenport is known for his “great range of…writing,” which encompasses short fiction, “poetry, painting, classical translation, literary essays, and art criticism” (Furlani, “Postmodern and After: Guy Davenport” 712). He died in Lexington, Kentucky, in 2005.

From these simple biographies it remains difficult to see how the works of two authors, spanning different times and worlds, could have much in common. And yet there are many similarities present in both the lives and writing careers and styles of both authors. For one, both authors delved into different forms of writing and artistic expression, having written literary essays and criticisms, and producing illustrations, some of which accompanied their literary works. However, the main reason for pairing these two authors together is their remarkable short stories. Although coming from different time periods, these texts share a lot of commonalities regarding their structure, themes, writing styles and characterization. Schulz’ and Davenport’s short stories read as dreamlike states, some euphoric, others terrifying, all the while encompassing elements of reality and fantasy to create settings where physical and moral boundaries are transgressed to establish a space of creativity and fantasy. Within these environments, various worlds, including past, present, and future, as well as fictional and non-fictional, are free to mingle and co-exist to bring new meaning and experiences to both the characters in the given short stories, as well as the reader.
Another similarity between Bruno Schulz and Guy Davenport lies in the difficulty of placing their works into specific time frames and categories, as both authors (Schulz more than Davenport) arguably wrote outside the respective literary trends of their times.

Finally, one last and tremendously significant factor that binds the two authors is the difficulty of approaching the process of reading their respective works, as their literary styles and subject matter are not easily accessible or straightforward, and require an open minded attitude on the part of the reader. However, before delving further into the topic of the difficulty of reading each respective author’s text, it is important to place the works of both Bruno Schulz and Guy Davenport in a specific literary timeframe.

Bruno Schulz’s fiction is often described by critics as belonging to the avant-garde literary style. Yet others, such as one of his greatest critics, Ignacy Fik, describe his works as “fantasyka,” or literature belonging to the realm of the fantastic (Fik, 20 Lat Literatury Polskiej, 130). Regardless of these explanations, what is apparent is that Schulz’s literature did not fit neatly into the actual time period during which his works were published. Obviously, this resulted in the under-appreciation of his fiction. The writer and his incredibly imaginative and unique works only received due “recognition many years after his death” (Krzyżanowski, 646). The main reason for this belated recognition lies in Schulz’s having written and published his work during a period dominated by Neo-Realism in Poland. This period of Polish literature, roughly covering the inter-war period (Krzyżanowski 564), came as a result of Poland’s regaining its reunification and independence after World War I, and being reinstated as a sovereign

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2 “Fantastic” (my translation).
republic (Krzyżanowski 561). Consequently, writers were mostly concerned with the political and social life of Poland, especially during the first eight years of the movement (Krzyżanowski 562). However, while the movement was largely concerned with rebuilding a sense of nationhood and reinstating a sense of national identity, there was also much more room for writers and artists to voice their opinions about the country and the socio-political issues at hand, as well as more opportunity to express their views in various stylistic ways. This was largely due to the rise of literary periodicals that were published at the time, which, “for the first time in the history of Polish culture…covered a large number of towns and even rural centres” (Krzyżanowski 563). The periodicals allowed for writers and artists to voice various stands, though “they were rarely” clearly defined (Krzyżanowski 563). However, these periodicals not only shone a light on the national concerns of Poland’s people, they also “reflected the wealth of artistic trends that were prevalent in Europe just before the First World War” (Krzyżanowski 563). These trends, which included the Italian and French trends of futurism, as well as German expressionism, reached Poland “quickly and easily because of the war,” and “criss-crossed in various ways and influenced [various literary] groups…beginning with the Skamandrites in Warsaw,” perhaps the most famous of the literary circles of this time (Krzyżanowski 563). Consequently, the influx of literary trends that infiltrated the inter-war period, as well as the often unstable political situation of the recently emancipated Poland helped to create a vast number of artistic trends that permeated the literary and artistic movements between 1919 and 1939. Although the neo-realist movement did not last long in Poland, halted, as it was, by the start of World War II, it did bring about a multitude of experimental literary works, including avant-garde poetry, drama, and “the
rise of the novel” (Krzyżanowski 614). It is with the rise of the novel during the time period that Schulz came into the eye of the literary public. He contributed “new and very original ideas to the literature of the period,” but his work has been noted as being “difficult to compare with any other works” of the specific time frame (Krzyżanowski 646). His approach was noted as being “psychopathological,” and his works were often described as “original grotesques” (Krzyżanowski 646). And it was precisely these psychopathological and grotesque elements of his art and fiction that garnered much negative criticism from literary critics of his time, most notably from Ignacy Fik, whose remarks will be quoted later on in Chapter 1. However, aside from grotesque material, Schulz’s works introduced “comic elements” and “biblical language,” as well as a “singular combination of metaphors and metonymies in a new, extremely bold and expressive way,” that had never been seen in Poland and stood out among the literature produced during this time (Krzyżanowski 647). Yet, even though his works were praised for their originality, they were difficult to place among the literature produced during the neo-realist period of Poland. Often, he was lumped with the avant-gardists, sometimes with the expressionists, and other times, his literature was labeled as fantastic. Another factor that split Schulz from the rest of his peers was the fact that he chose to focus on his hometown, as well as personal events from his childhood, rather than focus on politics or the rebuilding of a nation and the social issues concerning various classes of people in Poland at the time (Krzyżanowski 646). His art, while highly original and full of vivid imagery and metaphors, was seldom understood by readers and was often overlooked, causing his literature to fall in the shadows of other contemporaries, such as Witold
Gombrowicz (Krzyżanowski 647) and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy) (Kryżanowski 610).

While Guy Davenport was not as ill-fitted to his time period as Bruno Schulz, the writer’s literary output and its rightful place in a specific literary genre or period was also debated, mostly by his critics. By many, Davenport is “frequently identified as a postmodernist writer” (Furlani, 709). The author himself sympathized with this view and “often employed the word ‘postmodernism’ to describe work with which he was in sympathy” (ibid.). He even went on to “offer a course in Post-Modernist literature,” which he said was the “first course ever, anywhere” on the topic and its representatives in the literary sphere (id. 710). Aside from the focus of his courses, his vast range of literary output was said to not only uphold the postmodernist tradition, but to also bring back various “modes almost wholly relinquished by postmodernists, such as pastoral and the utopian” (id. 712).

However, while Davenport freely identified with the postmodernists, there are some critics who place him in an entirely different category, grouping him instead with the “metamodernists” (id. 713). Instead of belonging to a category post the modernist movement, the metamodernist movement suggests an “after” movement (ibid.). In this case, the “metamodernists develop an aesthetic after yet by means of modernism” (ibid.). Essentially, the “metamodernists seek with the help of modernism to get over and beyond it” (ibid.). They are “among the poets they follow,” for many of the writers belonging to this particular group “made direct contact with prominent modernist writers, and several wrote important criticism on them” (ibid.). The literature and works of metamodernists, Furlani continues, “reconceptualize [the] methods and subject matter” of those writers
who came before them, during the modernist period. This does not mean that they agreed with everything that the modernists wrote about, as metamodernism is both a “departure as well as a perpetuation” of the previous movement (ibid.). For example, the “metamoderns scorned the reactionary political radicalism and religious conservatism of various prominent modernists,” and they also disagreed with their views and depictions of the process of history (id. 713-714). So, while metamodernism is essentially a continuation of the modernist movement after its time, it is also a movement that addresses “subject matter well outside the range or interest of the modernists themselves” (id. 714).

Despite questioning the particular literary group to which Davenport belongs, the majority of critics still group him with the postmodernists, as he himself sympathized with this movement. His placement within a specific literary time period is not nearly as complicated or debated as that of Schulz, in terms of both his written and visual works.

With this in mind, it is time to turn to the question of reading the works and coming to grips with the content contained within the literature of both Bruno Schulz and Guy Davenport. For many a critic, Schulz remains a very difficult and elusive author. The subject matter and the style of writing, while original, are readily accessible to readers, who often struggle to make sense of what is being presented in the works. In the introduction to the 2008 edition of the English translation of The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories, Jonathan Safran Foer clearly sums up the difficulty and frustration of reading Schulz:

I loved the book, but didn’t like it. The language was too heightened, the images too magical and precarious, the yearnings too dire, the sense of loss too palpable—everything was comedy or tragedy. The experience was too
intense to be pleasant…The fingers of his words rubbed (or scraped or clawed, shoveled, or ripped) and revealed not enough (Foer ix).

Others also exhibit a similar amount of frustration when confronting his texts:

Z Brunonem Schulzem kłopot jest taki: wszyscy wiedzą, że jest genialny, wszyscy mówią o jego potężnym wpływie, ale kiedy przychodzi co do czego, to kończy się na banalach, jakby miarę wielkości pisarza była wspólnota obiegowych sądów. Z drugiej strony trudno się dziwić (Markowski 1).^3

Markowski goes further and expands on the experience of reading Schulz’s texts, by describing it in the following way:

Schulz atakuje czytelnika od pierwszej strony i nie daje nigdy odpocząć, nie daje pozbyć myśli. Jego perfidia polega na tym, że opiera się jakimukolwiek tłumaczeniu, zachęca zaś do naśladowania, parafrazowania, podrabiania. Łatwiej jest mówić Schulzem niż o Schulzu. Po przeczytaniu jednego akapitu od razu wiadomo, że to Schulz, nie od razu jednak wiadomo, co o tym akapicie powiedzieć (Markowski 1).^4

Essentially, most of the frustration with reading the works of Schulz boils down to the fact that he attacks his reader with vivid imagery, metaphors, and various sensations of extreme highs and lows. He is not easy to follow, and the narrator of his stories does not help to explain things as they happen. Rather, the narrator reiterates what he sees and what happens, without offering an insight as to how to make sense of the events that occur within the text, or the actions and reactions of various characters to the fictional world which they inhabit. In addition to an unreliable narrator, much of Schulz’s fiction

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^3 “The trouble with Bruno Schulz is the following: everybody knows he is a genius, everybody talks about his tremendous influence, but when push comes to shove it’s all restricted to banalities, as if the measure of a writer’s greatness were to be this community of popular judgements. On the other hand, this comes as no surprise.” (Trans. Stanley Bill).

^4 “Schulz assaults the reader from the very first page and never allows him to rest, never allows him to gather his thoughts. His perfidy lies in the fact that he resists all translation, but encourages us to imitate, to paraphrase and to counterfeit. It’s easier to speak in Schulz’s language than to speak about Schulz. After reading a single paragraph we know at once that it’s Schulz, though we don’t at once know what to say about the paragraph.” (Trans. Stanley Bill).
is based on events from his own life, making it difficult to read and understand his texts without prior biographical knowledge of the author himself. Despite these obstructions, there have been various approaches and attempts taken towards deconstructing his texts, according to various mythic, religious, psychoanalytic, and metaphorical codes (De Bruyn and Van Heuckelom). However, a lot of these interpretations require the reader to have previous knowledge of both Schulz’s personal biography, as well as an in-depth knowledge of Jewish mysticism and culture, and not all those interested in perusing his texts have the necessary background information to pursue these ideas in his works.

Similar problems arise in confronting the short stories of Davenport, although they are arguably easier to follow. His stories, which follow the postmodernist model, “frequently take place in the lush open fields and unpartitioned, genial domestic spaces of a self-sufficient utopian present” (Furlani, 716). They consist of “brief, concentrated episodes” which are “[d]iscontinuous, polyphonous, and heterotopic, built out of grafts…fragmenting time and space into a series of perpetual presents” (ibid.). Like Schulz, Davenport creates stories that combine fiction and reality in order to create new possible worlds and meanings. His stories are also fragmented and episodic, and sometimes contain elements from various genres and time frames which, at an initial glance, are difficult to place in a familiar context within his texts (ibid.). His texts can also be studied in a variety of theoretical approaches and readings, which can focus on a purely postmodernist treatment of his works and break his fiction down into various themes, symbols, and influences.

Instead of looking at the texts of both authors according to previous theories and studies, there is an alternate way of approaching the reading and deconstructing process
of the works of Bruno Schulz and Guy Davenport. A carnivalesque reading of selected stories from *A Street of Crocodiles* and *A Table of Green Fields* can assist in engaging readers more actively with the texts of both authors and bring about a sense of unity to an otherwise chaotic world of fragmented dreams and realities.

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The initial notion of the carnival, in the Christian context, appeared in the late Middle Ages as a pre-Lenten feast leading up to Ash Wednesday. The literal definition of the word, which stems from “*carnem levare* or *carne vale,*” translates to mean the “‘giving up’” or the “‘farewell’” to meat (Hyman 9). Although the idea of the carnival is associated with the pre-Lenten activities of Christians in the Middle Ages, anthropologists “locate its origins much earlier, in pre-Christian ritual…in the Saturnalia—the period of licence and excess, when inversion of rank was a central theme” (ibid.). During the Saturnalia, “slaves were set free and given the right to ridicule their masters; a mock-king was elected; the lost Golden Age of the deposed god Saturn was temporarily reinstated” (ibid.). While the Christian tradition of the carnival shares its roots with Saturnalia, there are also many other “distant traditions—the Jewish *Purim* or the Indian *Holi*—[that] suggest a structure deeply implanted in mankind: a moment in each year when for a few days the laughter of disorder comes out from the margins and assumes centre-stage” (ibid.). Focusing on the more Christian tradition of the carnival, it allows us to focus on its particular “structure of inversion” and its “topsy-turvy”
presentation of the world, which allows for the “liberty of the imagination; as an ideology of unbuttoning” (id. 10).

This sense of unbuttoning and an inversion of the world as it is normally perceived is a concept that is taken up by Bakhtin in his writings about “humour and the grotesque… in Dostoevsky and Gogol,” and later, “Rabelais” (id. 14). This idea emerges as the theory of the carnivalesque, a notion closely tied to the carnival festivities of past generations. One of the most important notions of the carnival is the idea of laughter and its link to “the overturning of authority.” It becomes most meaningful in situations where “laughter is most forbidden,” and where the “carnivalesque becomes most meaningful.”

A few key elements of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque include the tumultuous crowd, the world turned upside down, the comic mask, and the grotesque body (Hyman 14-17). While the tumultuous crowd is missing in the works under study by Schulz and Davenport, the idea of the world turned upside down, and comic masks, which serve to “free the individual from class and gender” and enable creativity and can appear as both “beautiful and ugly” (id. 16), as well as the idea of the grotesque body are elements that are all present within the texts of each respective author. With regards to the grotesque body it is important to note that sexual imagery and the display of genitals, whether artistic or otherwise, was also a big part of the carnival and its traditions (Hyman 25-26). This display of sexuality can also be applied to Schulz and Davenport, in varying degrees. However, the exact application of carnivalesque themes and readings of the short fictions of both authors will be taken up in the first two chapters.
Before delving further, it is important to outline in more detail Bakhtin’s views on the carnivalesque, as well as its relation to the serio-comical genre, the Socratic dialogue, and finally, Menippean satire.

Bakhtin too talks about a sense of carnival and carnivalesque that has strong roots in antiquity. For this reason, he highlights a close comparison between the Menippean satire and carnivalesque literature, labeling the two as components of a serio-comical genre (Bakhtin 107-108). For Bakhtin, the serio-comical genre consists of three main characteristics. The first entails the genre’s “new relationship to reality,” which consists of living in the “present” (id. 108). The second revolves around the notion that the genre does not rely on legends, and is, in fact, critical of their substance (ibid.). Instead, the serio-comical relies on conscious experience and “free invention” (Bakhtin 108). The third and final characteristic of this particular genre is its rejection of previous forms and styles of writing, in favour of “multi-toned narration, the mixing of high and low, [as well as the] serious and comic.” In addition, the socio-comical “makes use of inserted genres—letters, found manuscripts, retold dialogues, parodies on the high genres, parodically reinterpreted citations,” as well as the insertion of “various authorial masks” in its texts (ibid.). These three basic characteristics are applied by Bakhtin to the genres that “enter the realm of the socio-comical” (id. 109).

Next, Bakhtin goes on to describe the importance of the Socratic dialogue in connection with the carnivalesque. He argues that it “grows out of a folk-carnivalistic base and is thoroughly saturated with a carnival sense of the world…especially in the oral Socratic stage of its development” (ibid.). Originally, the Socratic dialogue was “almost a memoir genre: it consisted of reminiscences of actual conversations that
Socrates had conducted, transcriptions of remembered conversations framed by a brief story” (ibid). Soon after a “freely creative attitude toward the material liberated the genre almost completely from the limitations of history and memoir, and retained in it only the Socratic method of dialogically revealing the truth and the external form of dialogue written down and framed by a story” (ibid.). Aside from its creative aspects, the Socratic dialogue is important to the carnivalesque because of the nature of truth contained within the process of a dialogue, rather than a “ready-made truth” contained within a monologue (id. 110). In addition, the heroes of the Socratic dialogue are “ideologists,” who seek and test truth (id. 111). As will be seen later on, such figures also appear in the works of Schulz and Davenport.

Lastly, before delving into his own theory of the carnivalesque, Bakhtin mentions one more important genre from antiquity that correlates with the characteristics of carnival and the previous two genres discussed thus far. This last genre is the Menippean satire, which Bakhtin divides into several categories of characteristics in order to link them to the serio-comic and Socratic dialogue genres. The first three deal with the “weight of the comic element being increased,” the notion of a freer plot that allows for more creativity and philosophy, as well as idea of a “bold and unrestricted use of the fantastic and adventure,” which is “internally motivated” and “devoted to a purely ideational and philosophical end” (id. 114). Other important characteristics of Menippean satire were its “organic combination…of the free fantastic, the symbolic,” as well as mystical and religious elements. More importantly, these elements were used in order to find a sense of truth in places that included some of the lowest and dirtiest settings of society, such as “brothels…the dens of thieves, taverns, marketplaces, prisons, [and even]
the erotic orgies of secret cults” (id. 115). In this scenario, the “wise man collides with worldly evil, depravity, baseness, and vulgarity in their most extreme expression” (Bakhtin 115). The last few elements of the Menippean satire worth mentioning with regards to its ties to the idea of the carnivalesque are the public scandals and erratic behaviour contained within the genre, the depiction of madness and insanity, as well as its incorporation of a wide variety of genres and writing styles (id. 116-118).

All of these elements help tie in Bakhtin’s own notion of the carnivalesque, as many of the characteristics of the Menippean satire can be seen in his own theory concerning the carnival. For Bakhtin, the carnival “is a pageant without footlights and without division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act” (Bakhtin 122). This particular act is “not contemplated…and not even performed; its participants live in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a carnivalistic life” (ibid.). The laws and restrictions that adhere to the structure of ordinary life are suspended during the duration of the carnival (ibid.). Among the elements suspended during this time are the notions of hierarchy, “terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette” (id. 123). Along with the suspension of these elements comes the “free and familiar contact among people,” who are no longer separated by barriers of any sort and are free to mingle in a carnival square or setting (ibid.). This lack of barriers and rules also allows for “outspoken” communication and gesticulation, as well as public behaviour that is free from rules and restrictions of any sort (ibid.). Carnival thrives on “eccentricity,” and often combines the “sacred…[and] profane, [as well as] the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, and wise with the stupid” (ibid.). With regards to the profane, the carnival
also allows for the emergence of the grotesque, the sensual, and emphasizes the body and its reproductive power, highlights the importance of the relationship between life and death, and allows for the “parodies [of] sacred texts and sayings” (ibid.).

An important ritual of the carnival is the “mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king,” which delves into the subject of ridicule as well as the process of rejuvenation, and again, profanation (id. 124-125). Lastly, the carnival contains laughter, which is often directed “towards something higher,” often a sense of truth that is outside the realm of reality and normalcy. This laughter also extends to the area of parody, as well as ridicule (ibid.).

All of these elements are reflected in carnivalesque literature as well as carnivalesque approaches to the reading and understanding of certain texts. Bakthin’s theory will be used extensively in order to provide a new way of reading selected stories from Bruno Schulz’s A Street of Crocodiles, which will include “August,” “Visitation,” “Birds,” and “Tailors’ Dummies,” as well as two short stories from Guy Davenport’s A Table of Green Fields, focusing on “August Blue” and “Gunnar and Nikolai.” A carnivalesque interpretation of the aforementioned texts will seek to approach the stories in a way that will allow readers to actively engage with the texts as the participants of a carnival, in order to break down many of the barriers that make the texts difficult and inaccessible due to their overwhelming fantastical, mythical, metaphorical, and symbolic content. At the same time, it will also bring to light many of the carnival-like characters of the given texts, and expand on their roles and importance within each work.
Chapter 1: The Carnival Layers of *A Street of Crocodiles*

1.1 Bruno Schulz: Life, Work, Criticism, and Reading

Bruno Schulz, as it has been previously outlined, is a difficult author to comprehend. His literary output spans a very limited oeuvre, consisting mainly of just two novels, *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*. In addition to these works there are also various essays and literary criticism published during his literary career, and a rumored, third work, which Schulz had hoped would be “his most important work, one worthy of the name *opus magnum*,” entitled *The Messiah* (Ficowski 155). Unfortunately, any physical evidence for the existence of the final literary text are said to be lost, with an air of mystery surrounding its disappearance during World War II, as well as its strange resurfacing in the years after the war, never to be recovered or officially claimed (Ficowski, 155-162). With so few works and such a short literary career, spanning only 9 years, coming to grips with his stories and their meanings is a difficult task, one which seems to get more and more difficult as the years pass (Jarzóbski iii).

In order to begin understanding Schulz’s stories at primary level, one is encouraged to be familiar with the author’s own, short biography. However, this is not to say that his biography contains all the answers, or provides a mode of reading for his work. Having at least a small amount of previous knowledge of his background assists with understanding some of the pain and complex emotional relationships that arise between or within specific characters in his stories, such as those of the father, Jacob, and
his son, Joseph. It also helps readers recognize some figures from Schulz’s actual life, who are, of course, distorted and taken greatly out of their original context within the realm of his works. Such characters include the “half-wit girl, Touya” (Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, 6), as well as the maid, Adela, and, of course, his mother and father, all “characters from his own biography” (Ficowski 60). Possessing knowledge of his background also helps readers in understanding the setting of his stories, which all take place in the small town of Drohobycz, the author’s birthplace, and permanent place of residency throughout his life. The author worked with areas and characters that were familiar to him, yet twisted them in such a way as to present an alternate universe, where they were used solely as inspiration for something bigger and much more complex. A key figure in the texts is Bruno Schulz’s own Father, Jacob. Although he is re-imagined in the stories of Schulz, there are some similarities between the fictional and non-fictional Jacob:

> Jacob Schulz, given to daydreaming more than to commerce or exercise of paternal authority, failed in business and as a head of household. His textile store on Market Square, located in his family house and registered under the name of his wife Henrietta, burned soon after the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Confined to bed and taken care of by Henrietta and his youngest son Bruno, Jacob survived the fire by only a few months. (Kuryluk 1)

Much like the real Jacob, the character portrayed in Schulz’s stories is also a failed shopkeeper and head of the household, who slowly deteriorates, mentally and physically until he is reduced to nothing, a laughing stock stripped entirely of his former status and hierarchical place within the family. Another key character that figures predominantly in the texts is Adela, the household servant. Although she is not exactly based on a set person, her dominating figure resembles Schulz’s own nanny, who often punished Schulz
when his parents were not around (Ficowski 40). While he never told anyone about this, he admitted that the experiences with his nanny led to his “masochistic tendencies, which with time developed and intensified” (Ficowski 40). These masochistic tendencies were often expressed in his visual art, and are also present throughout the stories in the relationship between Adela and the figure of the father.

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Besides being an author, Bruno Schulz was also a “teacher of drawing and handicrafts [at] the same Drohobycz gymnasium…he had left after graduation in 1910” (Ficowski 45). While it offered the prospects of a steady income, Schulz was not particularly happy with the arrangement, and felt the job was both a “curse” and a blessing, as it allowed him to remain financially stable, but often stifled his creative output (Ficowski 45-46). He habitually struggled with his duties as a teacher as well as those of a writer, and developed a “distaste for his increasing school duties” (Ficowski 49). Despite this, he was “fair and kind toward [his] students, and [the] graduates of the gymnasium have the best possible recollections of him” (ibid.). One way in which he captivated the attention of his students was through his telling of fairy tales, which he often illustrated on the board as he went along. His reputation as a story teller grew and was admired by students, and those who had the fortune of hearing and seeing his stories come to life (ibid.). Some students recalled a frequent motif in his story telling, that of a “child, his adventures, [and] his sometimes strange fate” (ibid.). Similar motifs would appear in his stories, included in the collections of *A Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium*.
Under the Sign of the Hourglass. Regardless of the content of his stories, which were often described as “unusual,” people “eagerly awaited his tales,” anxious to hear about inanimate objects coming to life, and having the stories illustrated before their eyes (Ficowski 49-50). Ficowski writes that this story telling was not purely for the entertainment of others. He suggests that Schulz “told these tales during his classes” because it was a form of “surrogate creation for him, an escape from the boredom and routine of school: only while telling stories was he really himself, in his own element” (id. 50).

This is a reasonable assumption to make, considering his distaste for the stagnated state of employment and his constant struggle between having a stable job and being free to create his own stories and art on the side. However, not everyone shared the same enthusiasm as his students regarding his work, especially his early artistic output. While he was admired by many, and “enjoyed a considerable degree of respect,” regardless of his eccentric character, there were many who did not “regard him with esteem,” such as “small town philistines…[as well as] members of his own family” (ibid.). Those who were generally negative towards his person as well as his literary and artistic output showed a “slightly disdainful attitude toward his uncommon personality, his lack of resourcefulness in practical matters, and his inability to climb the ladder of success in teaching” (id. 51). This form of personal disdain was significantly reduced after the major publication of his work in 1935; however, it was “more as a result of snobbism than of an understanding of his work” (ibid.). And yet, the particularly vicious from of attack associated with his works prior to public recognition increased with the publication of his visual works, collected in a portfolio entitled Xięga Balwochwalcza, or The Booke of
Idolatry. In addition to its publication Schulz also managed to secure a number of public showings of his works, the first occurring in March 1922 in Warsaw, at “the Society to Promote Fine Arts,” with subsequent shows occurring in June of the same year (Ficowski 52). However, the most prominent public exhibition of his work took place in 1928 at a health resort near his home town. The resort was in Truskawiec, and Schulz had taken along some of his art and proceeded to show it to an acquaintance, “a professor of chemistry,” who was staying at the same resort (id. 52). The professor responded positively to his work and encouraged Bruno Schulz to put his work on display, and a public exhibition was arranged in the “hall of the Dom Zdrojowy, [or] the Health Resort Club” (ibid.). While many flocked to see the display of his works, Schulz had the unfortunate luck of attracting the audience of senator Maximilian Thullie, who was deeply affiliated with the Christian Democratic Party in Poland. Upon seeing Schulz’s works, which featured nude or scantily clad women in dominating positions, with men cowering near their feet, the senator was outraged and called for an immediate closure of the exhibition, which he deemed amounted to nothing more than “hideous pornography” (ibid.). Fortunately for Schulz, the show remained open, and he managed to sell almost all of his art work. However, the senator’s comments reflected another area of the criticism of both Schulz’s literary and artistic works, which were often deemed as pornographic or perverse based on their content, with frequent images of female dominance and male supplication expressed in written and visual form, which many found to be unnerving. Some visual examples of this form of dominance and supplication are provided below, with the illustrations of “Bestie/Beasts” and “Undula u
Artystów/Undula visiting the Artists,” signaling a common motif expressed throughout Bruno Schulz’s works.

Figure 1: ‘Bestie/Beasts’
Source: Jan Koźbiel, Bruno Schulz, Olszanica: BOSZ, 2003: 15
Unfortunately for Schulz, there were more critics who provided negative opinions of his works, based predominantly on their personal preferences rather than spelled out literary or artistic perspectives. The most famous of these critics is Ignacy Fik, who relished attacking the more inventive writers of the time period, targeting Schulz and his literary colleagues, Gombrowicz and Witkacy, in particular. Of their work in general, he offered the following criticism:

Czy nie jest zastanawiające, że piszący [taką literaturę] autorzy są to ludzie, którzy w rozwoju zatrzymali się na fazie dojrzewania płciowego, że są to homoseksualiści, ekshibijoniści i psychopaci, degeneraci, narkomani, ludzie chronicznie chorzy na żołądek, mieszkający na stałe w
Fik did not stop at this, but went further in attacking Schulz’s works:

Najsystematyczniejszym i najpomysłowszym budowniczym nowych realności jest B. Schulz w zbiorach opowiadan: „Sklepy cynamonowe” i „Sanatorium pod klepsydrą”. Rozróżnia on różne stopnie rzeczywistości i różne jej fazy. Pozwala mu to własnego ojca uważać za karalucha, a wiosny czy wicher wyposażać w psychik ludzką. (Fik 133).

While this comment is not as nasty as Fik’s previous assessment of Schulz, Gombrowicz, and Witkacy, it retains undertones of personal dislike and disregard for Schulz’s writing, and also includes a moral compass by which Fik judges the given works. To reduce one’s own father, even if it is in the realm of literature and creativity to the status of a cockroach is seen as morally repulsive by Fik. When it came to criticizing works of the period that did not adhere to popular literary trends, Fik subjected them to the scrutiny of his personal views and ideologies. This not only resulted in undermining the talent and unique subject matter of works produced by Schulz and his colleagues, but it also brought on a “merciless tirade against Schulz and his creative activities,” which continued until the late 1950s, when the works of the late author were re-assessed and began to

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5 “Is it not striking that the authors who write such literature are people whose development stopped during the phase of sexual maturation, that they are homosexuals, exhibitionists and psychopaths, degenerates, narcomaniacs, people who chronically suffer from stomach pains, who permanently live in hospitals, people who do not distinguish between sleeping and waking, hypochondriacs, neurasthenics, misanthropes?” (trans. mine).

6 “The most systematic and inventive builder of new realities was Bruno Schulz, with his collections of stories Cinnamon Shops and Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass. He differentiated between different levels of reality, and its various states. This allowed him to view his own father as a cockroach, and to endow spring and gale winds with the human psyche” (trans. mine).
“gradually flourish under the impulse of Artur Sandauer and Jerzy Ficowski” (De Bruyn and Van Heuckelom 11).

Fik’s critical attacks, while vicious and highly personal, bring about the subject of the difficulty of approaching, understanding, and reading Schulz. When his works were first published, many critics applauded the intricate imagery and use of metaphors within the works, but often put the overall text down due to its lack of a common “theme, a ‘leading idea,’ [or] a ‘problem’” that was to be resolved upon reaching the novel’s end (De Bruyn and Van Heuckelom 10). This lack of a theme and a problem is an issue that resonates with readers to this day, who may be fascinated with the works but do not know how to approach them, or describe them after a thorough reading.

However, amidst all the negative criticism that Bruno Schulz received upon the publication of his works, there were also positive reviews from many of his fellow writers. Gombrowicz, a contemporary literary figure of Schulz’s and a personal acquaintance, praised his work as both “imaginative and immaculate” (Gombrowicz 61). Others, such as Julian Tuwim and Antoni Słonimski, were taken by his revolutionary ideas and nominated his first work, Cinnamon Shops, for the “Wiadomości Literackie” prize (Ficowski 106). While he “hadn’t reached a broader readership” during his life, “the elite who knew him held him in high regard” (Gombrowicz 61). Those who knew him personally, like Gombrowicz, described him as “small and timid, with an oh-so-quiet voice; inconspicuous, mild, yet with something cruel and severe concealed behind an almost childlike gaze” (ibid.). His friend also described him as a writer who “preferred admiring to being admired,” a consequence of his “masochistic nature” that “drove him to remove himself to the background.” Yet even in the background Schulz remained a
highly influential force on other authors. He willingly read other writers’ works, and provided whole-hearted criticism and support for their texts (ibid.). Meanwhile, in his own work, Schulz became an entirely different person; he was “majestic, with sentences that were weighty and magnificent, unraveling gradually like the dazzling tail of a peacock, a poet with inexhaustible powers of creating metaphors, exceptionally sensitive to form, and capable of modulations and gradations” (ibid.). This sense of vivid creativity is evident in *A Street of Crocodiles*, which also adds to both the intense wonder and frustration of coming to grips with his work. While rich with complex metaphors and images, processing the aforementioned categories becomes an exhausting process when searching for coherent meanings and connections in his text. Gombrowicz adds his own negative criticism of Schulz to this very effect, stating that the author could not go beyond metaphor, and had difficulty assimilating the real world into that of his fiction (ibid.). This in turn put him in a prison of his own specific literary style and form, from which he was unable to free himself (ibid.). This in turn contributed to his limited audience, as not everyone appreciated his literary and visual works and could not come to terms with his innovative ideals and style (id. 65-66).

With this in mind, it is time to approach the subject of reading Bruno Schulz. To this day, his works are frustrating and not easily accessible. As stated earlier by Jonathan Safran Foer, an initial reading of his text can prove to be incredibly intense, to the point of being unpleasant (Foer ix). But his work cannot be read as a regular story, with a linear plotline, culminating in a single climax that then ties all of the stories into a complete whole. Schulz himself once stated that:
There are things…that cannot ever occur with any precision. They are too big and too magnificent to be contained in mere facts. They are merely trying to occur, they are checking whether the ground of reality can carry them. And they quickly withdraw, fearing to lose their integrity in the frailty of realization.” (Foer ix)

The same approach can be applied to his work. Rather than a neat book with coherent stories, his work is a collection of occurrences, some big, some small, but all magnificent and outside the bounds of reality. Because of this, they challenge the reader, and catch his or her “pants down.” His focus suddenly shifts; events that start off as innocent occurrences turn into graphic and vivid confrontations of the private sphere of life, suddenly and forcefully made public. And this is precisely the challenge he offers to readers; the shift between the public and private spheres of life, and the ability to accept the events that occur within the two amalgamated spheres. This is the precise moment where he catches readers off guard and forces them to analyze and think about the text in a different way, and to read on through the sometimes harsh, sometimes comical imagery and events.

For this reason, a carnivalesque reading of the text provides the best mindset and mode of analysis in order for readers to submerge themselves in his playful, sometimes emotionally uncomfortable and painful stories. Submitting to the carnival atmosphere and approaching the work in this manner aids with the reception and deconstruction of Bruno Schulz’s unique stories.
Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival in literature not only allows for a more “punchy” and imaginative approach to literature, but it also “breaks down barriers…overcomes power inequities and hierarchies, [and] reform[s] and renew[s] relationships both personal and institutional” (Shields 97). A carnival approach allows for a creative and unrestrictive process of both writing and reading, and encourages an active form of participation with the text. In outlining his theory, Bakhtin states:

Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated, and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants live in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a carnivalistic life. Because carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its usual rut, it is to some extent “life turned inside out,” “the reverse side of the world” (“monde à l’envers”). (Shields 99)

He goes on to describe what happens during a carnival state, and outlines the aspects of life which are suspended, inverted, and altogether flipped around:

The laws, prohibitions and restrictions that determine the system and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age). All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people. This is a very important aspect of a carnival sense of the world. People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square. (Shields 99).

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While fear associated with power and a hierarchical structure is suspended to a certain degree in the works that will be discussed by Schulz, it still retains a presence with regards to the character of Jacob, and his perception of certain female characters, most notably, Adela.
Bakhtin’s final point about the suspension of barriers is particularly applicable to the approach of Schulz’s texts, in a couple of ways, the first being that with a carnival approach, readers can break down any obstructions that impede the understanding and experience of the stories. Another way in which barriers are suspended deals with the amalgamation of the private and public spheres of life presented in the works, and the merging of reality and fiction, as well as of dreams and nightmarish realms.

The breaking down of barriers is only one aspect of the carnival realm that will be taken up in the discussion of Schulz’s works. Others include the subject of decrowning, the presentation of the body, human and animal, in sexualized and grotesque forms, the use of laughter to depict a sense of truth and understanding, as well as the relationship between various mental states and the subject of religion and spirituality. As mentioned previously, the analysis of these carnival aspects contained within the works of Bruno Schulz will focus on the first four stories from A Street of Crocodiles, which includes “August,” “Visitation,” “Birds,” and “Tailors’ Dummies.”

1.2 Touya’s Cry on a Sensuous Morn

The first story in Schulz’s work is an excellent example of the author’s ability to lull readers into a false sense of security with lush imagery, which is then followed by an event that shakes readers to the core. “August” begins by describing a fairly luscious and sunny morning, where characters are basking in the “blinding white heat of the summer days” (Schulz, A Street of Crocodiles, 3). The narrator is introduced, as well as his father, mother, and elder brother, all in a relatively simple manner. Another key figure that is revealed at the very onset of the story is Adela, a character likened to a goddess. Schulz
describes the “luminous mornings” on which “Adela returned from the market, like Pomona emerging from the flames of day, spilling from her basket the colourful beauty of the sun—the shiny pink cherries full of juice…the mysterious morellos that smelled so much better than they tasted…[and] apricots in whose golden pulp lay the core of long afternoons” (Schulz, *A Street of Crocodiles*, 3). All of the imagery thus far is associated with fertility, growth, and a sense of calm joy.

The narrator continues describing this particular summer day, as well as the people who inhabit the city and also experience the blistering heat and light of the sun. It is important to note that Schulz goes back and forth between describing public places, such as fields and the city streets, and private ones, mainly the narrator’s home (Schulz, *A Street of Crocodiles*, 3-4). This intertwining of public and private already brings in the carnival theme of breaking boundaries. This is a common feature in all of Schulz’s works, which are set in very public places, with shops and sanatoria being key locations. Markowski highlights this particular aspect of Bruno Schulz’s writing by stating the following:

[P]rzede wszystkim trzeba zauważyć – nader trywialnie – że w sklepach i w sanatoriach przewijają się nieustannie ludzie, że sklepy i sanatoria to miejsca intensywnej socjalizacji, spotkań, rozmów, krzyżujących się spojrzeń, gadania i obgadywania, a nawet – czasami przede wszystkim – nieposkromionych pragnień. (Markowski 3)  

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8 “[W]e must observe—in the most trivial manner—that shops and sanatoria are places filled with people constantly coming and going, that shops and sanatoria are places of intensive socializing, of meetings, conversations, glances exchanged, chit-chat and back-chat, and even—sometimes above all—untamed desires.” (Trans. Bill Stanley)
Schulz upholds key elements of carnival literature not only with his settings, but through the interactions of the various people who inhabit his worlds. Their conversations, their communal gatherings, and revelation of intimate desires are vital in upholding Bakhtin’s theories and promoting a carnival reading of his texts.

Another key aspect of carnival life that is brought to the readers’ attention is the inclusion of references to the sun, mythological gods, such as Bacchus, and the emphasis on the townspeople as sun god “worshippers,” wearing “identical masks of gold” (Schulz, A Street of Crocodiles, 4). This return to ancient mythology suggests yet another point at which barriers are broken between the past and present, and brings humans and divine intimations together in a common sphere. All people are participating in a carnivalesque worship of the sun, with everyone wearing the same mask. Bakhtin (130) states that it was a common feature of the carnival life and experience to wear “disguises.” The masks also represent the breakdown of hierarchies within the community, with everyone being presented as equal in their participation in the worship of the hot, summer sun. The mask is an important aspect of carnival life, as it allows the public to come together as a uniform one. It also allows freedom as expression, as masks disguise one’s own individuality and encourage uninhibited participation in all aspects of carnival celebration. In elaborating on the subject of masks, Bakhtin makes the following statement:

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery, and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristics of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. (Shields 116).
So far, the atmosphere presented by Schulz is one of communal celebration and positivity. It is not until he introduces the character of Touya that he truly shakes readers of their false sense of security and presents them with disturbing images of grotesque sexuality. Touya, a “half-wit girl,” lives isolated from the town, on a “rubbish heap” (Schulz, *A Street of Crocodiles*, 6). Her home is described as being located on a “heap of discarded junk, of old saucepans, abandoned single shoes, and chunks of plaster,” where she sits on a “bed, painted green, propped up on two bricks where one leg was missing” (Schulz, *A Street of Crocodiles*, 6). For the most part, Touya is a character who moves very little and keeps to herself. Her immobility and seeming ignorance of the world around her makes her seem like a very innocent character, as she does not upset the overall atmosphere of the story thus far. She may invoke pity or sympathy from readers based on her condition and lonely state, but remains of little importance up until the point at which she begins to stir. Her sudden movement brings about a complete shift in the overall tone of the story, and also incorporates further carnival themes into the text itself. Her movement is illustrated as follows:

Suddenly, the whole heap of dirty rags begins to move, as if stirred by the scratching litter of newborn rats. The flies wake up in fright and rise in a huge, furious buzzing cloud, filled with colored light reflected from the sun. And while the rags slip to the ground and spread out over the rubbish heap, like frightened rats, a form emerges and reveals itself: the dark half-naked idiot girl rises slowly to her feet and stands like a pagan idol, on short childish legs; her neck swells with anger, and from her face, red with fury, on which the arabesques of bulging veins stand out as in a primitive painting, comes forth a hoarse animal scream, originating deep in the lungs hidden in that half-animal, half-divine breast. […] the half-wit girl, hoarse with shouting, convulsed with madness, presses her fleshy belly in an excess of lust against the trunk of an elder, which groans softly under the insistent pressure of that libidinous passion, incited by the whole ghastly chorus to hideous unnatural fertility. (Schulz, *A Street of Crocodiles*, 7)
Before going into an analysis of Touya’s feral, sexual expression, it is important to note a key difference in the translation of Schulz’s text. While the English translation of the above instance brings with it the intended shock value of a particularly vivid and shocking occurrence, the original Polish version of the text is arguably more appalling, as the “libidinous passion” she exhibits towards the tree bark is instead described as an act of hitting or forcefully pressing against the object with “mięsistym łożem” (Schulz, *Sklepy Cynamonowe*, 8).  

This particular scene differs greatly from the sunny, lazy summer day Schulz has just spent the last few pages describing. Having lulled his readers into a false sense of security, he now challenges their perceptions and reactions by disturbing the sensuous summer morning. He turns the seemingly calm setting upside down, making the world topsy-turvy, a common trait of a carnival world. And he does not offer an explanation for the occurrence, making the event even more frustrating and difficult to comprehend. Instead of elaborating on Touya’s feral display, he simply moves on to the next event in the story. Treating the scene with such a nonchalant attitude leaves readers baffled, caught with their pants down, to bring back the image associated with this confusion. First, they are led to expect seemingly normal and events connected to a lazy summer day, filled with sensuous fruit flavours and lazy strolls throughout various private and public parts of the city. Suddenly, they are forced to encounter Touya, a half-wit girl set apart from the rest of the town and are confronted with her erratic behaviour. Her episode

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9 “Meaty” or “fleshy womb” (my trans.).
does not fit in to the atmosphere of the text up until this point, nor does it offer some sort of satisfying conclusion to the readers’ desires, as they may have been expecting a much more sensual account of her display of personal, sexual yearnings. The account is far from beautiful or intimate, and is instead highly grotesque and visually disturbing. A carnival reading of this particular scene aids in comprehending its context.

Bakhtin states that the world of the carnival is one that enables the co-existence of “the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the significant, the wise with the stupid” (Bakhtin 123). This encapsulates the current scene where that which is low and profane is intertwined with previous sensations of the great and sacred. In addition, the display of Touya’s explicit actions ties in closely with the concept of “carnivalistic obscenities linked with the reproductive power of the earth and body,” in this case, Touya’s fleshy womb expressing libidinous desires against the bark of a tree (Bakhtin 123). While the episode occurs in a realm of its own and has no logical ties to the rest of the events of the stories to come, which concern the figure of the father, it does shed some light on how to experience the text, and what to expect as the text moves forward. The carnival atmosphere in literature, as Bakhtin emphasizes, functions in the following manner:

[It] addresses the hierarchy and power that constrain so much of human life, that result in some people being marginalized while others are accepted, some being oppressed and others privileged, some voices being heard and others silenced. In carnival, Bakhtin tells us, the first aspect of life that is suspended is the hierarchical structures that determine our “proper” place—including the acceptable ways of talking, dressing, laughing, and celebrating. Everything, he claims, that is associated with socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality—including fear, awe, holiness, and good manners—is suspended. (Shields 101)
While visually and atmospherically jarring, the episode highlights the purpose of a carnival nature, and encourages readers to approach the text with this particular mindset.

The uncomfortable atmosphere of Touya’s appearance prepares readers to be on their toes, and to expect high and lows as they go through the text. It also foreshadows the isolated state of Jacob as well as his decrowning as head of the household: he, much like Touya, becomes a spectacle, separated from the rest of the characters through his mental state, as well as his various actions, which verge on the precipice of the eccentric and obscene. But the most important aspect of this particular episode is that it establishes a mode of reading for its audience, encouraging a carnival approach to its subject matter as it weaves through dreamlike and nightmarish states, breaking down the boundaries between acceptable social etiquette and behaviour and that which is obscene, the highs and lows of life, and the sacred and profane.

One last important aspect of this scene is the obstruction of desire. This refers to the notion of raising or arousing one’s desires, and then inhibiting those desires from developing fully or coming to a climax. In this sense, Schulz’s text plays on the notion of perversion, of enticing readers with seemingly sexual imagery, and suddenly upsetting their expectations, either by presenting it in terms that embarrass or horrify rather than please, or quickly fade into the background of the stories. The Touya scene is arguably one of horror, as it is not aesthetically pleasing and simply projects base human desires, carried out outside the bounds of socially accepted modes of expression. Providing a voyeuristic gaze for the readers to look into the private lives of characters is one form of perversion; another is the form of teasing readers with the idea of erotic instances, which are then suddenly turned on their heads, ignored, or completely forgotten.
Another such instance of this form of inhibiting perversion occurs at the very end of the first story, when the narrator recounts a visit to his Aunt Agatha’s house and in particular, his brief encounter with his cousin, Emil (A Street of Crocodiles, 8-10). Here, Joseph, the narrator, recounts a moment where Emile takes him between his knees and proceeds to show the then young boy cards with lewd images of men and women in “strange positions” (ibid.). At first, the young boy does not know what to make of the images, until he is hit with “the fluid of an obscure excitement,” which pierces him “with a shiver of uneasiness, a wave of sudden comprehension” (ibid.). While the young Joseph realizes what the pictures are depicting, his reaction suggests an uneasiness and inability to fully appreciate what he sees, and a sense of inhibition with regards to the fulfillment of sexual desire resurfaces. In addition, the older Emil also quickly loses interest in the cards and the excitement they produce is momentary and quickly fades. The narrator recounts this process of exhilaration and its sudden deterioration in the following manner:

[M]eanwhile that ghost of a smile which had appeared under Emil’s soft and beautiful mustache, the seed of desire which had shown in a pulsating vein on his temple, the tenseness which for a moment had kept his features concentrated, all fell away again and his face receded into indifference and became absent and finally faded away altogether. (A Street of Crocodiles, 10)

Again, readers are enticed by an episode that presents deep desires, which are subsequently done away with before they can fully develop. In this way, Schulz plays with the carnivalesque freedom from inhibition. While he offers up the idea of occurrences and desires that are in line with carnival expression and freedom from the constraints of societal norms and expectations, he never lets these yearnings come to full fruition, and cuts them short before a point of climax is ever reached. And yet they
linger, perhaps in a growing “unconscious” of the story, wherefrom they could return with the accumulated wrath of the repressed. In this proleptic threat lies also the defensive potential of carnival, the only able to turn on its head the violence with which repressed desires, thwarted and contorted in the dark, come back to hit and ruin the subject.

1.3 The Decrowning Process of Jacob, and Adela’s Rise to Power

Moving on to a discussion of the process of carnival decrowning and a reversal of hierarchies, the rest of this section will focus specifically on the characters of Joseph and Adela, in the remaining three stories from Schulz’s text. “Visitation,” “Birds,” and “Tailors’ Dummies” provide an in-depth account of Jacob’s slow descent into madness and sickness, and bring about a role reversal in the domestic realm, where the servant becomes master, and the master a senile, old man, who is constantly ridiculed and, on one occasion, reduced to a mere pile of rags. In the “Visitation,” this whole reversal in the universe of the book is triggered by a change in the overall atmosphere and season of the text. No longer basking in the heat of the summer, the town sinks “into the perpetual grayness of dusk,” becoming “affected at the edges by a rash of shadows, by fluffy mildew, and by moss the dull color of iron” (A Street of Crocodiles, 11).

With the shift in atmosphere, Schulz also brings about the notion of breaking boundaries with regards to the description of the house inhabited by the narrator and the other characters. He states that the house is “dark,” with “empty blind nooks, so difficult to distinguish one from the other” (ibid.). These dark nooks, however, are precisely what
allow characters and readers to transgress boundaries and experience other worlds. The narrator describes these possibilities in the following passage:

This gave endless possibilities for mistakes. For once you had entered the wrong doorway and set foot on the wrong staircase, you were liable to find yourself in a real labyrinth of unfamiliar apartments and balconies, and unexpected doors opening onto strange empty courtyards, and you forgot the initial object of the expedition, only to recall it days later after numerous strange and complicated adventures, on regaining the family home in the gray light of dawn. (A Street of Crocodiles, 11)

Once again, the subject of overcoming boundaries and barriers is highlighted, and while the narrator is using the passage to describe the intricacy of the structure of his house, he is also, in a way, instructing readers on how to approach the text. He encourages them to get lost in its endless passages, and to accept a journey that will not always make logical sense or prove to lead anywhere specific. The important thing is to explore every crevice of the text, and experience new sensations, images, and ideas each time. And only later will the object of the reading resurface from oblivion.

Along with a shift in atmosphere and tone, this segment also begins to set readers up for a major shift in the hierarchical structure of the household. This is signaled by a description of the state of the house, which is shown to have sunk “deeper and deeper into a state of neglect owing to the indolence of [the narrator’s] mother, who spent most of her time in the shop,” taking over the duties of the father, as well as the “carelessness of slim-legged Adela, who, without anyone to supervise her, spent her days in front of a mirror, endlessly making up and leaving everywhere tufts of combed-out hair, brushes, odd slippers, and discarded corsets” (A Street of Crocodiles, 11-12). The state of the house and the carelessness of the women signals a change in the structure of the family
home, as well as the absence of a father figure or head of household to keep everyone on track with their duties. This instance also begins to move towards the declining state of the father and his slow process of decrowing, which comes with his mental regression and Adela’s rise to power within the family.

Before moving further, it is interesting to note Adela’s lack of care concerning her duties as the household maid, as well as the absence of a sign of adhering to a higher authority. While *A Street of Crocodiles* does not include any of Schulz’s drawings or images, he did depict the figure of Adela in one of his visual works, titled “Adela i Edzio.”

![Figure 3 Adela i Edzio/Adela and Eddy](http://brunoschulz.eu, 2013)

**Figure 3 Adela i Edzio/Adela and Eddy**

Source: http://brunoschulz.eu, 2013

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10 “Adela and Eddy” (my trans.).
This visual portrayal of Adela helps in understanding her domineering presence in the text, and it also elaborates on the subject of unattainable desires within the stories. Adela is depicted fully naked, asleep and without concern for her surroundings. This lack of concern transposes itself into her lack of obedience to her superior, who, in the case of the stories under discussion, happens to be Jacob. The man looking at her naked, sleeping body, Eddy, represents the unfulfilled longings that are present in both the characters and the readers of the text, as what they want is often within reach but never fully granted or attainable. Lastly, the image also hints at the heightened power of women within the text, as Schulz depicts women who overpower men, and a matriarchal structure is introduced in the realm of his stories as opposed to a traditional patriarchy.

As Adela turns away from her duties, the slow downfall of Joseph’s father makes its appearance on the slopes of the text. With the onset of winter, the narrator states, his “father’s health [begins] to fail” (A Street of Crocodiles, 12). This is demonstrated with the father’s turning away from his own duties as shopkeeper, regressing instead into the rooms of the household and beginning to display erratic behaviours, such as running his bare feet up and down a leather sofa when he becomes infuriated with his wife’s inability to properly note the shop’s accounts (id. 12-13). In between episodes of bizarre behavior he exhibits calm normalcy, which suggests he still retains a semblance of his normal, healthy self. However, this is quickly overpowered by more displays of eccentricities, as Jacob resorts to attaching himself to a strange apparatus in the corner of his room, which was filled with a “dark fluid” (id. 13). Merging himself to the instrument via a “long rubber hose,” Jacob becomes “tense with concentration, his eyes darkening, and an expression of suffering, or perhaps of forbidden pleasure,” spreading across his face.
(ibid.). It is never made clear in the text as to what this dark fluid is, or why the father insists on attaching himself to the apparatus. However, his behaviour is outside the bounds of accepted norms and therefore crosses over into the domain of the carnivalesque.

The narrator goes on to describe further cases of erratic behaviour in his father, some of which occur at night. Jacob begins to think that the wallpaper in his room comes to life, and that the various prints come alive and attack him, be it the birds or plant life depicted on the wall covering (id. 13-14). Jacob’s descent into madness comes to a culminating point during an episode where he, in a grotesque manner, becomes a prophet like figure. The narrator states that during the night, his father would have heated debates with someone, as “voices rose with [great] passion” in the confines of his room, and the family hears him “talk of God, as if begging for something or fighting against someone who made insistent claims and issued orders” (id. 14). That someone is never specified and it is assumed that the father is really having these heated debates with himself, although at a later point it is also hinted that there are voices speaking through him, as if he were being possessed by unknown spirits (ibid.). But these late night arguments signal the quick deterioration of his mind, and the gradual process of his decrowning through sickness. The father’s status as a prophet brings about the more grotesque aspects of the carnival, as well as a sense of the profanation of the sacred. This occurs when the “spirit enters” Jacob as he sits on a chamber pot, and emits “brash words…like a machine gun,” as well as many “groans,” akin to that of a “Titan” (ibid.). Joseph likens his father to a prophet from the Old Testament as he goes through this spiritual possession, which culminates in the father’s eventual defecation into the chamber pot, and the emptying of
its contents into the street below his window (id. 14-15). Here, there is a clear presence of both carnival profanation, as Jacob proceeds to proclaim strange prophecies while fulfilling basic and base human needs, as well as the grotesque, obscene body. Jacob’s actions can be summarized under the category of the “eccentric,” which is also a common feature of the carnival sphere (Bakhtin 126).

This is but one episode out of many that emphasize the demise of Joseph’s father in the text. After Jacob’s incarnation as a prophet, the narrator goes on to describe both his mental and physical condition:

My father was slowly fading, wilting before our eyes. Hunched among the enormous pillows, his gray hair standing wildly on end, he talked to himself in undertones, engrossed in some complicated private business. It seemed as if his personality had split into a number of opposing and quarreling selves; he argued loudly with himself, persuading forcibly and passionately, pleading and begging; then again he seemed to be presiding over a meeting of many interested parties whose views he tried to reconcile with a great show of energy and conviction. But every time these noisy meetings, during which tempers would rise violently, dissolved into curses, execrations, maledictions, and insults. (A Street of Crocodiles, 15).

Aside from noticing the sad mental state of the father, the narrator also mentions the physical size of Jacob, as he appears to “shrink from day to day, like a nut drying in a shell” (A Street of Crocodiles, 16). In a carnivalesque sense, Jacob’s “regal vestments are stripped off,” his authority diminishes, and he is “ridiculed” through his weakened mental and physical state (Bakhtin 125). He regresses further into a frantic, childlike state, which speeds up the process of decrowning.

The narrator’s father begins to act like a child, disappearing throughout the house, exploring its various crevices, wardrobes, and rooms (A Street of Crocodiles, 16). He becomes intrigued by a “large stuffed vulture” and “crouches before it…with a smile on
his lips,” remaining in front go the figure for “long periods without moving, except to flap his arms like wings and crow like a cock whenever anybody entered the room” which housed the object of his fascination (id. 16-17). His regression into a childlike state is also all part of a carnival process, in which “youth and old age” are inverted (Bakhtin 126). Eventually, the family ceases to pay attention to the father and his actions, becoming “used to his harmless presence, [and] his soft babbling” (id. 17). They also stop paying attention to his diminishing stature, nor do they count him anymore as one of their own (id. 17). Like Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, eventually the father distances himself from the family and humanity altogether, and becomes nothing more than a “heap of rubbish swept into a corner, waiting to be taken by Adela to the rubbish dump” (id.). This signals the first complete instance of his decrowning, as he is fully stripped of his status as head of the household, and his fatherly duties. According to Bakhtin, the carnival decrowning of a king is not only at the very heart of carnival celebration, but also signals a “pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal” (Bakhtin 124). In this case, the father’s regression into complete madness and physical frailty signals a shift in the family home and the hierarchical structures it upholds.

By the end of the second story, Jacob has retreated fully into himself and is no longer a functional member of the family, or of society for that matter. He enters into a fully carnivalesque existence, outside the bounds of societal norms, and lets go completely in order to remain in his new state. Being considered rubbish and taken out to the trash by the servant of the household also emphasizes the shift in rule in the narrator’s household. The servant completes the process of decrowning her master, and takes on his role in the text’s carnivalesque realm.
The next story focuses on Jacob’s already altered state, emphasizing his eccentric habits through the detailed description of his experiments. At the onset of the text, Jacob continues living in his own world, displaying peculiar behaviour as he begins to climb ladders and stilts, studying the ceiling in preparation for his next course of action (A Street of Crocodiles, 19-20). The only person in the house he recognizes at this point, and pays any attention to, is Adela, who in the process of his decrowning has become his master of sorts (id. 20). He becomes fascinated by her presence, and the “cleaning of his room” becomes a “great and important ceremony” to him (ibid.). Jacob watches “all of Adela’s movements with a mixture of apprehension and pleasurable excitement,” attaching to “all her functions a deeper, symbolic meaning” (ibid.). All of her gestures drive him to a point of ecstasy, whether it is pleasurable or painful. This experience makes Jacob cry, as well as “silently” laugh as he watches Adela go about her business (ibid.). In the carnival realm, laughter is an important aspect linked to a point of understanding unspoken truths and shifts in power structures. According to Bakhtin:

Carnivalistic laughter…is directed toward something higher—toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Laughter embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with crisis itself. Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation. (Bakhtin 127)

Jacob’s silent laughter acts as an acknowledgment of the shifts in power in terms of the hierarchy of the household, as he directs his gaze towards Adela. In addition to attaining pleasure from watching her work, Jacob also gets immense fulfillment from Adela’s pretending to tickle him. The “waggle [of] her fingers” sets him into a “wild panic,” making him run all over the room in “convulsions of laughter” (ibid.). His reaction to her
tickling is a sign of his submission to her person, and at this point in the story, Adela’s “power over Father [is] almost limitless” (ibid.).

While Jacob has lost his position as the head of the household, he gains a new form of power in the form of creation when he decides to experiment with bird eggs and breading various, new species of birds (id. 20-22). It is interesting to note that the carnival encourages creativity and going outside the bounds of normalcy and tradition. Such an experiment, while strange and grotesque, would not be viewed in an entirely negative light. However, in the text, Joseph and his family refer to the experiment as “uncanny, complicated, essentially sinful and unnatural” (id. 20). It is yet another instance within the text that refuses to fully submit to the carnival atmosphere of events, and where a sense of fear emerges. While Schulz’s work is carnivalesque, it also contains elements of restriction. Many desires remained unfulfilled, or out of reach, and not all of the characters are able to free themselves of the social hierarchies that bind them to the realm of reality, therefore hindering their experience and understanding of the carnival atmosphere. This also mirrors the frustration of readers, who struggle to immerse themselves in a completely carnival reading of the text, with it switching between the confines of complete freedom and restriction. The narrative voice in the text often appears to be disengaged from the carnival events occurring within the text, and is therefore uncomprehending of the situations, which serves to feed the subsequent confusion of the readers. However, readers have to move past this confusion, and immerse themselves in a carnival understanding of the events within the work, which makes sense of the father’s actions.
Jacob turns to breeding the birds after his family has officially acknowledged his decrepit mental state, and he loses his standing within their bounds. By creating new creatures he once again becomes a figure of authority. The constant cycle of crowning and decrowning is common in the work, and resembles the carnival atmosphere where the process is also never-ending. While Jacob retains a semblance of authority, it is still important to note that he is not entirely sane. His experiments are mad, and a source of anxiety for this family. When creating his new species of birds, he starts from scratch, and hatches the beasts from eggs (id. 21). Eggs are associated with the carnival of Medieval times, where they were often associated with images of fools, or also used as missiles during celebrations (Hyman 21-25). In this instance the eggs can represent the figure of the father as a fool, as his experiments do not go as planned and are eventually destroyed by Adela, and he is once again left decrowned and powerless (id. 21-23).

One of the birds Jacob manages to create resembles him in stature, form, and character. The narrator described the “certain condor” as “an enormous bird with a featherless neck, its face wrinkled and knobbly. It [is] and emaciated ascetic, a Buddhist lama, full of impenetrable dignity in its behaviour, guided by the rigid ceremonial of its great species” (ibid.). It is strange, grotesque, but also contains a mystic air, much like the father with regards to his various mental states and active participation in a carnival life. The narrator continues further, stating that the bird looked like “an older brother” of his father’s, as its “muscles and body seemed to be made of the same material” as the father’s (id. 22). Not only does the condor look like Jacob, it also uses the same “chamber pot” as the narrator’s father, further linking the two beings together. In a way, the condor is a symbol of Jacob’s creativity, as well as a signal of his ruling status over his creation.
Unfortunately, Jacob is the only person in the household who shares any enthusiasm for his newfound creations. His work is swiftly undone by Adela, who, disgusted with the state of the father’s quarters, as well as the mess and stench produced by the creatures, proceeds to fling open the windows, and lets all of the birds fly out of the rooms (id. 23). While she dances her “dance of destruction,” the father flails about and frantically tries to escape with his birds, flapping his arms about but remaining stationary while his creatures fly away (id. 23). At the end of it all, the father is decrowned once again, no longer in control of his experiments or in a position of power over other creatures. He is reduced to the status of a “broken man, an exiled king who has lost his throne and his kingdom” (ibid.).

This is the second instance of Jacob’s decrowning within the text. The third occurs in the next short story, “Tailors’ Dummies.” It also deals with unattainable desires and puts women in the position of dominance, while the male characters, in this case, Jacob, simply grovel at their feet and submit to their presence.

The onset of the short story presents the narrator in a more understanding role, if only for a brief moment. Joseph realizes that his father was being creative, and that during the dull winter, his experiments and actions were all a part of a fantasy – Jacob’s way of defending himself against the “sterile and empty winter” (A Street of Crocodiles, 25). While this is true, Joseph still does not see his father in a carnival perspective. As to Adela, she is not punished for her actions, and the family even secretly admits that they are glad that she set the birds free and rid the house of Jacob’s experiments (ibid.). Once again, after the brief excitement of the bird episode, the family is quick to forget about the father, and returns to its monotonous life (ibid.).
Having decrowned Jacob, Adela becomes a sort of master of the household. She continues to clean that house at her own pace and tries to run the house to the best of her abilities (id. 26-27). During this time, two girls who work at the shop owned by the family move into a room in the house to continue their textile work. Polda and Pauline work silently, attending to their duties on a daily basis (id. 28). They become Jacob’s next pupils, as he tries to dominate them through various lectures.

Jacob first encounters them while wandering throughout the apartment, when Adela is absent from the house (id. 29). He becomes intrigued with the young girls, and they in turn become fascinated with the strange, older man. They not only become his pupils but, to a certain extent, also objects of desire. The narrator recounts the succession of meetings in the following way:

My father succeeded in charming both of the young ladies with the magnetism of his strange personality. In return for his witty and elegant conversation, which filled the emptiness of their evenings, the girls permitted the ardent ornithologist to study the structure of their thin and ordinary little bodies. This took place while the conversation was in progress and was done with a seriousness and grace which ensured that even the more risky points of these researches remained completely unequivocal. (A Street of Crocodiles, 29)

The girls are taken with Jacob and his fascinating conversations, and he in turn is enraptured by their bodies. However, it is important to note here that young girls “arouse in him enthusiasm rather than desire” (Gondowicz 3). The purpose of his inspection of their bodies is not meant to be erotic, but rather an aesthetic appreciation of form. This leads Jacob to develop an in-depth “Treatise of Tailors’ Dummies” (A Street of Crocodiles, 31).
However, before the father embarks on his theoretical talks, he encounters Adela for the first time since his previous decrowning, marked as “the first meeting of the two enemy powers since the great battle” (id. 30). Surprisingly, the two greet each other in a friendly manner, and a mini celebration occurs within the room, with Pauline and Polda taking Jacob’s arms and dancing around the room (ibid.). This meeting is in line with carnival celebration, where hierarchies are overlooked and forgotten, and everyone is put on equal footing. The brief reconciliation between Adela and Jacob enters once more into a carnival atmosphere within the work.

During these meetings with Pauline and Polda, Jacob comes up with a treatise on dummies and matter that promotes creativity and states that everyone can be a part of this process (ibid.). In the treatise, he states the “Demiurge,” the figure in charge of all creation, “has…no monopoly of creation, for creation is the privilege of all spirits” (id. 31). He goes on to describe his fascination with matter in the following way:

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 shapes, tensions build up, attempts at form appear. The whole of matter pulsates with infinite possibilities that send dull shivers through it. Waiting for the life-giving breath of the spirit, it is endlessly in motion. In entices us with a thousand sweet, soft, round shapes which it blindly dreams up within itself. (A Street of Crocodiles, 31).

Jacob continues his exultation of matter over the course of the evenings, while the girls sit transfixed, listening to his rambling with utmost curiosity (id. 32). The father claims that the Demiurge cannot have all the creative control, and that people should not be afraid to take on this role and manipulate matter to their own liking (id. 32-33). He does not promote this as an act of rebellion against a higher force, but rather as an affirmation
of the creative power of humans. Again, he tries to promote a transgression of boundaries and hierarchies, where everyone is viewed as an equal. However, he is the only one who is convinced of these views, as the rest of the family does “not share these demiurgical aspirations” (ibid.).

For Jacob, the epitome of this form of creation is the figure of the dummy, a sort of second creation of man (id. 33-34). However, before he can go on, his passionate speech is interrupted by Adela, who once again acts as a usurper of his throne by presenting him with her leg, stretched out “like a serpent’s head” (id. 34). This action causes the father to cough “nervously, fall silent, and suddenly become very red in the face” (ibid.). Her leg, covered in a black silk stocking is used as an erotic symbol in this context, throwing Jacob completely off his game, and reducing him to the status of a slave, while Adela towers over him as his master. She then tells him he must “obey,” and Jacob falls to his knees like an “automaton” before her (ibid.). Once again, this invokes the common image of the dominant woman in Schulz’s fiction and art, and of the unattainability of desires, as well as the inability of characters to properly respond when they are presented with objects of desire. Again, the full carnival experience is hindered by an inability to accept it completely on the part of the characters in the text.

After yet another episode of decrowning, Jacob returns with a slightly altered treatise on tailors’ dummies. This time, he talks about wax figures, and their pathetic state (id. 35-39). This new treatise is not as optimistic or full of creativity as the last, as he now looks at the consequences of creating matter, and the state of suffering they go through. Rather than creation, the wax figures under discussion are imitations of things or people that came before. Jacob uses the specific example of a wax figure of Queen Draga, asking
his audience if there is any “likeness, and similarity, even the remote shadow of her
being” in a simple wax statue (id. 36). He casts imitation in a negative light, then goes on
to talk about another form of creation, one consisting of “half-organic… pseudofauna and
pseudoflora, the result of a fantastic fermentation of matter” (id. 37). He continues
praising new forms of creation, fusing matter that has come before into something new,
constantly invoking the carnival spirit of construction, of imagination, and transgressing
moral and societal boundaries.

Jacob also brings back the notion of the grotesque body in this segment with his
discussion of his brother, who has “gradually transformed [himself] into a bundle of
rubber tubing” due to an illness, and is incapable of movement, having become a “rubber
tube of an enema” (id. 40). The father does not state that this form is ideal, but he is also
not repulsed by the image he discusses. He simply acknowledges that it is sad. His
audience at home, however, can no longer take his sermons about experiments and
grotesque bodies and once again, Adela drives him away with her finger, as if to tickle
him, causing Jacob to once again shut up inside himself, and run away (ibid.).

In the end, Jacob is the sole character in the work who lives by the code of the
carnival and is open to all of its unrestrictive characteristics. The rest of the characters
choose to avoid participation in this atmosphere, save for Adela, who repeatedly takes on
the role of decrowning the father figure, and taking over his domain. The inability of
other characters to effectively engage in the carnival atmosphere of the text mirrors the
often difficult process of fully engaging with the work that readers face, unless they, like
Jacob, give in to the carnival atmosphere of events and allow themselves to be swept
away by its overall strangeness and freedom.
These four short stories capture the very essence of Bruno Schulz’s text, and set up the structure of the overall work. The carnival themes of decrowning, of changing hierarchies, and the inclusion of imagination and the grotesque are all key elements that occur repeatedly through *A Street of Crocodiles*, and help uphold a carnivalesque approach to the text itself.
Chapter 2: Davenport's Uninhibited Carnival

2.1 Guy Davenport: Texts, criticism, and style

As is the case with Bruno Schulz, Guy Davenport is an author who is difficult to comprehend or place in a specific literary spectrum. His particular literary style was discussed in the introduction, where the debate between placing him among the postmodernists or metamodernists was elaborated upon in greater detail. Like Schulz, Davenport does not fit in neatly to the specific literary genre of his time, although he is not cast out as far apart from it as was his earlier predecessor. His works and person are not categorized by the same form of alienation as was Schulz, along with his limited literary oeuvre. Despite this, there are some elements of alienation that remain within the works of Davenport to a certain degree, with regards to the reading of his texts, and the characters and events that appear in his works.

Unlike Schulz, whose legacy consists of two main works and a single collection of artwork, Davenport’s literary and artistic output spans many different genres, encompassing everything from poetry, short fiction, painting, essays and art criticism, as well as classical translation (Furlani, “Postmodern and After: Guy Davenport,” 712). In addition to the multitude of his publications, Davenport was also a professor who traveled and gave lectures around North America, as previously mentioned in the introductory chapter. Already many differences can be seen in both the characteristics and works of both authors, as one was very shy and timid, reluctant to venture past his hometown into the world, while the other was much more open to the world, to different genres and perspectives, and the prospects of travel. As both Schulz and Davenport were also artists,
it is interesting to note the ways in which they portrayed themselves in their own unique artistic styles. Below there are two self-portraits done by each respective author, which shed further light on the characteristics of Bruno Schulz and Guy Davenport.

![Figure 4: ‘Dedykacja (Introdukcja)/Dedication (Introduction)'](image)


This image, taken from Schulz’s *Book of Idolatry*, depicts the artist and author as he and many others saw him: shy, timid, always looking up from below, his stance suggesting an uncertainty and lack of comfort in his own body. He sketches himself in a submissive pose, reminiscent of his masochistic tendencies and in line with the pattern of
his artwork, which featured men in submissive roles before powerful and dominant female figures. He is presenting a crown on a plate to someone or something that is outside the picture, but, based on the pattern of his sketches it is viable to assume that the crown is being presented to a woman. The crown, being a symbol of power, is being given away to someone else. This is also in line with the carnival themes of the disruption of traditional hierarchies, and the notion of switching roles while celebrating in the carnival realm. Schulz is willingly decrowning himself in this picture, and giving that power over to someone else. This is in line with Gombrowicz’s previous description of the writer and artist as a person who preferred admiring to being admired, and remained in the background (Gombrowicz 61).

In stark contrast, Davenport depicts himself in a much more confident and creative way.
The above portrait is simple, straightforward and “modern.” Guy Davenport illustrates himself facing his audience rather than looking down, in an upright pose rather than one of submission and supplication. The way in which the two authors depict themselves in their own artistic styles reflects the overall tonality of their work, and their approach to the atmosphere of their writing. In Schulz there is always a sense of anxiety, and the carnival realm has a dark element to it in terms of a constant decrowning, and the inability of personal desires to come to full fruition. Davenport’s stories are much more positive, and invoke the full carnival atmosphere of celebration. There is no inhibition,
desires are fully expressed and attained, and the decrowning process that occurs puts characters on an equal plane, rather than one above the other in a constant power ploy.

Another way in which Davenport’s art differs from that of Bruno Schulz is through the subject matter depicted in his works. Like Schulz, Davenport also illustrated some of his work and published his art. However, his art was not as dark or masochistic as Bruno Schulz’s, and often tied in closely with the subject under discussion in the given text. For example, in his short story “Tatlin!” taken from *Twelve Stories*, Davenport includes a large print of the image of both the main character as well as Stalin. The images corresponds to the time period in which the short story is set, and the inclusion of an image of the country’s then ruler reflects the real Stalin’s imposing figure on the events that occurred within that particular era. The story is set in Russia and follows the remarkable achievements of the Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin (Davenport, *Twelve Stories*, 1-53). The inclusion of the image of Tatlin follows logically, in order to give readers a sense of who the story is about, while the image of Stalin helps set the tone of the work. In Davenport’s case, the artwork is not meant to threaten his audience, but rather provide a visual guide as to the events and characters set in his stories.
Figure 6: Tatlin
Before going any further, it is necessary to outline some of the key components of Davenport’s writing, which help set the basis for a canivalesque reading of his texts. The specific literary characteristics contained within much of Davenport’s works, and the text under discussion here are the inclusion of archaic tropes, a collage of genres and subjects, pastoral elements and settings, the inclusion of utopic environments, and the discussion of sexuality, prevalent among many of his short stories (Furlani, *Guy Davenport*, xxix-xlvi).
Beginning with the subject of archaic subtexts in his work, it is important to note that Davenport draws on a lot of subjects and themes from the classical era. This fascination with the archaic is a common trait of the modernist, postmodernist, and metamodernist writers, who were captivated by this “embryonic state of civilization” (Furlani, *Guy Davenport*, 5). The reason for this deep interest in things of the past came about as a result of the modern era and the “social displacement, alienation, and technology” it produced, which drove artists and writers back to a time of “intuitive, immediate, and harmonizing modes of thought” (ibid.). While this theme is much more applicable to some of Davenport’s other works and translations of works from antiquity, there is a vital element of the archaic world that carries over into his stories from *A Table of Green Fields*. Archaic notions of sexuality are vital keys in understanding and appreciating some of his works, which embrace antiquity’s “nonessentialized attitude to sexuality and an acceptance of its diverse expressions” (id. xxx). The stories often present relationships between genders, between parsons of various ages, as well as relationships between teachers and pupils. However, it is important to note that archaic sexuality not only promotes forms of liberal love, but that is promotes more than just physical desires through various forms of sexual expression. For Davenport, archaic relationships present “an exemplary unity of intellectual, creative, and sexual drives” (id. xxx). His stories often feature the figures of youths, who are “intelligent in large part because, like primitives, they have been permitted to learn from their bodies and with their bodies. Their intellects emerge with the impetus, rather than is conflict with or suspicion toward, their desiring bodies” (ibid.). For Davenport, there is a concrete link between learning and the formation of one’s own self and intellect through the fulfillment of sexual desires.
This translates well into the carnivalesque realm, where the attainment of personal sexual longings is encouraged and turned into positive forms of expression. Unlike Schulz’s texts, which cast a shadow of shame and perversion on attaining personal desires, Davenport offers a much more open perspective on the topic and a fuller carnival experience.

Another key aspect of Davenport’s writing is the collage structure of his stories. Much like “modernist painting and poetry,” Guy Davenport’s short stories feature a “variety of discontinuous and discrete writings as well as images” (id. xxxi). Davenport builds on stories, works, and historical events that have come before, and amalgamates them in order to form new stories and perspectives within his own works. This particular formula is natural to Davenport, who saw it as no different from “Homer’s inserting family histories, myths, and long lists of ships into battles,” which were necessary in providing a context for the stories being told (id. xxxii). While the amalgamation of different genres, historical episodes, characters and time periods may be confusing, they are employed in order to make readers think, and to piece together common elements and fragments found within the themes and subjects presented in a given Davenport text. In his work, “casual connection and narrative continuity are jettisoned, not in favor of an aleatory play of signification, but in order to intimate by combinational logic kinships and correspondences between eras, ideas, and forces” (id. 43). An example of these logical connections will be discussed further on, with regards to the works contained in A Table of Green Fields. It is important to note that the use of collage in writing is also in line with the carnival notions of transgressing barriers, which include the breakdown of private and public spheres, as well as the barriers that exist between time and genres.
Yet another key feature of Davenport’s writing is the inclusion of pastoral themes and spheres. This is in line with Modernism, which “rescued pastoral from the meretricious idealism and precious retrogressions of the later nineteenth century” (id. xxxii). Yet the pastoral that was rejuvenated by the Modernists was in no way “decorative and sentimental nor ironic and self-mocking” (id. xxxiii). Instead, it was presented in forms that seemed entirely natural and fitting to a contemporary environment (id. xxxiii). Davenport’s use of the pastoral not only reinstates it into the world of literature and art, but is also in line with modernist thinking and the aversion to technological advancements prevalent at the time. This was in line with Davenport’s own personal views, as he was highly suspicious of many forms of technology and did not own a “television set nor a car,” and produced much of his written and artistic work without the aid of a computer or modern technology (id. 52). In addition to writing about pastoral themes and settings, many of Davenport’s works are also named after “their carefully delineated rural settings,” as is the case with *A Table of Green Fields* (ibid.).

Davenport sets much of his work in the pastoral realm, where they become “an instance of…transformation” for the “youths prominent in his fiction” (id. 56). The youths replace swineherds in Davenport’s stories, and flourish in the pastoral realm. Furlani describes the depiction of children in Davenport’s fiction in the following manner:

Most of the youths in Davenport’s fiction are as intellectually precocious as they are physically beautiful, and while child prodigies are perhaps less an anomaly than highly artful swineherd poets…they make up a deliberately implausible majority of his stories. This is reinforced not only by the almost complete liberty they enjoy, but by the emotional maturity with which they pursue new experience. (*Guy Davenport*, 56-57)
The pastoral setting also enables the carnival realm to flourish, once again stressing the absence of boundaries and social hierarchies within the texts.

Closely tied to Davenport’s use of the pastoral is the utopian nature of many of his texts. With regards to *A Table of Green Fields*, Davenport employs an “optative utopia,” which features “Scandinavian idylls of adolescent fellowship fostered by the integration of intellectual, erotic, and ethical drives” (id. xxxiv). Often times, the inclusion of utopian themes depend on the historical stories included in Davenport’s works (id. 100). In this instance, “the historical stories do not require the utopian ones, [but] the utopian stories…depends on the historical ones that precede them” (Furlani, *Guy Davenport*, 100-101). This allows Davenport to “situate limitless possibility within historical limitation,” which will be expanded upon further in a segment focusing on the first story of *A Table of Green Fields*, entitled “August Blue” (id. 101). Davenport’s utopian stories become “imaginative responses to the unrealized aspirations described in the archival ones” (ibid.). This too is in line with the spirit of the carnival, allowing its participants to break free from the constraints of society and their personal worries, in order to freely pursue dreams and desires in a safe and open environment.

The last category of Davenport’s fiction under discussion is the subject of sexuality prevalent among his works. In his stories, Davenport “defies a culture of moral panics to make bold imaginative forays into youth sexuality,” going against the codes and norms of his time (id. xxxvii). Many of his works feature the subject of “uninhibited and happy sexual maturation” (ibid.). The erotic aspects of his texts are not there strictly for the purpose of attaining physical gratification. The use of sexuality goes beyond the realm of purely carnal desires. In Davenport’s stories, the characters
range across sexual boundaries confident of their porousness. The youths explore their own natures as avidly and intelligently as they do the nature of a flower, a historical event, or a painting. They give each other instruction, pleasure, and affection in many ways, including sexual ways. (Furlani, Guy Davenport, xxxvii)

Sex is not used solely for the purpose of personal gratification, but also as a tool of exploration in the pursuit of knowledge of the world and oneself. It is also important to note that sex is never repressed or judged as immoral within the confines of Davenport’s literature. Nor is it ever dictated, or forced. In his short stories, the youths “scarcely need advice” in sexual matters (id. 123). Instead, “they enjoy the taste and are keen to teach it to their kind. Distinctions of age or sexual orientation are not drawn, consent alone determining sexual actions” that take place within the stories (ibid.). In addition, “coercion is not used, force [is] never applied,” resulting in the assumption that the “young are potentially mature enough to exercise…autonomy, monitored form a distance by liberal parents” (ibid.). This is in stark contrast to the sexual images presented in Schulz, which are repressed almost as soon as they arise, and are not openly greeted by the characters within the text. Where Schulz presents sexual repression and oppression, Davenport grants its liberation.

It is also important to mention that much of the sexual imagery in Davenport’s fiction has to do with children, or youths. In his works, “sexual desire compliments…curiosity,” and is experiences by children rather than adults because the young are, in a sense, freed from the moral hierarchies and codes of the adult world (id. 131). This is also another instance in which the world of carnival comes into play, as, once again, children
are freed from the moral standards and hierarchies of society, and are permitted to pursue their desires and interests outside the confines of the world of adults.

The aforementioned categories elaborate on just some of the common characteristics of Davenport’s writing, but are best suited to the understanding and discussion of the text chosen for the discussion of carnival themes. They also outline some of the difficulties of reading Davenport, which becomes especially difficult when readers lack a background in the writings and customs of antiquity, and are not readily familiar with Davenport’s penchant for creating collages in his work, for piecing together stories, characters, and events that seemingly have nothing in common. Another difficulty encountered upon reading Davenport’s text is the fact that, much like Schulz, he does not include traditional, linear story lines in his stories. There is no beginning, middle, or end, there is no solution to a greater problem, and the stories themselves are occurrences and events taken from the lives of the characters involved. They do not necessarily contain a moral lesson to be learned, nor do they solve particular problems. They are simply meant to be experiences, and the best way to experience and analyze them is by once again reading them in a carnival context.

The two specific stories that will be discussed further in this chapter are “August Blue” and “Gunnar and Nikolai,” taken from Davenport’s A Table of Green Fields. These two stories contain themes of the carnivalesque destruction of boundaries and social hierarchies, of decrowning, of a celebration of the body, though not entirely under the guise of the grotesque, and of the emergence and encouragement of different forms of creativity and the pursuit of knowledge. Davenport’s stories offer a lighter and more positive view of carnival life as opposed to Schulz’s rather dark and limited perspective,
which is entrenched with uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. In addition, Guy Davenport’s stories feature a set of characters who all partake in carnival celebration, rather than just a select few who are able to immerse themselves in the carnival world while others watch on, confused and dismissive of the events taking place before their eyes. A Table of Green Fields opens up a wider perspective on carnival life and the joys it brings to both characters and readers. A carnival approach to Davenport leads to a better understanding and appreciation of his texts, which can otherwise be very challenging and difficult to comprehend.

2.2 From Yeshua to Cornish: Making Connections Across History and Time

The first story under discussion is “August Blue,” which is divided into four separate parts, “none of which overtly relates to the others” (Furlani, Postmodern and After: Guy Davenport 716). The first part deals with the young figure of Jesus, or Yeshua, who is presented not in a temple but in “yeshiva, offering a homily on the Hebrew alphabet” (ibid.). Yeshua and his friends are headed to school in the morning, when they walk past “one of the largest fig trees in Jerusalem” (Davenport, A Table of Green Fields, 1). The tree is believed to be extraordinary, and to have “special blessing” powers that make its figs “fatter and sweeter than any others in the world” (ibid). This tree is kept behind a great red wall, though travelers and children are able to help themselves to the fruit growing beyond the wall, including figs from the succulent tree, “without being guilty of theft” (ibid.). As they pass by the tree the students “pine for the fruits” of the fig tree, and Yeshua “miraculously conjures” up the fruit and gives it to his
friends (Furlani, Postmodern and After: Guy Davenport 717). He then goes on to share even more figs with his other classmates and teacher, who is stunned by his ability to produce the figs (Davenport, *A Table of Green Fields*, 2-3). While the teacher is stunned and unable to speak, Yeshua goes on with the teacher’s lecture about the *aleph*, which Yeshua claims is a “picture of the whole world” (Furlani, 717). By transgressing the red gate that separates the tree from the rest of the town, Yeshua goes beyond the boundaries of reality, goes beyond restrictions imposed on him by society. Later, by taking over the class from the teacher, Yeshua decrowns the other by stripping him of his teaching title and putting it on instead. This image perpetuates the carnival theme of decrowning, though in this case it is more in line with the image of renewal and “*joyful relativity*” (Bakhtin 124). The status of teacher passes on to Yeshua, and “the symbols of authority…are handed over to the newly crowned king,” and they in turn become “*ambivalent and acquire a veneer of joyful relativity*” (Bakhtin 124). After his speech about the alef, Yeshua invokes a speech similar to that of Jacob in the “Tailors’ Dummies,” where he talks about the power of creation. The teacher asks Yeshua of what he has just said something that is true, something that someone else may have stated before. Yeshua replies that he is “making it up,” and that the “Creator made [humans] creators too” (Davenport, *A Table of Green Fields*, 4). In this story, “Yeshua is not so much a Christ as a healer and a parabolist who affirms elective kinships and a material world anchored in spirit” (Furlani, 717). In this brief story, the subject of decrowning and the creative aspect of the carnival is introduced, through the character and events that occur. The transgression of boundaries is present not only in Yeshua bypassing the red
wall in order to get at the ripe fruit of the fig tree, but also in going back to antiquity and sifting through various time periods in history as the story moves on.

The second section of “August Blue” deals with “America’s first Jewish professor, the mathematician James Joseph Sylvester,” as he “makes a narrow escape from the racism, violence, and ignorance of the antebellum University of Virginia” (id. 716-717). This story is much darker than the previous one, but it still falls in line with carnival themes of decrowning and the transgression of barriers. In this segment, the professor is forced to encounter a problem he has never faced before, and this is precisely the problem that leads to his decrowning. His students, “all healthy, strapping young men from the richest families, [are] illiterate” (Davenport, A Table of Green Fields, 5). They essentially “know nothing,” and demonstrate a negative attitude towards the professor, his class, and the institution of learning in general (ibid.). They ridicule him during lectures and reduce the professor to tears, sending him to the faculty for help (id. 5-6). There he is told that the students have “shot three professors already, [and] that he had best deal with them as patiently as he knew how” (id. 6). Unfortunately, the harassment from students continues, and the professor finds himself having a hard time attending to his own work, as it has become “harder and harder to finish” (ibid.). By this point, the students, who he refers to as “barbarian louts,” have rendered him completely “sterile,” completing their process of decrowning the professor (ibid.). At this point, the professor has become the carnival king. His “regal vestments [have been] stripped off…his crown [has been] removed, and other symbols of authority [have been] taken away” (Bakhtin 125). His students are now in the position of power, having had the “symbols of authority” handed over to them (id. 124).
This version of decrowning, which is much more fearful and signifies a loss of authority rather than a joyful cycle of the renewal of power, as was seen in the previous segment with Yeshua, is much more in line with the carnival process of decrowning found in Schulz’s texts. Once again, there is an instance of fear and anxiety at having lost power over a group. For Professor Sylvester, this loss of control over his classroom transforms into the inability to control his personal life, as he is no longer able to write papers at his normal speed, and is even ashamed to “keep up his correspondences” with several learned men “in Germany, France, and England, who understand his work” (Davenport, A Table of Green Fields, 6). However, unlike Jacob in Schulz’s A Street of Crocodiles, Professor Sylvester does not simply accept his state. While Jacob always retreated to the shadows after being repeatedly decrowned by Adela, Professor Sylvester fights back against his students, in the most literal sense, in order to regain his crown and bring the cycle of decrowning full circle. “On the advice of a fellow professor,” the decrowned Sylvester buys a “sword cane” (Davenport, A Table of Green Fields, 6). He carries it with him at all times, and upon another encounter with his students, where they once again ridicule him and even throw racial slurs his way, referring to him as “Jewboy,” the professor draws “the sword from his cane with one graceful movement,” and stabs one of the students in the chest (id. 7). The students panic and run away, while the professor “cooly sheaths his sword, tapping it against a brick wall to assure that it is firmly fitted in his cane, turns his heel, and walks away” (ibid.). With this one gesture he has reinstated his status as the carnival king, and regained his power.

It is interesting to note that no form of punishment is instilled upon the professor for his violent deeds, signifying the lack of moral system enforced by societal codes in
the story. This once again upholds a carnival tone of the work, where the systems and hierarchies of normal society have no solid base. After the stabbing incident, Professor Sylvester travels to New York, “where he practices law” (id. 7-8). He is also able to return to writing his papers, and takes up teaching once more, and proceeds to found “the first school of mathematics in the United States, where he arranges for the first woman to enter an American graduate school” (id. 8). Not only has he regained his authority, but he also goes outside the limitations of society and goes on to do new things, never been done before. Unlike Jacob in Schulz’s narratives, he does not let others get the best of him and fights for his crown. Although this segment of “August Blue” contains dark elements of violence and racism, those are eventually overcome to make way for new ideas and a new life for the professor.

The third segment in “August Blue” is very short, and deals with “juxtaposed descriptions by Samuel Pepys and Daniel Defoe of the Isle of Ely” (Furlani, Postmodern and After: Guy Davenport 717). The brief narrative does just this, expanding on the wildlife that resides on the Isle of Ely, and providing a brief description of the Isle itself (Davenport, A Table of Green Fields, 8). This segment is very much in line with Davenport’s pastoral themes, as he gives nature a key position in his works, highlighting the importance of its existence in allowing life and creativity to flourish.

The fourth and final segment of “August Blue” focuses on an encounter between T.E. Lawrence and Henry Scott Tuke at a Cornish cove, where the former poses for a work of art being made by the latter (Furlani, “Postmodern and After: Guy Davenport”
717). It is in this episode that the title of Davenport’s short story is mentioned by name, referring to an actual painting produced by Tuke, entitled *August Blue* (ibid.). This very painting is presented on the cover of *A Table of Green Fields*, and features a collection of nude youths on a boat, enjoying a bright day out on the lake.

The atmosphere presented by the painting lends itself to the overall tone of the fourth and final installment in the short story. Here, there is a group of young men collected together along with the painter Tuke, all posing for his various watercolours and also enjoying one another’s company, with no inhibitions (Davenport, *A Table of Green Fields*, 10-14). All of the men gathered strip and “horse around” on the shore, expressing the free attitude that features prominently in Davenport’s short stories (id. 10). The story
is a utopian, pastoral idyll, where self-exploration, fun, and creation are possible and free from any forms of constraints or inhibition. Once again, this brings back many of the common themes of Davenport’s works, which also lend themselves to the world of the carnival, which promotes “free and familiar contact among all people” (Bakhtin 123).

The short fragments that make up the entirety of Davenport’s “August Blue” do not have a connection to one another. According to Furlani, the story is a “patchwork of periods, styles of writing, [and] citations” (Furlani, “Postmodern and After: Guy Davenport” 717). He goes further, stating that the story is an “ontological clash of historical and imaginary characters,” as Davenport includes “the obscure…the concealed…the elusive…and the mythic” in the text (ibid.). Because of the amalgamation of different themes, time periods and various characters, both real and imaginary, the story “omits” any form of connections between the short segments” (ibid.). This is true, as none of the objects or subjects of the stories transition into the others. Each story is a simple occurrence within a specific time frame, which happens, and then the story moves on. This is where a carnival reading of the text provides some sort of common ground for the stories, as they each feature several characteristics of the carnival world. The stories express a “free and familiar attitude…over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things. Things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by noncarnivalistic hierarchical worldviews are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations” (Bakhtin 123). In the stories, situations and characters that would have normally not been connected in any way come together to transgress the boundaries of genre, history, and literary style. Each story also presents a form of social transgression that is perfectly in line with the realm of the carnival. Yeshua breaks boundaries by
providing his classmates and teacher with seemingly unattainable fruit, then takes on the role of teacher himself. The professor steps outside the bounds of moral codes in order to re-establish his authority and re-gain his creative force. The remaining two stories transgress the boundaries of history and fiction, and allow for a free and creative environment in the realm of nature. The last short story is also self-referential in terms of alluding to the title of the collected story fragments. Davenport not only blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction within his stories, but also between the boundaries that exist between readers and the book itself. He encourages a more interactive relationship with the text, and challenges readers to make connections between characters, stories and themes that at first glance have very little in common. A carnival approach helps in piecing together various fragments of the stories, and some of the key themes that pepper the episodes throughout the text.

“August Blue” is an excellent example of how difficult Davenport’s texts can be in terms of trying to find connections between all of the things that occur or are described in each segment. However, it sets the basis for the overall structure of the stories under discussion here, and also promotes the carnival themes of decrowning and the transgression of boundaries. The next story under discussion will elaborate on the themes of sexuality and exploration outside the confines of society, and will tackle the subject of a more positive decrowning carnival experience that promotes equality among its participants.

2.3 Gunnar and Nikolai: Carnival in Nature

The second story from *A Table of Green Fields* brings about more of Davenport’s key writing features, which blend perfectly with some of Bakhtin’s theories on the
carnival and carnival writing. This story is arguably easier to follow and does not jump all over the place like “August Blue,” though it does deviate from the main focus of the story several times, in order to tie in common themes and bring about new perspectives.

Davenport’s “Gunnar and Nikolai” follows the story of an artist and his young male muse, Nikolai, and the bond they form while working together. Nikolai begins posing for Gunnar’s statue of Ariel, “a spirit of the air” (Davenport, *A Table of Green Fields*, 25). Gunnar also tells Nikolai that he is considering using him as inspiration for the statue of Korczak’s King Matt, a “boy who’s king of an unimaginable Poland” (id. 24). During Nikolai’s time as Gunnar’s model the youth willingly explores his body, for pleasure and knowledge, and also forms a sexual relationship with the older artist and his girlfriend. The subtext of the story is very much in line with Davenport’s themes of sexuality and the pursuit of knowledge outside of societal restrictions, while the setting, which is often a natural backdrop or the artist’s studio allows for a more free demonstration of this sexual awakening and creative process of the artist. It is a stark contrast to the sexuality expressed in Schulz, which is often shunned or quickly put out of the picture, never allowing characters to fully experience their desires or come to a sense of maturation through sexual exploration. This story very much presents a liberating sense of the carnival, where partaking in its various themes and activities becomes a form of therapy (Malbert 75). This purpose of the carnival is elaborated further:

Carnival’s therapeutic function is central to Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of medieval ‘folk humor’, which he describes as the ‘social consciousness of all the people. Man experiences this flow of time in the festive marketplace, in the carnival crowd, as he comes into contact with other bodies of varying age and social caste. The purpose of carnival laughter is to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and
destruction (the death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation’. (Malbert 75)

This particular story perfectly encapsulates Bakhtin’s essence of the carnival. To begin, there is an emphasis on forming relationships outside the bounds of personal comfort zones and social hierarchies. Nikolai and Gunnar form a firm friendship that is physical, creative, and intellectual, despite their difference in age. This also ties in the notion of the carnival atmosphere doing away with the boundaries of age, and does away with the hierarchies of authority. Another way in which the story captures the spirit of the carnival is through intertextuality. As with the previous story, Davenport blends history and fiction, and refers to works already in existence throughout the text, which tie in with some of the themes presented in the story. A key text that resurfaces over and over in “Gunnar and Nikolai” is Janusz Korczak’s *King Matt the First*, and Gunnar frequently talks about both the book and its historical author. The boundaries between different time frames and the realm of fiction and reality are done away with to create a multileveled story.

The story begins with Nikolai coming to the home of the artist Gunnar for the first time. Right away, an equal relationship is established between the two, as Gunnar proceeds to ask Nikolai if he would like a cup of coffee, and the youngster automatically equates this statement with the notion that Gunnar is “treating him like a grown-up” (Davenport, *A Table of green Fields*, 24). The decrowning process happens at the onset of the story, creating an atmosphere of equality rather than a vicious cycle of the crowning and decrowning of a carnival king. Unlike previous stories, and especially those discussed in the Schulz chapter, the atmosphere in this work is more peaceful,
relaxed, and the element of fear and anxiety is completely done away with. Next, Gunnar asks Nikolai to strip all of his clothing, so that he can study him in an aesthetic manner. The boy takes off his clothing without hesitation, which again goes back to Davenport’s ideas about the freeing concepts of sexuality, and of his presentation of youths that are not ashamed of nudity, or of experimenting with their bodies in order to learn about each other and the world.

While Gunnar studies Nikolai for his work, the youth plays with himself liberally and goes on to talk about the subject of masturbation (id. 25-26). He even talks about his best friend, Mikkel, whose own father encourages “doing it every day,” signaling a more liberal attitude towards sexuality in the story, and again doing away with the hierarchies that exists between parents and children within society (id. 26). The liberal parents and adults in this work signal a more open approach to sexuality, and a freer environment in the text.

On the topic of sexuality, it is important to note that Davenport includes the image of the phallus on several occasions in the story, mostly while referring to Nikolai’s self-discovery. Phallic imagery was a big part of early carnival celebrations, tied to the notion of transgressing moral boundaries and in line with the topsy-turvy festivities (Hyman 28). After Nikolai’s first meeting with Gunnar, Davenport includes a short bit about Commandant Nikolai Doyen-Parigot, and focuses specifically on discussing the size of his penis. The character is the epitome of manliness:

Thick curly hair matted his chest. His dick was as big as his charger’s, and his balls like two oranges in a cloth sack. His wife went around in a happy daze because of them, as did several lucky young actresses and dancers.
Restocking the regiment for the next generation he called it. (Davenport, *A Table of Green Fields*, 28).

Images like this abound in the text, but they are simply taken as facts, and are not treated with aversion or fear. Instead, they are fully embraced, and emphasize the openness to all forms of sexuality and sexual expression prevalent in Davenport’s stories, especially the text in question.

Along with the images of sexuality Davenport also incorporates pastoral settings and expands on the notion of creativity and growth. During the sessions with Gunnar, Nikolai often asks many questions and engages in deep conversations about everything with Gunnar and his girlfriend, Samantha. In addition, he spends time with them outside of the studio and work. In one instance, Gunnar takes Nikolai for a picnic, changing the setting from that of the studio to a more pastoral one (Davenport, *A Table of Green Fields*, 34-37). During the picnic, both Gunnar and Nikolai strip off their clothing, once again bringing back images of freedom and of experiencing the world through their bodies, as well as Davenport’s emphasis on learning through sensual understanding. On this picnic, there is an instance where Nikolai stresses that grown-ups are “tiresome,” expressing a discontentment with the hierarchies instilled by society (id. 35). Gunnar reminds Nikolai that before they were grownups, they were also once children, and that everything has a place in life. The pastoral environment allows both characters to feel free and safe, and reflects the comfortable atmosphere shared between the two. Nikolai trusts Gunnar and asks him all sorts of questions about society and life, and Gunnar answers them, all the while treating Nikolai like an equal, and not just a child.
While the story is full of images of sexuality and experimentation, they all come to an important climax when Nikolai, Gunnar, and his girlfriend Samantha all end up in bed and partake in sexual exploration (id. 46-47). Again, they tear down boundaries between age, sex, and orientation, and are in line with both Davenport’s mode of presenting sex and its function in his texts, as well as carnival celebration, which also promotes the transgressions of barriers imposed by the moral codes and standards of society. The act is one of openness and promotes a sense of exploration that goes beyond the realm of the sexual. All three members use their bodies to explore new possibilities, to learn more about each other and their surroundings, and what is most important, the act also emphasizes a sense of equality among Nikolai, Gunnar, and Samantha. It is important to note here that the carnival notion of decrowning occurs in a different way as opposed to the works discussed thus far. Here, any form authority is stripped in favour of an atmosphere of unity and equality. No new king is selected to rule during the time of the carnival. Instead, all characters are set on an equal plane, and the process of decrowning allows for a free atmosphere of experimentation and celebration.

Aside from emphasizing the liberation of all characters through the process of decrowning and stressing the importance of attaining knowledge of all things through the body, the story also focuses on transgressing boundaries that exist beyond the realm of social hierarchy and morality. In the story, Gunnar utilizes Nikolai’s posing abilities and young body for two of his art works, that of Ariel and of the Korczak group

11 Janusz Korczak, whose real name was Henryk Goldszmit, was a Jewish-Polish pediatrician, educator, and children’s writer. He worked as a director of an orphanage and perished along with his orphans during
(Davenport, *A Table of Green Fields*, 29). The Korczak group is to be a statue of a procession of the group, consisting of the “Polish doctor who had an orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto” during World War II, and focuses on the day that the “Germans took all the kids and Korczak and a woman named Stefa to die at Treblinka, and they all marched through the streets to the cattle cars” (id. 29). Nikolai is to be cast as the boy carrying the flag of the orphanage on the solemn march to the trains (ibid.). The inclusion of Korczak throughout the text emphasizes the subject of breaking the boundaries that exist between reality, fiction and time, and highlight not only Davenport’s pattern of intertextuality but also the carnival notion of transgressing boundaries that exist within society, space, and time. In addition, the statue planned by Gunnar becomes a sort of carnival procession itself, in that it consists of a crowd of people marching towards their own demise. While they are not celebrating in a jovial mood, they nonetheless become a collective in their shared experience, which can also be found in the realm of the carnival, where people gather together regardless of age or gender in order to unite and partake in carnival events. While it does not celebrate a jubilant event, this march is in line with the theme of death, which exists alongside that notion of life and is an important part in the life cycle of the carnival realm.

In addition to transgressing boundaries that exist within the realm of fiction, the use of Korczak and the constant emphasis on *King Matt the First* also stresses carnival themes of decrowning and turning hierarchical structures on their heads. Korczak’s novel *World War II*, after being sent to the Treblinka camp. He was also the author of *King Matt the First*, a story about a child king of Poland who is eventually poisoned by his elders and sentenced to die.
focuses on “the child king, who yearns to become the king of all children, [and] endeavors to make a social class of children and to reform the world by establishing trust and cooperation between elders and minors” (Furlani, Guy Davenport 131). This is very much in line with the spirit of the work, which stresses equality among all ages, and is also in line with the carnival spirit of a loss of hierarchical boundaries. However, the book’s hero is not successful in his attempt at promoting the equality between elders and minors and he is eventually poisoned and sent to die, offering a bleak end to a utopian concept. This is juxtaposed in the story of Gunnar and Nikolai, as a utopian sense of equality is achieved, and youth flourishes.

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Davenport’s second story focus on the positive aspects of carnival life, emphasizing the liberating aspect of its tearing down of all forms of boundaries in order to make room for creativity, self-expression and exploration, and allow various forms of literature, historical events, and characters both real and fictional to come together in a single space. In addition, the story is completely free of any forms of anxiety and fear, and allows for the full achievement of personal desires, unlike the stories of Schulz discussed earlier. Davenport’s texts serve as an excellent contrast to those of Bruno Schulz, as they embrace carnival life to the fullest and allow for a more open interaction with the stories. While Schulz’s texts cause a sense of anxiety in readers and a hint of uncertainty remains present throughout the stories, Davenport offers a much more open reading experience and presents positive images through the depiction of idyllic pastoral utopias, and the emphasis on complete freedom from societal hierarchies.
Conclusion

The works of Schulz and Davenport challenge readers by presenting them with stories that contest traditional narrative forms, and delve into the realm of dreams and nightmares. Both Schulz and Davenport themselves partake in a carnival creation of their works, as they go outside the boundaries of their given time periods in order to produce texts that question traditional narrative form and amalgamate themes and subjects that may be uncomfortable or seem unusually out of place when stitched together.

Of the two, Schulz was the greater risk taker. By creating art and stories that openly expressed images of fear, anxiety, domination and submission, he went outside the bounds of neo-realist literature, the dominant literary trend of his time, and expressed views that were not in line with the conservative thinking of post-war Poland. Because of this, he did not experience an enthusiastic following until decades after his death, when scholars suddenly became interested in the relatively unknown, introverted author from the town of Drohobycz. Yet many remain skeptical of this newfound frenzy surrounding the literary cult of Schulzomania, or Schulzology (De Bruyn and Van Heuckelom 9-20). Gombrowicz, one of Schulz’s literary acquaintances and admirers of his work even stated that it is “too late for his art to be appreciated in the West,” and expressed sadness over the fact that he remained largely unappreciated and unnoticed in Poland, with the exception of the following from a few poets and a “handful of writers” (Gombrowicz 61). He described Schulz as a “prince traveling incognito” (Gombrowicz 61). This description is quite accurate, and Schulz may have gone unnoticed for many more years if it had not
been for the mystery and controversy surrounding his mythologized, last work, *The Messiah*, as well as the discovery of some of his murals in Drohobycz, in the house once inhabited by Landau (Foer viii). The works were transferred to Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust museum, under mysterious circumstances that sparked further controversy, but also promoted a growth in the interest of Schulz’s work, and his fate as a citizen during World War II, and as writer and artist (Foer viii). As a prince of innovative story-telling he was decrowned by the society of his time, who did away with his works because it deemed them vulgar and strange. The renewed interest in Schulz’s stories and art suggest a re-crowning of the author, where a celebration of his achievements is undergone in an attempt to transgress the challenges of reading and engaging with his texts. In the spirit of carnival, anything is possible and encouraged. Reading Schulz’s texts in the same way is not only a form of experiencing his work in a new and more approachable manner, but also a way of overcoming the previous struggles met with deciphering his texts.

Davenport too was a risk taker in the forms and themes he chose to express in his works. He also went against his times with his return to the idyll images and realm of the pastoral, preferring a return to nature rather than adapting to the new technologies that abounded during his life time. His insistence on going beyond the boundaries of society, of traditional literary forms and subject matter also adhere to the patterns and themes of carnival life. Because the collection of his work is much larger and more diverse than Schulz’s, it is a little easier to approach and find ways of making the various puzzle pieces of his stories fit together. He is also much more widely known, thanks to his time as a Professor and his willingness to travel, unlike Schulz, who remained stationary for most of his life. While the stories of Davenport have much in common with those of
Schulz in terms of the carnival themes depicted, they differ greatly in the overall tonality of the works. Where Schulz presents a realm of limitation and uncertainty, Davenport expresses the utmost freedom and allows his characters to further transgress boundaries that would normally act as forms of inhibition and repression. Read together, they are an excellent representation of both spectrums of carnival life, with death co-existing alongside life, and all manner of opposites in constant contact with one another during the ultimate carnival celebration. Schulz imagines the darker side of the carnival, while Davenport incarnates it in a more positive light.

The works of both authors are an excellent contrast of the way in which carnival themes can be depicted in the literary and artistic genre. The purpose of the carnival is to bring all forms of people and subjects together in a common celebration of breaking boundaries, and embracing that which is normally repelled by the moral standards and hierarchies of society. Reading the texts in this particular style, as celebration of carnival life, allows for a deeper connection between audience and text. It also serves to provide an innovative way of looking at the works of Schulz and Davenport, going beyond the literary tropes and styles of each respective author’s time.
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