

Michał Paweł Markowski: Schulz – Writer as Philosopher

There are six popular superstitions regarding the distinction between literature and philosophy. Firstly, philosophy is said to be concerned with truth, while literature deals with fabrication. Secondly, it is believed that philosophy uses language in an imperceptible way, while literature consciously shows language. Thirdly, philosophy is assigned a “realistic” position in the sense that it refers to what is, while literature freely imagines various impossible things. Fourthly, philosophy is required to be serious, while literature is allowed to use irony, humour, and jokes. Fifthly, philosophy should base its considerations on reason, which proceeds methodically and without doubt, while literature is allowed to rely on intuition, which does not have to prove anything. Sixthly, it is assumed that philosophy tells us directly how things are, while literature tells various stories.

Fiction, metaphor, imagination, humour, intuition, and narrative are the domains of literature, while truth, linguistic economy, realism, seriousness, reason, and interpretation are the domains of philosophy. Is this a judgemental view? Of course, and it is so in both directions. Someone who is extremely serious and methodical will hold literature in contempt because its frivolity might weaken the authority of reason, without which – serious minds are so very afraid! – the world would easily fall apart. In turn, someone with a sense of humour or great emotional sensitivity will treat philosophy as a pathetic limitation to their unfettered imagination. Quite naturally, what is grounded in private beliefs, has its institutional counterparts. In philosophy departments, literature rarely appears, only as an object of philosophical study; analogically, in literature departments, philosophy is tolerated only as a necessary supplement. This division proves that between literature and philosophy there is a gap that should not be crossed because, as supporters of clear divisions say, it could cause the destruction of the foundations on which the entire cultural architecture is built. For the complicated mechanism of culture to function properly, literature should not overlap with philosophy, just as reason should not obscure intuition, seriousness should not be confused with humour, and man with a woman. Culture is based on stereotypes, because stereotype facilitates cognition, and cognition has an economic basis – it does not tolerate waste and to produce the final product (knowledge), it uses the cheapest means, i.e. cognitive ready-made materials, thanks to which it quickly categorizes reality.

However, sometimes such methods fail. Let us read the following fragment: “This is the phenomenon of imagination and vicarious being. An event may be small and insignificant in its origin, and yet, when drawn close to one’s eye, it may open in its center an infinite and radiant perspective because a higher order of being is trying to express itself in it and irradiates it violently”. If you agree to all the criteria listed above defining the difference between philosophy and literature, it will become clear that the above piece is not literary fiction. It would seem to be a serious lecture, rationally justified, written in a rather transparent language, containing philosophical concepts; a lecture in which the author sketches for us his own philosophy of the event, full intellectual evaluation of which would require a good knowledge of philosophical tradition, from Plato to Deleuze, taking into account the theological nuance.

But this quote comes from Bruno Schulz’s story “The Book”, undoubtedly a literary text. The reader is somewhat perplexed because, on the one hand, they believe that this fragment, according to almost universal criteria, is philosophical, but on the other hand it was written by a writer who, in other parts of the same text, meets all the criteria for the literary use of language. Having shaken off this embarrassment a bit, the reader will say that the writer has the right to philosophize from time to time, to put philosophical speculations into the mouth of a character or his narrator, but in the end, we still remain on the grounds of literature. Because Schulz is a writer who, indeed, manifests philosophical inclinations, but is primarily a master of imagination and language – which makes him a master of literary fiction. But a reader might as well shake off that confusion to think differently and say that literature is just an unnecessary form through which the writer tries to tell us extraordinarily serious things, written in a perfectly serious manner but also making a strong claim to truthfulness. This same reader could claim further that the real Schulz is right here, in this fragment about representation, that here he expounds his most important views, that without understanding this particular piece, we have no reason to delude ourselves that we can understand Schulz.

This is what it usually looks like: either the philosophical content is subordinated to the literary form, or the literary form is subordinated to philosophical content. In the first case, various philosophical traditions are attributed to Schulz, let us say: from Plato to Nietzsche, but these traditions are secondary to his literary genius.

In the second case, Schulz’s entire work comes down to a bundle of several discursive theses, easily omitting the trivial form. It is a situation of permanent imbalance, asymmetry, and incommensurability. Either philosophy or literature. Either Schulz the writer, who sometimes betrayed literature in favour of philosophy, or Schulz the philosopher or theologian, who treated literature only as a short suit that could not fit an overgrown kid.

I will provide just one example to illustrate. In his latest book, *Between Fire and Sleep: Essays on Modern Polish Poetry and Prose*, in a chapter devoted to Schulz, Jarosław Anders writes: “It is true that he seems to postulate a unity of matter and spirit, a life force permeating even inanimate objects but his visions develop as a series of unconnected impressionistic images that never cohere into a larger pattern suggestive of a deeper metaphysical order. His baroque metaphors, his brilliant and innovative linguistic clusters certainly ‘renew’ the world, but they do not discover anything about its nature, origin, or destiny. It is more likely that the search for a ‘primeval myth’ is for Schulz merely an alibi for a free play of imagination. His real goal is not the philosophical or religious probing of life’s depths, but the experience of life in an intensely sensual and radiantly aesthetic way”¹.

With claims like these, Anders disappoints the reader very much. In such a view, Schulz is a trivial aesthete whose work is only an incoherent collection of images and fancy metaphors, and therefore metaphysical problems, such as the investigation of the “essence of reality”, must be uninteresting to him. This reasoning is based on the belief that only in transparent, coherent, and linguistically neutral prose is a writer able to face the most serious subject matters. A truly profound writer, Anders suggests, effectively replaces words with things, leaving no unnecessary metaphorical residue that would distance both the writer and the reader from the “essence of reality” and would lock it in the “free play of imagination”. Schulz could be taken seriously, says Anders, but only if his drawings were less chaotic and if they could be parts of a coherent pattern. The fact that Anders is unable to notice such a pattern is not surprising, because someone who thinks that “experiencing life in an intensely sensual and radiantly aesthetic way” and the vivid imagery of language have little to do with asking serious questions should not, in my opinion, deal with literature at all.

What if we tried differently and did not ask who Schulz read, who influenced him and whether, for example, Romana Halpern managed to borrow Husserl from the library for him and what the reading of, say, *Logical Investigations* might have meant for his literature. What if we did not take into account the division between philosophy and literature and read Schulz as if he were not worse than any philosopher (because only worse philosophers get inspiration from better philosophers), but as if he himself had something important to tell us – something that we would entrust to philosophers because they are so serious and use such difficult words. What if we read Schulz on his own terms, according to his own thought – what if we agreed that a writer can also use the words “being”

¹ J. Anders, *Between Fire and Sleep: Essays on Modern Polish Poetry and Prose*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2009, p. 20.

and “representation” meaningfully, and that literature is not just a gripping story or a clever arrangement of words, which we look at in silent admiration, but is thinking about the world, which, although not directly stated, is no less related to this world than much more serious discourses – what if we assumed that one could seriously discuss the world with the writer? His world, Schulz’s, and ours.

Well, this may surprise the reader, but I believe that no one has taken Schulz very seriously so far. In my opinion, no one has yet read Schulz philosophically, that is, has not read him as he deserves; no one recognized that Schulz had something very important to tell us about the world, about ourselves, about how reality is built, what sense it all makes and how we are supposed to be involved in all this. That is because no one recognizes Schulz’s intellectual ingenuity, while everyone eagerly searches for the sources of his thoughts, because a writer becomes a greater writer when he is assigned some philosophical contexts. And so they search in the Jewish kabala, in Nietzsche, in Romanticism, in Schopenhauer, in Bergson, in Leibniz, show affinities with Jung, with Cassirer, as if this revealing of affinities could tell us anything about Schulz, as if the creation of such links proved his originality. To put it bluntly: any work that searches for some philosophical themes in Schulz’s work, contrary to intentions, adds no value at all to Schulz, but it radically impoverishes, belittles, infantilises and assaults him. To say that Schulz uses in his work some threads from some great philosopher, Nietzsche or Bergson, is to say that he could only afford to take them on loan, to engage in petty smuggling, or in clandestine transplants.

Of course, I am asking a basic question here. Is there a philosophy of Bruno Schulz? Is there a separate, original philosophy bearing only his name? And if that were the case, what would it mean? What does Schulz tell us that is important? Where does his greatness really lie?

It is said that Poland in the interwar period brought into the world two interesting schools of philosophy. The first was the Lviv-Warsaw school, with Twardowski, Ajdukiewicz, Leśniewski, but above all with Alfred Tarski. The second one is, of course, the phenomenological school, though here only Husserl’s student, Roman Ingarden, comes to mind. Yes, the schools are strong, with great names, but if we look at their influence today (apart from Tarski, the best thinker of the bunch), it seems no one in the world reads them anymore, no one is inspired, no one comments. So maybe instead of uncritically boasting that we have such a wonderful philosophical past, we should ask why this relative lack of interest in it is really the case?

One answer is that eighty years ago both Polish schools shone with light reflected from their fires, and when these fires dimmed (like that of analytic philosophy) or almost died out (like phenomenology), the names of their representatives have faded into oblivion. Today, both analytical philosophy and phenomenology are present only in narrow professional circles, and in fact no

one, except a few specialists, wants to know what is going on in them. There's a million dollars for anyone who mentions an interesting, brilliantly conceived book that has been published anywhere in the world, or even in Poland, about Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz or Roman Ingarden.

But there is another answer, which seems much more interesting to me. Why is it that no one comments on Polish interwar philosophy today? The answer is this: because the most interesting things at that time were said not by philosophers, but by writers. Let us take the example of Witkacy, who unnecessarily insisted that his philosophical system was worth nothing, unnecessarily wasted energy on unending, one-way discussions with Carnap, Husserl or Wittgenstein (let us thus at least acknowledge his great ambitions) and tormented his wife by endlessly rewriting, as he used to say, his "main thing". Witkacy is an excellent thinker, though not where his excellence is usually sought. Instead of worrying about his formulated philosophy, which, to be honest, is dramatically graphomaniacal and derivative, one must carefully observe how he develops relationships between characters on stage and in his novels, how phenomenally he analyses human motivations, inhibitions and hesitations, and how thoroughly he shows the drama of an exceptionally intelligent consciousness. We should see how brilliantly he shows the powerlessness of language in the face of reality, and at the same time how this language detaches itself from things and drifts on its own, in the human gibberish that is the answer to the chaos of the world. When Witkacy argued with Tarski by drawing a giant tongue next to the word "metalanguage", it was indeed funny, but never for a moment was he as brilliant as when, side by side with Heidegger, but without knowing his analyses, he showed the mechanics of human "talk", *die Gerede*, as the author of *Sein und Zeit* called it. When one writes about Witkacy's philosophy, the choppy pieces about monadology and Individual Existence immediately come to mind, but no one will think about the fact that philosophy is not a technical discourse, understandable only to the initiated, but a precise analysis of what is happening in the world, in in our heads, in our words, in our relationships. The fact that today it is worth reading Witkiewicz rather than Twardowski, and Gombrowicz rather than Ajdukiewicz, is proof that the literature written in interwar Poland by a few fancy lunatics is significantly more important today than philosophy, which was dealt with by several serious professors in lab coats. It is more important, because it is alive, "unlecturable", unobvious and exceeds any expectations whatsoever. Bruno Schulz may have exaggerated a bit when he wrote to his friend that as a "spiritual act", *Ferdydurke* should be placed next to Freud and Proust, but if we look at the matter more closely, he was certainly right. Gombrowicz did more for Polish literature than Proust did for French culture or Freud did for the German one. Gombrowicz showed something that Żeromski, Reymont and Staff's Poland could not afford, namely, as Schulz called it, that the "cloaca of culture" is much more important than its facade, that "disgrace and shame" say more about a man than

his sublime declarations and that “life is great without higher sanctions”. Polish culture was only poorly prepared for such a spiritual act, so it is not surprising that, as Gombrowicz later described it in *Dziennik*, all three of them: himself, Witkacy and Schulz “wandered around Polish literature like a twirl, an ornament, a chimera, a griffin”. Neither rhyme nor reason. Neither fish nor fowl. Neither use nor ornament. It is the “neither nor”, that lack of clear assignment, that makes them extraordinary writers. But, as I say, not only writers.

In June 1939, Bruno Schulz, terribly tormented by “despair, sadness, the feeling of inevitable defeat, irreparable loss”, wrote to Romana Halpern: “I am afraid of contacts and people. I would prefer to remove myself in the company of just one other person into quiet retreat and set out, like Proust, to embark on the final formulation of my world”. I leave aside the sense of defeat that consumed Schulz completely in the second half of the 1930s, bordering with depression and a sense of abandonment. I am interested in this comparison with Proust, but not as a sign of megalomania, but, contrarily, as a sign of belief that the writer’s task is to formulate his own world. At the same time, Schulz adds that he would now like to begin the “final formulation” of his world, which means that his work to date, that is, in fact, almost everything we know, can be considered a non-final attempt at formulating this world.

From this point of view there is no difference between the philosopher and the writer – each of them in their own way, sometimes in different languages, formulates their own world, that is, tries to find a formula for their own world in which they would like to live, in accordance with the principles they would like to live by, whose meanings would constitute a whole. Beginning with Plato, philosophy does nothing else, and the difference between great and minor philosophers is that the former can impose such a formula on others, while the latter cannot free themselves from the formula imposed on them. Literature deals with the same thing, regardless of whether it speaks in prose or verse, whether it tells stories, or puts actors on stage. The difference between a first-rate and a second-rate writer is that the world of the former is more capacious than that of the latter and has more possible residents; it is also that the formula of this world is much more attractive, and it presents itself to us with greater ruthlessness.

Everything I have said so far leads to one simple thesis: that Bruno Schulz is one of the most important Polish philosophers, and at the same time one of the most important Polish writers. Not really because one can find traces of numerous philosophical readings in his texts, and not because it is possible to extract some philosophical thought from his works, but because the formula of his world, which he laboriously constructed over the years and which he did not finally formulate, is one of the most interesting formulas that were presented to us in Polish in the 20th century. What is this formula? I will try to recreate it in

the simplest way possible – at the risk of simplification, perhaps, but at the same time suggesting that without such a reconstruction it is difficult to understand Schulz's world. What I will present now is a formula of a formula, a reconstruction of Schulz's philosophy, a summary of the basic rules of his world, made for all the dauphins of the empire of literature.

Our lives tend to congeal into shapes whose durability belies life itself, because between the matter of life and the forms that this matter takes on, there is a radical asymmetry. While we need these shapes to deny the formless imminent chaos that terrifies us, we should never agree for these shapes to be in any way final. If there is such a thing as our nature, it does not know peace, but it puts on different masks, takes on countless characters and roles to find the best ground for itself, where it could settle down and find shelter. But it never manages to do so. Human life is permanently unfinished, because it always shows us its "eternal otherness" (a term Schulz used). All our possibilities will never be realized, which does not mean that we should limit them in advance. On the contrary, the more possibilities, the better life, because (I quote Schulz again) nothing is impossible for a willing soul. If reality is the realization of various potentials, then the more possibilities are actualized in the world, the richer reality is in senses, the more it means. And the richer the reality is, the greater effort it takes to read it. Human existence, which finds a justification for itself only in development is an interpreting existence. Interpretation is the extending of existence with new possibilities, because interpretation is not a way of getting to know the world, but of being in it.

Today, such an interpretation is not surprising. However, eighty years ago, such thinking was an extremely original and creative part of the most interesting line of philosophical thinking in Europe. There was both Hegel and Kierkegaard, there was Nietzsche and Heidegger, but Schulz did not copy any of these philosophers, did not imitate them, did not make them his precursors. He thought in his own way and wrote his thoughts into literary texts. Sometimes all of it is evident already on the surface, sometimes it demands more in-depth reading. In Poland at the time, nobody thought like this about the world, about man, about life, about interpretation, about experience – neither in Lviv, nor in Warsaw, nor in Zakopane. But no one used paronomasia, synecdoche, anaphora and apostrophe like Schulz, either. As long as Bruno Schulz wanders somewhere between literature and philosophy treated as separate discourses, his greatness will remain doomed to undeserved diminution. So what are we waiting for? We are waiting for a book about Bruno Schulz that will show us the philosophical meaning of his style.