

Deadlings

Interpretation is always immoral. Surely, there is someone who knows better and more than us – especially if we are not seeking to know everything.

In Schulz studies, there are “strong” and “masculine” interpretations: those that speak with the Phallus, the Great Integrator of the World. They try to mansplain the world to the reader. These are some interpretations of the work of Schulz, who, according to those same interpreters, had at least an ambiguous and contradictory attitude towards phallogocentrism.

Is it any different in the writing of the weaklings who refrain from answering the questions they pose? Do we betray the literary text by renouncing interpretation – understood as the masculine “desire to merge”? Is the lament over a “graveyard of signs” a functional alternative to interpretation? Or is the necrophilic gloom over text corpora that are, without the gesture of an interpreter, “corpses-to-be”?

One of the most serious accusations literary criticism leveled against Schulz during his lifetime concerned not so much his style, but something that could be called, as Jerzy Jarzębski put it, the “worldview of prose”. What many critics could not accept in Schulz’s work was not even the non-normative eroticism, but the lack of an easily graspable commitment to political ideology – and the fundamental amorality and ontological weakness of the reality presented in Cinnamon Shops and The Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass, where critics saw a camouflaged nihilism.

The fiercest critique came from Kazimierz Wyka and Stefan Napierski. In their famous “Dwugłos o Schulzu”, they accused Schulz of “anti-humanism and reinforcing chaos”. Just like Deleuze did over half a century later in Bartsch, the scrivener – they saw in Schulz “a metaphysical scoundrel”. For Wyka and Napierski, there is nothing affirmative in his writing. All is darkness, all is quiet – and only art might save us. Schulz, however, has a “fear of form and law – traits of any decadence; the arbitrariness of pretexts made into dogma”. They probably would never have written this if they had read Sontag’s Against Interpretation. Although even that is uncertain, since Tomasz Swoboda convinces us that “plagiarism by anticipation” is so often the case.

However, there is also a different kind of literature – one that could be understood not as the “land of strong interpretations” or “agonistic heritage”, but the kind that sides with dispersed, disrupted writing, never oriented toward “integrating” answers, and, in this sense, irresponsible. Let us call it not so much lesser literature, but weaker literature. Only within this literature could sentences be written that – unrelated to the intention of mighty Freud – seek to breathe life into the dead. Like those written in “Father’s Last Escape”: “He had been dying a number of times, always with some reservations that forced us to revise our attitude towards the fact of his death. [...] The wallpaper began in certain places to imitate his habitual nervous tic; the flower designs arranged themselves into the doleful element of his smile [...] as the fossilized imprint of a trilobite”.

There is more, too. There would be no interpretation without archival research.

It would be most convenient to establish that archive work on Schulz is a dead or dying field. Almost nothing remains of it. It is easy to overlook it when explaining the world of his work, and there is no experience with his biography or work with documents. This is what researchers and scholars of the material traces of creativity focus on – in their bouts of “archive fever”.

The greatest success of archivists is that moment when they find unborn pages restored from the “depths of oblivion”. And here it is: pulled out by Lesia Chomycz – as if from posthumous birth – Schulz’s earliest story, “Undula”. He published it in Świt, the “publication of oil officials”, in 1922, under the pen name Marcelli Weron.

Some interpreters stood in awe, others in discontent. A new story after so many years! They claimed it was kitsch. A Schulzian abject. Some of their work was nullified, while others confirmed their earlier beliefs that they had wasted their time. Poor little deadlings. A non-existent American poet Keanneth Penn¹ wrote about you/us: “Next to the deadlings / Plenty of livelings”. Those poor beings, who cannot live without touch and tenderness. In Weron’s story, there is a relevant scene: the nameless narrator begins to give birth to his little deadling. It is unclear whether it is his hallucination or an actual birth:

“Why do you weep and fuss the whole night through? How can I ease your sufferings, my little son? What am I to do with you? You writhe, sulk, and scowl; you cannot hear or understand human speech; and yet still you fuss and hum your monotonous pain through the night. Now you are like the scroll of an umbilical cord, twisted and pulsating...”

It is a pity that Schulz never got to see Lynch’s Eraserhead – because that is exactly what all of this is about. Or perhaps no one ever tried to make it possible for him to commit plagiarism by anticipation. Surely, he would have watched the film, just as he watched German expressionist cinema, which Paweł Sitkiewicz writes about. “Deadlings” is a right category for describing Schulz’s work. We worry about it, and it somehow makes us – researchers – quite dead: immobilized, stiff, and stale.

And yet it still hurts.

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Translated by Language Extreme

¹ Translator’s note: Keanneth Penn is a fictional poet from Krzysztof Puławski’s poetry collection *Martwiątka / Deadlings*, in which Puławski presents fabricated translations of what is claimed to be Penn’s poems, and also a short fictional biography of the non-existent poet.