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The Untamed Interpretative Strategies of Bruno Schulz's biography and work

Summary

Bruno Schulz (1892–1942), a Polish writer of Jewish descent, was born in the town of Drohobych in Eastern Borderlands, which at that time belonged to a very peculiar „Borderland Tri-City” compound (term coined by Stanisław Sławomir Nicieja). Schulz is an outstanding author and object of biographical narratives who indeed shaped the twentieth-century literature. Jerzy Kwiatkowski considers Schulz to be, along with Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and Witold Gombrowicz, one of the „great innovators” of interwar prose. Schulz's legacy is one of the most unusual artistic phenomena of the last century. Numerous studies devoted to his work soon became a separate stream in humanities research, referred to collectively as schulzology, which extended beyond the discipline of literary studies. Despite this, the exploration of Schulz's output is still far from exhausted, being the kind of work that provides an infinite number of interpretative possibilities. Along with biographical narratives about the artist and the iconic recognition achieved among others thanks to the broad reception of his artistic works, it grows into a multidimensional cultural phenomenon.

At the core of this paper lies the belief that both the biography and literary output of the author of *The Street of Crocodiles* have been thus far presented mostly through interpretative strategies that can be described as „tamed”, meaning known, well-established in schulzology over the past decades, often gathering numerous followers. This diagnosis became the point of departure for an attempt to shed light on the untamed strategies – those functioning in the available literature in the ovule, not exploited in terms of their interpretive potential, and at the same time important for the complex process of discovering Schulz's life and legacy. This way of proceeding was therefore dictated not so much by the intention to enrich the already expansive register of schulzology works with an additional approach, but rather by the palpable need to further develop this field.

The basic methodological postulate regarding the whole of the deliberations contained in this paper is a thorough orientation in the state of schulzology research and a simultaneous

attempt to go beyond the paradigm it has so far demarcated. As such, this leads to the presentation of interpretative strategies different from those that have been propagated, which use the adopted reading models creatively and critically, in a positive sense of the word.

The first chapter, entitled *The representative interpretative paradigms of Schulz's work*, presents the main directions of readings of Schulz's literary legacy, disseminated in the state of research. On the basis of a difficult, systematically diverse material, the ten most important interpretative paradigms of Schulz's work are outlined and briefly discussed. Interestingly, the reception of *The Street of Crocodils* and *The Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* – or, more broadly, the very history of schulzology – have so far been undertaken by relatively few researchers.

This chapter also addresses the problems posed by the orientation in the complex structure of the predominant interpretative paradigms. These are, specifically, an attempt to answer the question why schulzology attracts so many researchers and an assessment of the degree of development of the discipline as a whole. It is worth noting that the chapter is based on the Polish reception of Schulz's works, in some cases enriched with references to foreign publications and events. In addition, only the existence of a school of research on the writer's biography was signaled here, without subjecting it to further consideration, given that it was presented as a separate and complex phenomenon in chapter two.

The subsequent chapter, entitled *The Strategy of Biographical Demythologization*, deals with the extremely complicated research topic of Schulz's biography, which is surrounded by a plethora of myths. It discusses the superior and until now the only tame model for interpreting facts from the writer's life, influenced by Jerzy Ficowski's monumental *Regions of the Great Heresy*, which proved extremely robust, monopolizing for many years the field of discussion. This recognition was accompanied by postulates showing how Schulz's trajectory can be learnt using different research approaches, and the same postulates may also be useful when preparing the biographies of other writers and artists. Reflection on this issues is supported by the view that the time has come for a new look at the life of the author of *The Republic of Dreams*. The general introduction to Schulz's biography is exemplified by specific topics: the artist's appearance, his professional work, financial situation and his attitude to women on the example of Schulz's relationship with Józefina Szelińska. The proposed approach, despite being firmly rooted in the literature, appears to differ from the other approaches by encouraging further decisions, and more than anything, by being certainly untamed.

The third chapter, entitled *Epistolographic Strategy*, focuses on the writer's correspondence. Due to the fact that reflection on it has so far escaped the interest of schulzologists, the basic problems associated with its examination were identified here. In Schulz's epistolography, an intermediate zone was found between his life and work, because taken as a whole, it is equally a biographical document and a manifestation of his art. This enabled further analysis of the outlined area of Schulz's literary activity in which he became a writer and also allowed for an attempt to discover the mechanisms initiating his creative process.

The last chapter, entitled *Anthropological Strategy*, exposes the occurrence in the Schulz's stories of an interrelated set of themes such as disability, old age and death. These somewhat universal problems, shown on the example of representative works from the volume *The Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, should be perceived as important for understanding the writer's legacy and at the same time overlooked by the current interpretative tradition as the subject of separate inquiries. In the course of the presented deliberations, particular attention was paid to aesthetic qualities subordinated to the implementation of the signaled thematic circle, such as irony or grotesque, and the anthropological concepts implied by them. The interdisciplinary research approach also served to illustrate these problems, which, apart from the work of literary scholars, drew from the studies of educators, sociologists and culture scholars, among others.

The characteristics of the content of this dissertation inclines to articulate the statement that each chapter focuses on a different area on the schulzology map. The first chapter brings reconnaissance of the entire discipline, the second concerns the artist's biography, the third – his epistolography, in a way bridging his life and creative output, while the fourth chapter covers the writer's literary legacy.

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