

The Father and the Animals. The Problem of Escape in The Cinnamon Shops

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“At that time my father began to decline in health” (15).¹ That is how the protagonist’s father is introduced in *The Cinnamon Shops* (*Sklepy cynamonowe*). That protagonist being the narrator of the entire collection of short stories, his father becomes a central figure in the book, and its most mysterious character. Is this mysterious quality linked with the illness from which he suffers? In the entire collection, we receive no answer to the question of precisely what his disease is. We are nevertheless given information that, while not helping us much to diagnose

1 All quotations are taken from: B. Schulz, *Sklepy cynamonowe*, Kraków, Wrocław 1984. Page numbers given in parentheses. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted (TWD).

what ails the father, describes him in various ways: “he spent whole days in bed” (15), “at times he was agitated and given to altercations” (15), “his eyes would get darker, and on his pale face appeared an expression of suffering or some illicit delight” (16) – all of this information comes at the moment of his introduction. The narrator-son’s observations also go deeper: “[...] his thoughts crept secretly into the labyrinth of his insides. He held his breath and listened intently for a moment. And when his gaze returned, whitened and blurred, from those depths, he calmed it with a smile. He did not yet believe and rejected as absurdities those claims and proposals that pressed themselves on him” (17). As the plot develops, however, there comes a moment at which the father crosses the threshold into absurdity and at the same time accepts an alarming proposal that he himself has unconsciously created, in some way endorsing the words of a French philosopher to the effect that “if need be, [...] absurdity can be a source of freedom.”² There remain two questions to be posed. First, if the absurd can be a source of freedom, then what does it free us from? Second, when does this “need” occur? In the context of *The Cinnamon Shops*, both of these questions are matters of great import. Each of them relates to the question of logic as the guarantor of mental health.

Let us go back to the illness of the protagonist’s father. “My father,” the narrator confesses, “was slowly disappearing, his eyes were fading” (18). In order to propose

2 G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, Boston 1994, p. 148.

an original interpretation of *The Cinnamon Shops*, let us consider some contemporary theories. They will allow us to contemplate the father's "disappearance" and "fading" in the context of Deleuze's notion of the process of *becoming* rather than through the prism of decay as such.

Claire Colebrook, a scholar specializing in the thought of Gilles Deleuze, has precisely described the phenomenon of becoming as developed in his work. According to Colebrook, the process of becoming imperceptible aims to transform the concept of freedom and to enable transcendence of the self. The process of becoming imperceptible seeks to abandon the perspective from which a person evaluates and organizes life. Colebrook emphasizes that freedom, true freedom, in this case is not seen as the opposite of necessity, obligation, and the imperatives that culture sets as norms, prohibitions, and commands, but in fact as the opposite of the nature that stands beyond culture, restricting and thereby determining it. We find this problem in this cycle of Schulz's stories as well: "[...] we observed father's passionate interest in animals for the first time. At first it was the passion of both hunter and artist, [...] the zoological sympathy of a creature for kindred though very different life forms [...]. Only at a later stage did this matter take an amazing, tangled, deeply sinful and unnatural turn" (23–24). Likewise, true freedom demands overcoming humanity, human nature, and thus an affirmation of life, extending beyond the limits

of the human. Becoming imperceptible postulates lines of flight, movement toward that which is other than the perceptible: away from the human, toward the animal (becoming hybrid).³ In other words, becoming imperceptible means yielding to a process of being in between, being not one thing only. We thus read the following passages: “Crouched underneath enormous pillows, wildly held up by clumps of gray hair, he muttered to himself under his breath, plunged wholly into some intricate internal trouble. It could appear that his personality was divided into many conflicting and divergent selves [...]” (18). “Sometimes he would climb up on the cornice and strike a pose of immobility, symmetrical to the great big stuffed vulture, [...] he would stay there for hours with a foggy gaze and a craftily smiling face, only to suddenly flap his arms like wings and start crowing like a rooster as someone was entering” (20). What are the consequences of this? Crossing the threshold of the absurd, the father rejects the status of a human being, who conventionally expresses himself by means of what we generally consider non-animal. “Slowly, one knot at a time, he was easing away from us, point by point he was losing the bonds that tied him to the human community.” (21).

Deleuze and Guattari distinguish among three types of animals. In the first they group domestic animals, the individualized, “Oedipal” ones (“my” cat, “my” dog). These animals, they claim, “draw us into a narcissistic contem-

3 C. Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, London–New York 2002, p. 129.

plation,”⁴ directing us, in psychoanalytical terms, toward the categories of father, mother, younger brother and so on, of which they are themselves extensions. The second type, for Deleuze and Guattari, consists of animals with particular traits or attributes. These are animals who take the form of archetypes, mythical models and national symbols. The third type comprises demonic animals, who travel in groups, dangerous, impulsive, representing multiplicity. “A becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, [...] in short, a multiplicity.”⁵ Becoming an animal therefore involves this third type, which we find present in *The Cinnamon Shops*: “Together with a flock of birds my father, fluttering his arms, attempted in fright to lift off into the air” (26).

Becoming an animal is a unique kind of journey, whose trajectory and nature depend on the intensity of experiences. “It is a map of intensities. It is a set of states, each distinct one from the other, grafted onto man insofar as he seeks a way out. It is a creative escape route which means nothing else but itself.”⁶ The third type of animal is disconnected from the human community, it eludes human culture. Its domain is the tendency toward escape. “Deleuze and Guattari use the idea of ‘becoming-animal’ to describe the positivity and multiplicity

4 G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi, Minneapolis–London 2005, p. 240.

5 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 239.

6 Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Marie Maclean, “Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature: The Components of Expression,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 16, No. 3, *On Writing Histories of Literature* (Spring, 1985), 599.

of desire and affect.”⁷ Affect thus no longer depends on the person experiencing it. Similarly, lust is not subordinate to human reason. In *The Cinnamon Shops* we read: “Sometimes through a lapse of memory he would jump out of his chair by the table and flap his arms like wings, foaming protractedly at the mouth [...]. Then, embarrassed, he would laugh with us and try to turn the incident into a joke” (26). A surprising number of points in common, then! This correlation leads us toward an essential point: the father, becoming-animal, becoming-imperceptible, personifies the very need for distraction, for dispersion, the need to go outside the self. “To get out of prison,” as Bachelard writes, quoting Hermann Hesse, “all means are good ones.”⁸ What kind of prison are we dealing with in *The Cinnamon Shops*? “Imprisoning” convention, probability, that keeps the human being confined within realism, or more narrowly, within the principles of realism.

Readers of Deleuze and Guattari will follow a different path in the course of reading *The Cinnamon Shops* than the one described by Włodzimierz Bolecki. Bolecki observes: “Schulz sings the praises of metaphor.”⁹ And elsewhere: “Metaphor is namely in Schulz’s view a synonym of all types of ambiguity.”¹⁰ Readers of Deleuze and Guattari, crucially, will find in Schulz’s work the praises not of

7 C. Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, 134.

8 G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 150.

9 W. Bolecki, *Język poetycki i proza: twórczość Brunona Schulza*, [in:] Bolecki, *Poetycki model prozy w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym. Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Schulz i inni. Studium z poetyki historycznej*, Kraków 1996, p. 238.

10 Bolecki, *Język poetycki i proza*, p. 239.

metaphor but of metamorphosis. Metamorphosis viewed as a process that brings in its wake new styles of perception. “See the world as an animal, as a series of passages going nowhere, or from the point of view of a diminishing body.”¹¹ To be fascinated with animals is, in other words, to be fascinated with the world seen through new eyes (a change in the path of perception, a choice of pure artistry). “What is most artistic in us is that which is the most bestial,”¹² writes Elizabeth Grosz. To be a human being and be an animal means to reject metaphor in favor of transformation. To submit to a process that is a life passage and simultaneously a bold exit – an escape – from the confines of anthropocentrism; “he felt good in a bird perspective” (23).

“If I, casting aside respect for the Creator, wanted to indulge in a critique of creation, I would prefer for there to be less content and more form; oh, how the world’s burden would be lightened by such a lessening of moderation” (32). The apotheosis of form enunciated by the father, privileging form over content, is a relinquishment of the authority of meaning, the meaning that transforms form into concept. The concept, according to Roland Barthes, “is determined, it is at once historical and intentional.”¹³ To free form from meaning is to deprive it of its past. “When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished,

11 C. Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, p. 138.

12 E. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art. Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, New York 2008, p. 63.

13 R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, New York p. 117.

history evaporates, only the letter remains.”¹⁴ The letter that signifies the beginning of a new journey, movement in the direction of the future.

Hybrid forms – “He was fascinated by borderline forms, doubtful and problematic” (44) – are one theme of the father’s reflections. So is matter, representing possibility itself, the essence of possibility, as well as potentiality (the opposite of intentionality). “Deprived of her own initiative, amorously docile, femininely plastic, she surrendered to all of her impulses – she represents outlaw territory” (34). Matter is an anarchic space. It is not by chance that Deleuze and Guattari, critics of dialectical materialism, place becoming-imperceptible and becoming-animal beside becoming-woman. In doing so, generally speaking, they indicate the power of attraction of what belongs to the minority, is external, excessive, other, and what threatens to disrupt the previously existing order constitutive of the universal, that is, male, subject.

In Schulz’s narration, as in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, matter is equipped with the power of creation. “My father was tireless in his glorification of that wondrously strange element that is matter. ‘There is no such thing as dead matter,’ he taught. ‘Death is merely an appearance, which conceals unknown forms of life. The scale of these forms is infinite, and their hues and nuances inexhaustible” (35). Matter as described by

¹⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 116.

Schulz corresponds to the body without organs in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. The body without organs “is not at all a notion or a concept but a practice, a set of practices. [...] it is a limit.”¹⁵ It relates to the substratum that constitutes the plane of consistency, an unformed, unorganized body. It brings alternative styles of being and experience. A body without organs, the French Post-Structuralists write, resembles an egg.¹⁶ The father’s penchant for bird eggs – “With a great expenditure of labor and money, father brought fertilized birds’ eggs back from Hamburg, from Holland, and from African zoological outposts, which he then gave to enormous Belgian hens for incubation” (24) – can in a certain sense serve to prove his attraction to what Deleuze and Guattari term the body without organs, that which “disrupts” the human organism, violating its construction, and furthermore remains in a continual process of self-creation.

The demiurge, “that great master and artist” (37), makes matter invisible, taking away its right to exist. That great master and artist introduces into the world the terror of “unattainable perfection” (35) – according to the father. And in another place: “Do you sense the pain, the desolate suffering, suppressed, the suffering trapped in matter of this shell, who does not know, why it is that it must endure in this form imposed by force, as

15 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 149–150.

16 See K. Message, *Body without Organs*, [in:] ed. A. Parr, *The Deleuze Dictionary. Revised Edition*, Edinburgh 2010, pp. 37–39. See also: G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem, H.R. Lane, Minneapolis 2000, p. 19.

a parody?” (39). Deleuze and Guattari, philosophers of the new materialism, explain: “The BwO howls: ‘They’ve made me an organism! They’ve wrongfully folded me! They’ve stolen my body!’ The judgment of God uproots it from its immanence and makes it an organism, a signification, a subject.”¹⁷ The body without organs, this stationary motor, wants to create new, independent, multitudinous forms that join opposites in themselves (the problem of the hybrid). Forms that flow into one another, forms in movement, free, asystematic, rebelling against the will of God (of generality). “They’ve made me an organism” – they! – those who organize the forms of life and identity! Deleuze and Guattari enable us to read the philosophy of the father in *The Cinnamon Shops* within the categories of the body without organs, the hybrid, matter developing into widely diverse forms of life and its many manifestations; yet the father was used to analyzing “the infinite scale of forms and shades taken on by many-shaped matter [...], the astral dough at the boundary between body and spirit” (44–45) – the plane of immanence.¹⁸

17 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 157.

18 “[...] because the plane of immanence is philosophical and does not immediately take effect with concepts, it implies a sort of groping experimentation and its layout resorts to measures that are not very respectable, rational, or reasonable. These measures belong to the order of dreams, of pathological processes, esoteric experiences, drunkenness, and excess. We head for the horizon, on the plane of immanence, and we return with bloodshot eyes, yet they are the eyes of the mind.” G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson, New York 1996, p. 41.

I truly remembered that invasion of cockroaches, that inundation of the black swarm [...]. Oh, those cries of terror from father, leaping from one chair to another with a javelin in his hand. [...] my father had grown completely wild (85).

As the action unfolds, we read that the father's repugnance to cockroaches is transfigured into fascination and fixation, resulting in radical changes to his behaviour. "He began avoiding us. He hid all day in corners, in closets, under the feather bed" (86). "The resemblance to a cockroach became more markedly visible with each day – my father was turning into a cockroach" (86). One could assert that when he falls prey to a swarm of cockroaches, the father ends his existence. He ceases to exist within the register of the human. From then on, suggestively for this interpretation of the text, no human eye observes his presence (*becoming-imperceptible*); "Father was then no longer there" (83).

The father "returns" in the collection's final story, in which he is confronted with people clamorously coming into his shop. The influx of the massive crowd provokes fear and aggression in him. Until suddenly: "the sky teemed with some kind of colorful rash, and scattered in undulating spots" (104) – birds, two-headed, many-winged, limping, seemingly stuffed, one-winged. In this scenery we can find birds deprived of inner life, whose energy (spirit) has transformed into various kinds of strange plumage, and the autonomous forms of their being; "those paper, blind birds could no longer have known father. [...] they did not

hear or see him” (105). That is why in the end they all perish from the blows inflicted on them by stones – dead matter. They are subject to accidents and decomposition. Dead matter absorbs them altogether. What is left to the father is return to the world of the living.

“Animals! The aim of insatiable curiosity, exemplifying life’s mysteries, as if created to show human beings to themselves” (48). In closing, there is no way to avoid devoting a few words to Nemrod, the little dog who appears in the narrator’s apartment. Nemrod, a doggie bearing a proud and valiant name, in contrast to humanity, creates a feeling of belonging and relationality for himself as he experiments with reality. He gives people a confirmation of something unlike themselves, which under the influence of diverse experiences curls up into a ball and retreats to primeval existence, pulsating in “plasma, in [...] nerves” (49) – in feelings of fear and rage, connected with pleasure and power – opens up a primal, eternal space, making humans aware of where life develops from. It is worth underscoring here that the example of Nemrod contrasts with the birds who appear in the final scene of *The Cinnamon Shops*, those disembodied forms categorically cut off from life potential, from life in itself; “the cheerfulness that makes the body expand and gives birth to the need for new, sudden and risky moves – all of that seduces, convinces and motivates toward accepting, becoming reconciled with life’s experiment” (49). The body, or life, and its processes of becoming, surpassing the bound-

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aries of human concepts of freedom (the boundaries of realism), is thus one of the main themes, I find, of *The Cinnamon Shops*. As is the escape of the human being, who persistently seeks a way out of traditional anthropology.

translated by Timothy Williams