Rutkowski Recapitulated

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American Book Review, Volume 32, Number 4, May/June 2011, pp. 28-29 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2011.0093

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The Ed Sullivan Show. In Vernon’s signature routine, to the clicks of a device held in his hand, he would pretend to project a series of slides onto the fourth wall, which he would then, in a monotonous voice and with the expression of a cadaver, describe. (“Here I am at the tollbooth tossing some money into the basket.” Click, “Here I am under my ear looking for the money.”) Like most standup comedians, Vernon was the butt of his own humor, the sad sack for whom nothing went right and who never got the girl. The same may be said of the protagonist—the singular case applies—of Rutkowski’s three bildungsromans, the not-so-alter egos that share their creator’s name. The slideshow analogy bears up as well, since Rutkowski’s narratives always come diced into brief chapters, or fragments (his previous work, Teched [2005], is subtitled “a novel in fractals”). Because of their fragmentary picaresque structure, Rutkowski’s books suffer from an identity crisis.

Neither novels nor linked short stories nor collected prose poems or flash fictions, they are also all of the above. His works build their effects cumulatively, through an accretion of discreet moments having little if anything to do with each other, rather than being linked. (In this respect, if not others, they may be related to the works of Philip Foundation, or to the mutative signification of the kind of the ‘correspondence.”)

Yet from the heady fragments, a single, unified narrative does emerge. That narrative, too, will be familiar to Rutkowski’s steadfast readers, and falls roughly into three parts: 1) childhood under the green water. 2) the open coffin invites you into a cream fabric room. Vanilla covered buttons tuft the ceiling over the life-sized doll you’ve always wanted waiting with curled lashes over closed eyes. “Renovations” is a five-part poem in which a house becomes an objective correlate for the destruction and re-building of the self and its emotions, as in part 1, in which accidents and emergencies occur, and culminate in these stark lines: If I could raise my senses to the third power and multiply them by my distance from these objects, death, would I understand your clarity?

Part 2 creates the ghost of a dead girl (or a version of a childhood self) in the now empty house. In part 4, the basement of the house is a locus of memory of the father and mother, as the child poet wears “scarlet / leather ten league boots” which by the end are “my father’s red boots” while the mother is remembered for “the Cretan terra cotta / honeycomb where my mother’s / snake drinks milk.”

Part 3 describes the dismemberment of the coal-burning furnace, the stripping of the house’s roof, and the discovery of old clothes still hanging: Bagged winter coats with vacant necks loll from ceiling hooks. ……………………… Summer’s full breasts wait inside a silk blouse.

In the final section, the poet remembers a boy who bit her arm: Still red and open on my flesh, his evenly dented ghostmouth.

So a lifetime of physical and sensual and emotional memories bites deep into the poet’s work, making it incredibly vivid to us, her open-mouthed readers.

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father and an equally ineffectual (if less malignant) Chinese mother who broaches family dysfunctions with a homemade brew of confused Confucianism; 2) college life in New York City, and the protagonist’s less-than-victorious pursuit of sex, love, drugs, and art; and 3) the less-than-victorious artist grappling (insofar as an automation can be said to grapple) with adulthood and its fetishes, and—in the case of Haywire—with two siblings, one of each sex, each with troubles of their own. 

As a devil in Rutkowski’s fictions lies in the very particular and peculiar details, and so reviewing them comprehensively does them a dis-service; like poems, they don’t flourish in summary, though summary must do. Haywire’s earliest scenes explore the cruelties and perversions of childhood. In one vignette, the narrator is initiated by the boy next door, who binds his hands and feet with telephone wire, then “de-pants” him, exposing his genitals to imaginary enemies. The scene is telling in several ways, as it embodies the narrator’s global attitude to existence, that of someone whose powers of volition are at best circumscribed, at worst like that of a sleepwalker, passing through his own life with his senses receptive to stimulus, but no will of his own with which to brazen out pain and disappointment. In a subsequent episode, Thaddeus’s anarcho-survivalist dad shoots a squirrel on the front lawn, then carves its corpse into gamey bits that he marinates, rolls into breadcrumbs, fries and feeds to his kin. “Everyone in my family had a taste.” One gets that the taste is also for masochism.

While a sado-masochistic thread runs through many of the book’s scenes, others—as when Thaddeus is sent to stay with his pinochle playing paternal grandmother—dish up banality: 

At night, she rubbed my face with a cold, damp cloth that smelled like mildew. She told me to sleep in the twin bed next to hers. As I lay there in pajamas, she led me through a prayer that began “Now I lay me down to sleep...” 

I heard her breathing become slow and regular, but I stayed awake for a long time. I wondered what it meant to have my soul kept by the Lord while I slept. Would that help me if I died before I woke? If my consciousness no longer worked, how would I know if my soul was being kept? Could I stay alert for just a little while after I died, so I could check to see if the Lord had taken my soul? 

An asterisk ends the vignette, and with it the theosophical inquiry, which like every other episode in the book comes to naught; it is merely there by the way, a feature in the passing landscape. Thaddeus’s sepsis complete, he and his father “celebrate” his homecoming at a dive where, while dad throws back whisky and beer, he washes down pork rinds with soda between forays to the dartboard and his father’s self-aggrandizing outbursts: 

“You know,” he said, “while you were away, I found some baby squirrels in the yard. They seemed to have fallen out of a tree. I put them in an empty aquarium with some cloth strips for bedding, and I fed them milk through an eyedropper. But one by one, they died.”

Considering the earlier squirrel scene, one suspects that as a cultivator of squirrels and children the speaker leaves something to be desired. That this father is a dangerous man is the blunt take-away of such moments, but as with all good fiction, this is not: funny. Later in the book, at a Sex Addicts Anonymous meeting attended by Thaddeus, an older man addicted to drive-by sex confesses, “I had to get rid of anything that reminded me of acting out. That included my leather pants. I also had to get rid of books that contained any reference to sex. I could never get rid of enough books. I’d think I had nothing left, then I’d pick up The Odyssey, and all of those warriors fucking each other would trigger me.” The comic appeal of such moments and of Haywire generally is voyeuristic; the same embarrassed thrill we get from watching someone drag a strip of toilet tissue on his or her shoe. It’s not meant to be funny any more than it was meant for us to see; we just happen to be there at the right time. Thus, Rutkowski rubberbacks the prolonged accident of his narrator’s life. If the book is as sad and horrible as it is funny, it is likewise so without intention, by default. As Alexandr Kuprin puts it, “All the horror, gentlemen, is in just this: that there is no horror!”

Because the pleasure of Rutkowski’s books lies mainly in the particular selection of impeccably rendered non-sequiturs rather than in any epiphany or surprise achieved by the aggregate, that we keep reading the same essential story over and over again hardly matters. In this way, Rutkowski’s books are like the proverbial river that can be crossed only once; the stream may be the same, and flow in the same predictable direction and at the same depth, but the water is always different. Each time, however, the pleasure is consistent, and consistently high.

And where is it written that an artist must change his technique, or, for that matter, his subject? Giorgio Morandi had his dusty bottles, Edgar Degas his ballerinas, Claude Monet his haystacks and lily pads. The fox may know many things, but the hedgehog knows one great thing. In Rutkowski’s case, that one great thing is the author himself, or his doppelingänger, in all his dysfunctional glory. That singular knowledge has so far produced three very fine books. In ways they may be interchangeable, but then so are Morandi’s bottles, Charles Bukowski’s women (and his bottles), and James Bond flicks. Call it a literary franchise, if you like. If so, it’s a winning franchise.

Reading Rutkowski’s work is like eating a bag of potato chips, with each non-sequitur scene its own salty, satisfying morsel.

But Rutkowski’s books are also something that Kahlschlagliteratur is not: funny. Later in the book, at a Sex Addicts Anonymous meeting attended by Thaddeus, an older man addicted to drive-by sex confesses, “I had to get rid of anything that reminded me of acting out. That included my leather pants. I also had to get rid of books that contained any reference to sex. I could never get rid of enough books. I’d think I had nothing left, then I’d pick up The Odyssey, and all of those warriors fucking each other would trigger me.” The comic appeal of such moments and of Haywire generally is voyeuristic; the same embarrassed thrill we get from watching someone drag a strip of toilet tissue on his or her shoe. It’s not meant to be funny any more than it was meant for us to see; we just happen to be there at the right time. Thus, Rutkowski rubberbacks the prolonged accident of his narrator’s life. If the book is as sad and horrible as it is funny, it is likewise so without intention, by default. As Alexandr Kuprin puts it, “All the horror, gentlemen, is in just this: that there is no horror!”

Peter Selgin is the author of Drowning Lessons, winner of the 2007 Flannery O’Connor Award, and Life Goes to the Movies, a novel, and two books on writing craft. Confessions of a Left-Handed Man, a memoir in essays, is forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press/Sightline Books.