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MASTERPIECE OR POETICAL WORKSHOP? Karol Irzykowski's *Pałuba* as a Literary Work

1. Introduction: *Pałuba* and/as Literary Criticism

In almost every national tradition one can find literary works whose titles are constantly being referred to, but which are hardly ever read from cover to cover. If Joyce's *Ulysses* is the classic example of such "most unread novels", then Karol Irzykowski's highly experimental novel *Pałuba* (1903) is undoubtedly Poland's most obvious contribution to this peculiar phenomenon. Although *Pałuba* has been referred to as an important piece of literature by generations of critics and readers alike, one could posit that only a few people actually know what the novel is all about. In some way, Irzykowski himself, who became a feared literary critic in the interwar period, but whose own literary output is rather modest both qualitatively and quantitatively, has contributed to this particular approach towards his only novel, by denoting it once as his "deservedly forgotten novel *Pałuba*" (*szuszenie zapomniana powieść Pałuba*; 1976a[1933]:443).

This notwithstanding, the true reason for the novel's unusual reception is most probably its heterogeneous and at times almost inscrutable literary form. More specifically, the novel consists of five different parts: the introductory novella "Sny Marii Dunin (palimpsest)" ("The Dreams of Maria Dunin (A Palimpsest)"), in which an anonymous archaeologist reports how he was initiated into the hidden "Brotherhood of the Great Bell" (*Bractwo Wielkiego Dzwonu*), then fell in love with the leader's daughter Maria and eventually married her sister Hermina, after which the narrator admits that the entire story is a falsification; the "actual" novel "Pałuba (studium biograficzne)" ("Pałuba (A Biographical Study)"), which tells the story of Piotr Strumieński's married life with Angelika and, after her suicide, with Ola; three explanatory essays, titled "Uwagi do *Pałuby*" ("Remarks to *Pałuba*"), "Wyjaśnienie *Snów Marii Dunin* i związek ich z *Pałubą*" ("An Explanation of *The Dreams of Maria Dunin* and Its Connection with *Pałuba*") and "Szaniec *Pałuby*" ("The Rampart of *Pałuba*"), respectively. The point to note is that even the actual novel consists mainly of explanatory digressions, discussing, for instance, the protagonists' psychology and, most prominently, the form of the novel which is being written.

Since a great deal of the many digressive comments in Irzykowski's novel, as we have just seen, are devoted to problems connected with the same text's production, or in other words, to the same text's poetics, it could be said that the novel contains its own first literary critical commentary. At the centre of this strategy of inserting metapoetical statements in the novel is the idea of what the "authorlike" narrator of *Pałuba* has called (in "The Rampart of *Pałuba*") "shifting the centre of gravity from the "masterpiece" to the poetical workshop, hence outside the work, where the true source of poetry wells up" (*przeniesienie punktu ciężkości z "arcydziela" do warsztatu poetyckiego, więc poza dzieło, tam, gdzie tryska właściwe źródło poezji*; Irzykowski 1976b[1903]:575).¹ This statement is, of course, both an example of such a metapoetical comment and a summary of the narrator's strategy of breaking the illusion of a coherent story world by showing how it was constructed. Not surprisingly, due to this peremptory self-informing layer of *Pałuba*, the "centre of gravity" of most literary critics' attention was equally directed towards the "poetical workshop" rather than to the novel as a "masterpiece". Or

¹ The Polish version of *Pałuba* will hereinafter be referred to with the abbreviation P. All English translations are my own.

in other words, before critics could start naturalising Irzykowski's confusing story world, they had to deal with this literary critical dimension of the novel in one way or another.

When reading the entirety of literary critical accounts on Irzykowski's novel, one can observe that, at first, critics were indecisive whether *Paluba* could be called a real novel or merely some literary critical or even scholarly essay. On the one hand, clear opponents such as Maria Konopnicka (under the cryptonym Włast) considered this "pseudonovel" (*pseudo-powieść*) to be "an irrevocable failure as an artistic whole" (*nieodwołalnie poronione jako całość artystyczna*; 1905:331). In a similar way, Antoni Potocki argued that the work deserved critical attention solely as "a document of an artistic error which was made in view of the search for truth" (*dokument błędu artystycznego, w obliczu prawdy poszukiwanej popełnionego*; 1912:277). On the other hand, more well-disposed critics tried to digest its lame story by focusing on what they considered to be extraordinary digressions. Władysław Jabłonowski, for instance, praised Irzykowski's book as "an unusual commentary, a great and masterly scaffold for a work which is almost invisible apart from this" (*niepospolity komentarz, wielkie i misterne rusztowanie do dzieła, którego po za nim prawie nie widać*; 1903:407f.) Waław Moraczewski, for his part, remarked that Irzykowski "had aroused less interest for the actual work than for the remarks and reflections" (*[w] twórczości nie zwrócił tak [...] uwagi, jak w uwagach i rozpamiętywaniach*; 1903:88). In other words, in the absence of the artistic, "masterly" depiction of a consistent story world, as in the traditional novel, the latter critics appreciated the philosophical, psychological, literary critical or aesthetic qualities of the numerous digressions. For many years, this critical approach remained untouched: either the discursive layer of *Paluba* was separated from the actual novel, or the work as a whole was placed outside of the novel genre.

In the 1930s, some critics started to pay attention to the poetical value of the numerous authorial interventions for *Paluba* as a whole. Whereas Karol Ludwik Koniński's remark on the novel's "charm typical of romantic irony" (*czar właściwy "romantycznej ironji"*; 1931:205) was still rather casual, Konstanty Troczyński analysed *Paluba* at length as "an extreme example of a rationalised and reflexive attitude of the artist towards his material" (*krańcowy przykład zrationalizowanej i refleksyjnej postawy artysty wobec swego tworzywa*; 1997 [1932]:294). Notwithstanding these early attempts at a "literary" reading of the entire textual structure of the novel, it was only after World War II, and especially from the 1960s onwards, that critics fully accepted the text's discursive layer as determinative for its artistic value. Despite this new interest in the novel's aesthetic qualities, however, most critics kept focusing on *Paluba* as a univocal, more or less novelistic critique of conventional literary techniques and reading habits.² Hence, in order to reconcile this literary critical dimension of the work with its clear novelistic aspirations, critics started calling *Paluba* one of the first examples of *autotematyzm* (in imitation of Artur Sandauer) or, more specifically, of the "autothematic novel" (*powieść autotematyczna*). Which is to say, a novel that discusses its own genesis and, in doing so, criticises any attempt at disguising the textual process.³

As I have already argued (cf. De Bruyn 2007), the problem with Sandauer's concept of *autotematyzm* is twofold. On the one hand, it mainly focuses on explicit thematiza-

² This tradition includes such postwar critical works as Wyka (1977[1948]), Lipiński (1949), Zengel (1958), Dąbrowska (1963), Werner (1965), Głowiński (1969), Stepnik (1973), Taylor Sen (1972), Budrecka (1981), Drozdowski (1987) and Eile (1996:42ff.).

³ As I have shown elsewhere (De Bruyn 2007), the evolution of Sandauer's understanding of *autotematyzm* in literature and art can be discerned in four subsequent essays: Sandauer (1969[1947]; 1981a[1956]; 1981b[1967]; 1981c[1970]).

tions of the artistic genesis and the textual process, thus excluding more implicit techniques of literary reflexivity. On the other hand, by treating such seemingly self-informing tendencies in literary texts as fully reliable approaches to the same literary texts, propagators of *autotematyzm* usually end up in a kind of circular reasoning: discursive parts of a certain text are used in order to elucidate the same text. Due to this methodological fallacy, for instance, Irzykowski's in fact *equivocal* anti-Modernist⁴ commentaries were interpolated rather *unequivocally* into many literary critical accounts, so that *Paluba* began to function as a plain novelistic *critique* of conventional modes of literary representation, rather than as a complicated artistic *representation* of the highly sophisticated literary critical self-consciousness of the author. It should be clear that, as soon as one does distinguish between a "metaliterary" *discourse* and its particular (literary or non-literary) *representation*, one can proceed to a more balanced analysis of the reflexive dimension of *Paluba*. In other words, what is needed is an approach which treats both the discursive and the narrative parts primarily as literary speech. The present paper aims at contributing to such a critical rereading of Irzykowski's novel by introducing the concept of "metafiction". First, the difference between the concepts of *autotematyzm* and metafiction will be explored, with special reference to their divergent focus on the role of the "authorlike" narrator in reflexive works of fiction. Next, I will demonstrate how a metafictional reading of the entire textual structure of *Paluba* may lead to a more complete picture of the novel's sophisticated reflexivity.

2. From *Autotematyzm* to Metafiction

As I have already suggested, both the methodological weaknesses of the concept of *autotematyzm* – viz. its emphasis on explicit thematisations of the creative process and its tendency to cause a kind of circular reasoning (cf. *supra*) – arise from Sandauer's early writings on literary and artistic reflexivity. Whereas the first problem is clearly connected with the critic's terminological preferences, one could explain the second fallacy by recalling the rather depreciatory interpretation of the phenomenon which was initially launched by Sandauer. More specifically, in his 1947 essay "Konstruktywny nihilizm" ("Constructive nihilism"), the famous critic has suggested the following definition of *autotematyzm* (termed here *samotematyczność* 'self-thematicity'):

The content of the work – in our country Irzykowski once has hazarded to do this in *Paluba* – has to be its own genesis, it has to serve itself as history and commentary, confined within a perfect and self-sufficient circle, a perpetuum mobile of nothingness. A new kind of literature comes into being – a self-thematic one.⁵

What Sandauer seems to suggest is that the more "autothematic" a novel is, the less it can be considered a full-fledged literary work, as such an increase of self-commentaries throws the work back on itself, which must necessarily lead to "a perpetuum mobile of nothingness". What is hidden behind this line of reasoning, then, is that no additional interpretation is needed: a fully "autothematic" work is "perfect and self-sufficient", as

4 In this case, "anti-Modernist" refers to the traditional Polish interpretation of literary Modernism, according to which this current is limited to the early, 1890–1900 period of *Młoda Polska*, instead of encompassing the entire 1890–1930 period.

5 Original text: "Treścią dzieła – porywał się na to kiedyś u nas Irzykowski w *Palubie* – ma być jego własna geneza, samo ma służyć sobie za historię i komentarz, zamknięte w koło doskonałe i samowystarczalne, perpetuum mobile nicości. Powstaje nowy rodzaj literatury – samotematycznej" (Sandauer 1969[1947]:42).

it contains its own “history and commentary” within itself, and the only thing a literary critic can do, is to repeat its discursive phrases.

When compared to *autotematyzm*, the American concept of metafiction is less oriented towards “thematic” renderings of the novelistic process. More often than not, however, propagators of this concept end up in the same literary critical aporia by treating certain more or less explicit reflexive devices in a literary text as authoritative clues to the same text’s interpretation. In order to avoid such fallacies, Mark Currie (1995:15) proposes to differentiate between a certain metafictional discourse which may (or may not) emanate from a fictional text, and its actual representation in the text. Whether this discourse is represented in the form of explicit comments or rather implicitly, is not relevant. Of importance is the extent to which the immanent textual self-consciousness is complemented by the critical self-consciousness of the reader, who may (or may not) realise the metafictional potential of a certain narrative text. What makes Currie’s own reader-centred and non-essentialist definition of metafiction as “a borderline discourse [...] between fiction and criticism, [...] which takes that border as its subject” (1995:2) so different, then, is that it stresses the critic’s responsibility to actively take part in the text’s aesthetic production. More specifically, his main task is not so much to repeat the presumed literary critical discourse of a certain text, but rather to formulate a literary critical answer to the various artistic ways in which this reflexive discourse is represented in a given literary text. In other words, if metafiction is “a borderline discourse between fiction and criticism which takes that border as its subject”, then scholars should try to disclose the different literary strategies which are used to represent this kind of borderline discourse in a certain text.

As soon as one adopts Currie’s notion of metafictional tendencies in narrative works and starts focusing on the “literariness” of both the discursive and the narrative parts of a given text, certain weaknesses in the approach of those defending the concept of *autotematyzm* may come to the fore. More precisely, it seems that most propagators of *Paluba* as an autothematic novel are confusing the “authorlike”, heterodiegetic I-narrator of *Paluba* with the historical author. For them, Karol Irzykowski is the reliable commentator of the narrated fictional events and if there are certain inconsistencies in his account, they can be attributed to him. As a consequence, whenever this “narrating author” comes to the fore, many critics, who sense the real author to be behind it, stop questioning what is told. When the I-narrator discusses certain artistic ideas, for instance, these are accepted as Irzykowski’s own ideas. On the other hand, the more the narration moves away from this reliable authorial centre (e.g. when focusing on the different protagonists or in the introductory novella), the more it is considered to be a deliberate deviation – an illusory game played by this authorial fabulator who is in control of all narrative threads. To put it another way, most critics tend to naturalise *Paluba*’s whimsical narrative structure by ascribing it to an omnipotent narrating author, who can easily transform himself from a commenting I-narrator into a describing third-person narrator.⁶ Instead of assuming a clear hierarchy of narratorial positions and relying on

6 This idea of an unequivocal narratorial split between the level of the narration (discourse) and the level of the story is maintained by Michał Głowiński, who explicitly connects the dual narration in *Paluba* with the use of personal pronouns: “One may argue that in this work the switch from ‘he’ to ‘I’ equals the switch from language to metalanguage, from utterances on the represented world to utterances concerning the principles according to which this world is constructed, and from the hero to the author-narrator, who presents reflections on the ways in which to report on him” (“Można powiedzieć, że w utworze tym przejście od ‘on’ do ‘ja’ równa się przejściu od języka do metajęzyka, od wypowiedzi o świecie przedstawionym do wypowiedzi na temat zasad konstruowania tego świata, od bohatera do autora-narratora, który przedstawia refleksje na temat sposobów opowiadania o nim”; 1969:261f.)

the authority of the narrating author, however, one might as well question Irzykowski's entire fictional world (i.e. both the discursive and the narrative parts) by focusing on the structural unreliability of its mediator.

Cognitive narratologists such as Tamar Yacobi have tried to term the cognitive mechanisms by which readers try to construct consistent story worlds out of the often distorted narrative data which they come across. More specifically, Yacobi distinguishes between five principles according to which textual contradictions are generally resolved: the genetic, the generic, the existential, the functional, and the perspectival. Reading strategies based on one (or a combination) of the first four principles allow the reader to avoid the problem of the narrator's unreliability because they ascribe certain inconsistencies to the author as a historical person, to generic conventions, to real-world models, or to the text's supposed goals (cf. the overview of Yacobi's model in Zerweck 2001:154). It should be clear that even those critics of *Paluba* who have been aware of its narratorial complexity, have eventually resolved the main textual contradictions by using one or more of the first four principles. As Yacobi puts it, however, only in the last case does one have to consider issues related to point of view: "What distinguishes the *perspectival* mechanism, or the unreliability hypothesis, is that it brings discordant elements into pattern by attributing them to the peculiarities of the speaker or observer through whom the world is *mediated*" (Yacobi 2001:224). In other words, in the case of the perspectival principle, indications of authorial intrusions are only one element in the wider spectrum of such "peculiarities" as all kinds of "linguistic expressions of subjectivity" (Nünning 1999:64), "internal contradictions and Freudian slips" (ibid:65), and "conflicts between story and discourse or between the narrator's representation of events and the explanations and interpretations of them that the narrator gives" (ibid:65).

It should be clear that such a perspectival approach of *Paluba*, one which treats the narrator as a literary construction and takes the many ambiguities of his account into consideration, may contribute to the proposed metafictional reading of the novel's entire textual structure. More specifically, if one stops associating the often "authorlike" narrator with the real author, one may discover that the narrator in question is a rather protean construction, who at times "pretends" to be the author Karol Irzykowski, but at other times exposes the same author's fallibility. An excellent example of this strategy is the following fragment, in which the alleged authorial narrator addresses the real author:

Now what's your opinion, dear author? Are you one of those writers who make fun of their characters and ridicule them, in order to force the reader to believe that they know more themselves, that they are more intelligent? Aren't you in fact shifting your own chaos onto Strumiński?⁷

Apart from being a highly reflexive statement, this extract primarily signals a split between the narratorial "subject" and an "objectified" author. As a consequence, the narrator, who for some readers may have seemed to be almost identical with the historical author, is no longer reliable. Upon closer examination, as a matter of fact, the narrator exposes his own artificiality and subjectivity throughout the entire novel, as his language is constantly readjusted, self-ironically put between quotation marks, or overtly ornamented with the most laboured imagery. In recent years, this peculiar poetic nature

⁷ Original text: "Bo c sdzisz ty sam, szanowny autorze? [...] Czy jeste jednym z tych autorw, ktorzy wyszydza, wydrwiwaja swe postacie, aby przez to narzuci czytelnikowi opinie, e oni sami wicej wiedza, e s mdrzejsi? Czy nie przerzucasz wasnie swego wasnego chaosu na Strumiskiego?" (P428).

of Irzykowski's language, which appears both in the narrative and the discursive parts of *Pałuba*, has been alternately termed a manifestation of the "linguistic grotesque" (*groteska lingwistyczna*; Pawłowska 1995:161) and an example of "stylistation" (*stylizacja*; Kłosiński 2000:21). In other words, given that even the discursive layer of the novel lays bare its own poetic function, there seems to be no sense in adopting it as an unequivocal source for interpreting the novel as a whole. What we can conclude from this, is that as soon as we stop treating the many comments as authorial, a new and literary world manifests itself for analysis.

3. From the Illusion of Depth to the Inevitability of the Surface

As we have seen, more attention should be paid in the intended "literary" analysis of *Pałuba* to those metafictional devices which reveal themselves rather covertly or subtly. To put it another way, instead of allowing the authorial voice to seduce us with his explanatory comments, we have to look for other, less explicit textual strategies by which the novel turns back on itself. What I would like to claim is that, seen from this point of view, *Pałuba* incessantly displays a significant interaction between the conventional illusion of a third dimension (depth, *signifié*) and the reflexive consciousness of the inevitable two-dimensionality of the text (surface, *signifiant*). In order to substantiate my hypothesis, I will first focus on those textual features which lay bare the search for depth, for illusion or representation, and then on the various ways in which this pursuit is disillusioned by a foregrounding of the textual surface, of the materiality of the text. Both aspects of the novel's metafictional dynamic will be analysed on three different levels: the level of the narratorial commentary, the level of the actual stories, and the level of the overall structure of the novel.

On the discursive level of *Pałuba*, the universal search for depth, for the unattainable ideal, is described at length as the clash between the "constructive element" (*pierwiastek konstrukcyjny*) of human culture and the "palubic element" (*pierwiastek palubiczny*) of Nature. Whereas the first concept refers to the artificial, "constructed" character of any such quest, the second notion, which is clearly derived from the title of the novel, stands for the many elements in life which inevitably frustrate the typically human habit of constructing all kinds of ideals. In his numerous digressions, the narrating author discusses this eternal struggle of mankind not only on a general philosophical level, but also with reference to the story about Piotr Strumieński and the characters surrounding him. As a matter of fact, both the novella "The Dreams of Maria Dunin (A Palimpsest)" and the actual novel "Pałuba (A Biographical Study)" contain several stories about people who are stubbornly pursuing some ideal love, despite the continual devaluation of this cultural construct by the physical aspects of love: the archaeologist in "The Dreams of Maria Dunin" falls in love with Maria but ends up with Hermina, Piotr Strumieński promises Angelika posthumous faithfulness but cheats on her at every opportunity, Gasztold seems to be successful in seducing Strumieński's second wife Ola but is eventually dumped by her, while Strumieński's son Pawełek is sexually initiated by the loose village idiot Kseńka (who is ironically nicknamed Pałuba).

Finally, on the level of the complete textual structure of *Pałuba*, this deceitful promise of a certain depth, of some ideal, appears to manifest itself in the form of the palimpsest. As has been mentioned earlier, Jabłonowski has called *Pałuba* "an unusual commentary, a great and masterly scaffold for a work *which is almost invisible apart from this*" (cf. *supra*; italics mine). One could argue that what is hidden behind the novel's entire heterogeneous structure, behind its extreme multilayeredness, is indeed some kind of invisible original text, the essence of the work, which has been overwritten with various provisional versions that merely function as its "great and masterly scaffold". In

other words, just like in the case of a palimpsest, what the reader can see are merely traces of a more important, never fully attainable text underlying the textual surface. Examples of such traces are not only the various and highly similar “attempts” at a love story (one of which is actually called “a palimpsest”; cf. supra) and the proliferation of marginal comments, but also certain more subtle textual signals suggesting the existence of a more authentic and less deficient text. On many occasions, for instance, the narrating author, who pretends to be in the middle of writing a novel with the same title, suggests that the present version is but one possibility in a long chain of textual representations of his novelistic concept: not only does *Paluba* already have a prehistory (cf. the account of an evening gathering at which the “author” read an earlier version of his novel to “a circle of invited literators” (*grono zaproszonych literatów*; P573), but also does it anticipate such future versions as “a popular edition” (*popularne wydanie*; P362), “a school edition” (*szkolne wydanie*; P 419, P 533) or even “the ideal *Paluba*, the one that should have been written” (*idealna Paluba, taka, jaką się powinno było napisać*; P 569). On the level of the story, this production of provisional “texts” is taken over by some of the main characters. As Ewa Szary-Matywiecka (1979:26ff.) has correctly remarked, both Strumieński (in the biography *Księga miłości/The Book of Love*) and his rival Gasztold (in the novel *Chora miłość/A Sick Love*) at a certain point seek to evade the “palubic element” by producing real (semi-)autobiographic texts in which they can easily construct their high ideals of love. In other words, the reader is faced with an ever increasing number of “texts” (either textually represented or, as in the case of *The Book of Love* and *A Sick Love*, merely suggested), which may hold the promise of a certain depth, but with which the “real” events (i.e. what really happened to Strumieński and the characters surrounding him) are overwritten. The underlying idea of the novel’s palimpsestic character, then, is probably that all literature can do, is to eternally overwrite the unattainable ideal of universal truth.

If we consider all these elements within the framework of our initial hypothesis, then we can conclude that what is suggested by the palimpsestic structure of *Paluba* is not only the absence (or illusion) of some ultimate essence (of depth), but above all the presence (or reality) of a text (of surface), and more specifically of the text entitled *Paluba*. Just like in the case of the search for depth, the exegesis of this manifold “text” of *Paluba* is executed in one way or another on several levels throughout the novel. First of all, on the discursive level, the complete text of the novel is reduced to one symbol by the narrating author:

It is a literary habit that every writer, when carrying through some idea in his work, embeds it in a certain symbol, which he inserts in the title of the work in order to drum into the reader the matter which he wanted to raise. Taking advantage of this right, I have called my novel *Paluba*.⁸

A bit further, the narrator explains his choice by claiming that “something which itself is different from anything should also have a name which is different from anything” (*to, co samo nie jest do niczego podobne, powinno mieć także nazwę do niczego niepodobną*; P483). Indeed, even at the time when Irzykowski wrote his novel, *paluba* was a rare dialectal form, which could have up to ten different meanings (cf. Kłak 1976:123), of which the narrator mentions only three: a pile driving ram, a tailor’s dummy, and a hag (cf. P458). In other words, the suggestion is that whatever reading of this unusual

⁸ Original text: “Jest zwyczajem literackim, że każdy pisarz przeprowadzający w swym dziele jakąś ideę ujmuje ją w pewien symbol, który umieszcza na tytule dzieła, aby wbić w pamięć czytelnika to, co chciał wyluszczyć. Korzystając z tego prawa, nazwałem swoją powieść *Palubą*” (P482f.)

word one proposes, there will always be other interpretations yet to be explored. In this way, *paluba* can be considered a metaphor for the entire novel's polysemy.

Next, on the narrative level, the word *paluba* is made use of (in all its polysemy) in order to provisionally name anything which frustrates the construction of ideals – of “turrets of nonsense” (*wieżyczki nonsensu*; P434), as the narrating author terms them. Strumiński's ideal of posthumous love for his late wife Angelika, for instance, is ironically reduced to his worship of an artificial image of her. More specifically, at a certain point, Strumiński starts venerating his dead wife by optically calling up some kind of effigy of her. Later on, Strumiński gives this phantasmagoric image of Angelika a real name after an uncommon word he has heard from his son: a *paluba* or “dummy” (*manekin*; P374). Pawełek, in his turn, who has learned the word from the peasants, starts associating it with the physical aspects of love. At first, he applies it to the optical image of Angelika in his father's secret museum, until he is attracted by a licentious woman named Kseńka (but whom the shepherds nickname Pałuba; cf. supra). As a consequence, Pawełek's ideal of sensual love is eventually degraded to a quickie with this loose village idiot named Kseńka Pałuba. According to Krzysztof Kłosiński, this gradual dissemination of the concept of *paluba*, of its “text”, can be interpreted as follows:

The function of this word, which is a nickname, then becomes a name, and eventually the title of the work, of which even the narrator's key concept (the palubic element) is derived, continues to be the function of a pure *signifiant*. In the spatial symbolics it is characterised by a bottom-up movement, from the peasants to Pawełek, from Pawełek to Strumiński, from Strumiński to the author, from the author to the dictionary (Linde), as it were from nature to culture.⁹

On the structural level, finally, this same concept of *paluba* can be said to function as a metaphor for the open, distorted structure of the text of the novel, which the narrator appropriately calls a “monstrous ruin” (*monstrualna ruina*; P586). Put differently, in much the same way as *Paluba* (the novel) continuously exposes its own textual, provisional and artificial nature, *paluba* (the word) – which turns out to be merely a defective *signifiant* without a definite *signifié* – refers to any loose and shoddy, overtly inauthentic and mediocre artefact, as if it were a metaphor for (or even an apology of) an aesthetics of mediocrity.

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⁹ Original text: “Funkcja tego słowa, które jest przezwą, staje się imieniem, w końcu tytułem książki, od którego pochodzi kluczowa kategoria podmiotu (pierwiastek pałubiczny), pozostaje funkcją czystego *signifiant*. [...] W symbolice przestrzennej charakteryzuje go ruch z dołu do góry, od chłopów do Pawełka [...], od Pawełka do Strumińskiego [...], od Strumińskiego do autora, od autora do słowników (Linde), jakby od natury do kultury” (Kłosiński 2000:35f.)

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