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Full title: The Janus-Faced Author: Narrative Unreliability and Metafiction in Karol Irzykowski's *Patuba* and Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*

Short title: Irzykowski's *Patuba* and *Ferdydurke*

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## Introduction

The suggestion that Karol Irzykowski's only novel *Pałuba* (1903) could be considered an ancestor of *Ferdydurke*, is almost as old as Gombrowicz's novel itself. On 11 July 1938, only a few months after the publication of *Ferdydurke*, the young Artur Sandauer wrote in a letter to Bruno Schulz: "I have just read *Pałuba*; an excellent book. Its main idea is almost identical with what I discovered in *Ferdydurke*; maybe a little more one-dimensional than in Gombrowicz, as it is treated strictly intellectually. Irzykowski is truly the father of all Polish experimenters" ("Czytałem ostatnio *Pałubę*; znakomita książka. Problematyka prawie identyczna z tą, jaką wymyśliłem w *Ferdydurke*; ale może trochę płytsza niż Gombrowiczowska, bo ściśle intelektualna. Irzykowski to naprawdę ojciec eksperymentatorów polskich"; Schulz 2002: 287). Strangely enough, Schulz himself had launched this very idea in his famous lecture on *Ferdydurke*, which he gave in Warsaw in January 1938 and which was published in *Skamander* in the summer of 1938. At the end of his panegyric on Gombrowicz's first novel, the author of *Sklepy cynamonowe* argues as follows: "[It] is worth remembering, without disadvantage to the undoubted originality of the novel *Ferdydurke*, that this book has a predecessor perhaps unknown to its author - the premature and therefore heirless *Pałuba*, by Karol Irzykowski" (Ficowski 1988: 164; "Warto przypomnieć bez ujmy dla niewątpliwej oryginalności *Ferdydurke*, że książka ta miała poprzednika może nawet autorowi nie znanego, przedwczesną i dlatego nieskuteczną *Pałubę* Irzykowskiego"; Schulz 1964: 491).

When reading these casual remarks by two major voices in twentieth-century Polish literature, two questions immediately arise. First: did Gombrowicz know *Pałuba* before he wrote *Ferdydurke*? And second: what similarities did Sandauer and Schulz exactly discover between both novels? It is, of course, always difficult to tackle the problem of direct influence. Not surprisingly, Gombrowicz not only denied any such influence of *Pałuba* on his first and most successful novel, but he even refuted that he had read it at the time he wrote *Ferdydurke*.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the case may be, although it was probably hard to get a copy of *Pałuba* in

the interwar period,<sup>2</sup> Irzykowski was at that time one of the most influential literary voices and his only novel had been at the core of literary discussion since it was published in 1903. Consequently, even if Gombrowicz did not read one single letter of *Pałuba* before he wrote *Ferdydurke*, he must have been acquainted with at least some details of its exceptional literary form ever since he started writing his own experimental prose. The question remains, however, what made two leading literary figures of the interwar period in Poland conclude that *Ferdydurke* descended from *Pałuba* – and from *Pałuba* alone? In this article, I will try to answer this question, not only by elucidating what Schulz and Sandauer might have thought about the connection between both novels, but also by adding some new arguments from a contemporary narratological standpoint.

#### *Human Inauthenticity and Autotematyzm*

In his paper on *Ferdydurke*, Schulz clarifies what he thinks are the two most important achievements of Gombrowicz's novel: on the one hand "a new, revolutionary novelistic form and method" (Ficowski 1988: 158; "nowa i rewolucyjna forma i metoda powieści"; Schulz 1964: 481), and on the other hand "the conquest of a new realm of intellectual phenomena" (158; "aneksja nowej dziedziny zjawisk duchownych"; 481), of "a zone of subcultural contents" (159; "strefa treści podkulturalnych"; 483) below the official sphere of "the mature and clear forms of our spiritual existence" (158; "dojrzałe i klarowne formy naszej egzystencji duchowej"; 482) – some underground area where human "immaturity" ("niedojrzałość") and authenticity flourish. It goes without saying that the struggle of the individual against human Form as a central theme of Gombrowicz's works has been discussed at length. As for the novel's "new, revolutionary [...] form and method", however, Schulz, just like many after him, remains silent. Only in the last part of his speech, not surprisingly just before he mentions Irzykowski as Gombrowicz's main predecessor, does he touch upon the novel's particular composition. More specifically, Schulz seems to criticize Gombrowicz's decision to

insert the apologetic chapter 'Preface to 'The Child Runs Deep in Filidor'' ('Przedmowa do Filidora dzieckiem podszytego') into *Ferdydurke*. Here, as if he wanted to break out of the "one-sidedness" ("jednostronność") of his great theory of Form, Gombrowicz "aims to bare the whole machinery of a work of art, its connection to the author, and he actually provides – along with the claim – the confirmation of this possibility as well, for *Ferdydurke* is nothing else than the great example of such a work" (164; "[d]ąży [...] do obnażania całego mechanizmu dzieła sztuki, jego związku z autorem i daje on istotnie wraz z postulatem i sprawdzenie tej możliwości, gdyż *Ferdydurke* nie jest niczym innym jak kapitalnym przykładem takiego dzieła; 490-491). By openly discussing his "personal motives" (148; "motywy osobiste"; 490) or artistic devices in chapters like 'Preface...', Gombrowicz apparently wants to expose his novel as just another (linguistic) form which is imposed on mankind. Whereas Schulz deplores this loss of artistic consistency, Gombrowicz considers it to be the only way to convey a more or less authentic message.

In a letter to Schulz on the occasion of the publication of his paper on *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz further clarifies his approach:

Language, which was created just like anything else out of the copulation of individuals, does not lend itself for expressing truly individual matters – it is a tyrannical vehicle, even when we think that it liberates us. As a consequence, it is necessary to go even one step further in this criticism of reality, which means that not only do I have to attack the world, but at the same time I should attack myself as well – ridicule the world and ridicule myself while ridiculing.

([M]owa, która powstała jak i wszystko inne z kopulacji jednostek, nie nadaje się do wypowiedzenia treści naprawdę indywidualnych – jest to narzędzie tyranii, nawet wtedy gdy wydaje się nam, że nas wyzwala. To powoduje konieczność cofnięcia się

w owej krytyce rzeczywistości jeszcze o krok, tzn. że nie tylko muszę atakować świat, ale jeszcze muszę w tej samej chwili atakować siebie – wyśmiewać świat i wyśmiewać siebie wyśmiewającego się; Schulz 2002: 261)

Even though Gombrowicz discusses the impossibility to break out of the 'prison-house of language' or to escape from the 'tyranny of Form' in a more general way, one can easily connect his argument with the particular novelistic form of *Ferdydurke*. Instead of being an unequivocal and straightforward critique of the superiority of Form, this multifarious and literally polyphonic novel incessantly wavers between Form and anti-Form. Not only does Gombrowicz radically interrupt the more or less consistent story line twice by inserting two rather disparate stories ('Filidor dzieckiem podszyty' or 'The Child Runs Deep in Filidor' and 'Filibert dzieckiem podszyty' or 'The Child Runs Deep in Filibert'), but also does he expose his entire novelistic project by prefacing both digressive chapters in a highly ironic way. Moreover, even the main story line on Józio Kowalski's adventures is frequently interrupted by the narrator for discursive comments. As a consequence, Gombrowicz's novelistic collage to a certain extent indeed resembles Irzykowski's *Pałuba*, which could also be described as a heterogeneous mixture of both narrative and discursive parts.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas Schulz, as we have just seen, remains rather vague about the exact connection between *Ferdydurke* and *Pałuba*, Sandauer, for his part, was certainly thinking about both novels' 'autothematic' dimension. It is common knowledge that Sandauer was the first critic in Poland to consider the peremptory self-informing layer of novels such as *Pałuba* as manifestations of *autotematyzm*.<sup>4</sup> In his 1938 letter to Schulz, however, this concept has not yet crystallized, although it is already 'in the air':

All of Irzykowski's excellence results from outdoing others, from quotation marks.

This is precisely the definition of his being: a person with an infinite perspective of

quotation marks; just like those boxes with a portrait of a man holding a box with the portrait of a man etc. I do not see his final instance, in whose name he outdoes all the others; he is like Münchhausen, pulling himself out of the swamp by his own wig. Hence, the last word of his philosophy is chaos: for what kind of system is it that all is make-believe, that reality can be conceptualized merely by means of coarse forgeries? This same idea can be discerned in Gombrowicz, but he calls the absurd into play and makes something positive of it, whereas Irzykowski limits himself to the negation.

(Cała [...] wielkość [Irzykowskiego] pochodzi z przewyciężeń, z cudzysłowów. To jest właśnie definicja [jego] istoty [...]: człowiek o nieskończonej perspektywie cudzysłowów; jak te puszki, na których rysowany jest mężczyzna, trzymający puszkę, na której itd... [...] Nie widzę [...] jego ostatniej instancji, w imię której przewycięża: jest jak Münchhausen, wyciągający się za perukę z błota. Toteż ostatnim słowem jego filozofii jest chaos: bo cóż to za system, że wszystko jest udawaniem, że rzeczywistość daje się ująć w pojęcie tylko przy pomocy grubych fałszerstw. Tę samą myśl znajdziemy zresztą u Gombrowicza, ale on wyzwala absurd [...] i czyni zeń coś pozytywnego, a Irzykowski poprzestaje na negacji; Schulz 2002: 287-288)

What Sandauer is suggesting here is that, although both authors share the idea of the inevitable inauthenticity of mankind and all of its cultural (linguistic, literary) constructs, only Gombrowicz does come up with a solution to this impasse. Irzykowski, on the other hand, is reproached for merely representing this vicious circle of fake illusions of reality without suggesting a way out. This difference in appreciation more or less reflects Sandauer's later distinction between, on the one hand, the destructiveness of 'pure' autothematic works such as *Patuba*,<sup>5</sup> and, on the other hand, the constructive dimension of the grotesque and absurdist solutions of such authors as Schulz and Gombrowicz, whose works are only partially reflex-

ive or self-ironic.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, in the second of his two famous postwar essays written “against the background” of *Ferdydurke*, Sandauer to a certain extent repeats his critique of the incompleteness of Irzykowski’s artistic project when compared to Gombrowicz’s novel. Whereas in *Pałuba* “brilliance is displayed rather by the ideas than by the realizations” (“świetne bywają raczej pomysły niż realizacje”; 1981d [1958]: 477), it was not until *Ferdydurke* was published that “the ideas of *Pałuba* became more convincing and started to function artistically” (“zyskały siłę przekonywającą i zaczęły działać artystycznie”; 478). Hence, what Sandauer is suggesting here is that not only did Gombrowicz adopt the main idea of *Pałuba* – i.e. that “reality disintegrates all schemes and every writer is a ‘forger’ who – in order to force reality into those schemes – has to cut it up” (“rzeczywistość rozsadza wszelkie schematy, każdy pisarz jest ‘falszerzem’, który – aby ją w nie tłoczyć – musi ją okroić”; 491-492) – but also did he manage to grasp it in an artistically convincing way.

Although many (if not all) readers of both *Pałuba* and *Ferdydurke* would agree that Gombrowicz’s novel is artistically more salient, one can easily challenge Sandauer’s (undoubtedly outdated) argumentation. Let us therefore once again try to paraphrase his line of reasoning: in their struggle with Form and inauthenticity, both authors feel the need to compromise their own literary project one way or another. Yet, whereas Irzykowski’s compromising act is predominantly aimed against the literary object (a novel entitled *Pałuba*), Gombrowicz eventually finds himself questioning the literary subject itself (an author named Witold Gombrowicz).<sup>7</sup> Hence, whereas *Pałuba* ends up in the chaos of an infinite self-informing discursive circle, *Ferdydurke* culminates in some kind of literary carnival, with an author “ridiculing the world and ridiculing himself while ridiculing”.<sup>8</sup> In other words, what had already been initiated by Irzykowski in *Pałuba*, was not executed “consistently and entirely” (“konsekwentnie i do końca”; 1981d [1958]: 478) until *Ferdydurke* was published. Yet, however convincing Sandauer’s argumentation may seem, at least two of its constituents seem to be problematic upon closer examination: first, the suggestion that the more ‘autothematic’ a

novel is, the less it can be considered a full-fledged literary work; and second, the conviction that the more discursive a novel is, the less the narrator diverges from the real author. In order to understand what makes these ideas so misleading, one should take a closer look at them.

As I have shown elsewhere (De Bruyn 2007), the problem with Sandauer's concept of *autotematyzm* is that it mainly focuses on explicit thematizations of the artistic genesis and the textual process, thus excluding more implicit techniques of literary reflexivity. Furthermore, 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. In other words, the impact of both Sandauer's literary critical term itself and of the critic's rather depreciatory interpretation of the phenomenon (as necessarily leading to "a *perpetuum mobile* of nothingness"; cf. note 5), cannot be underestimated. More particularly, Sandauer's initial statements about the 'autothemacity' of *Pałuba* lie at the basis of an entire critical tradition in which too little attention is paid to the literary value of the novel. As a matter of fact, Irzykowski's actually *equivocal* anti-Modernist<sup>9</sup> commentaries were interpolated rather *unequivocally* into many literary critical accounts, so that *Pałuba* started functioning as a univocal, more or less novelistic *critique* of conventional literary techniques and reading habits, instead of being interpreted as an extraordinary artistic *representation* of the highly sophisticated literary critical self-consciousness of the author.<sup>10</sup> 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 approach of the reflexive dimension of both novels under scrutiny.

In the wake of this first methodological fallacy evoked by Sandauer's early writings on *autotematyzm*, a second awkward way of reasoning comes to the fore. When stating that in *Pałuba* "brilliance is displayed rather by the ideas than by the realizations" (cf. *supra*), San-



dauer seems to suggest that the dominance of discursive parts over narrative parts turns the work into an authorial preface to a novel still to be written, rather than into a real novel. As a consequence, there seems to be no real narrator in *Pałuba*, but only an 'author' discussing, among many other things, certain elements of the story. In *Ferdydurke*, on the contrary, Sandauer observes a totally different situation: here, the author is introduced in the plot and thus 'objectified' and even compromised. As a consequence, "above the author-object, the author-subject is raised, and above man - his thought" ("ponad autora-przedmiot zostaje wyniesiony autor-podmiot, ponad człowieka - jego myśl"; 1981e [1957]: 441). To put it another way, if *Pałuba* still presupposes the authenticity of an authorial voice, *Ferdydurke* is more consistent in compromising any attempt at grasping authentic reality: what is real (the author and his thought), is always elsewhere. What Sandauer and many after him seem to forget, however, is that the narrator of *Pałuba* is actually not as authorial and unequivocal as he appears at first sight. Again, then, as soon as one does distinguish between the *discursive* function of a text and its particular *narrative* representation, a more precise interpretation of the reflexive dimension of both *Pałuba* and *Ferdydurke* becomes possible.

To summarise, what Schulz and Sandauer seem to suggest, is that both Irzykowski and Gombrowicz tackle the problem of human inauthenticity by reflexively ('autothematically') compromising their own literary constructs (the novel *Pałuba* and the author Witold Gombrowicz). What is lacking in their (and many of their successors') critical accounts, however, is a clearer insight into both novels' extraordinary narrative structure: somehow unable to come to terms with the grave narrative distortions in both *Pałuba* and *Ferdydurke*, subsequent generations of literary critics have not resisted the temptation to treat these works as direct emanations of their real authors' personal opinions. As a result, discursive comments tend to be considered as reliable authorial utterances, whereupon the entire texts are praised for their philosophical or literary critical value - and not for their manysided literary form.<sup>11</sup> Hence, what is needed are critical approaches in which more attention is paid to the media-

tor of all these valuable opinions – the narrator – and to the result of his account – a work of fiction.

### *Narrative Unreliability and Metafiction*

Notwithstanding the strong tendency in Polish criticism to treat reflexive comments in literary works as direct authorial intrusions, some attempts have been made to approach such texts on the basis of strictly narratological principles. In what is undoubtedly the most valuable and comprehensive study on the highly reflexive fiction of such interwar writers as Schulz, Witkacy and Gombrowicz, Włodzimierz Bolecki (1996 [1982]) brilliantly evades the issue of *autotematyzm* by focusing on generations of readers' difficulties to construct a consistent story world out of these most alienating and unusually discursive narrative accounts, rather than repeating once more the texts' main philosophical ideas, presenting themselves in the ready-made form of unequivocal self-commentaries. More specifically, Bolecki argues that the interwar authors under scrutiny have propagated a new "poetical prose model" ("poetycki model prozy") as an alternative to the prevailing "vehicular prose model" ("wehikularny model prozy"; 14). Whereas in the latter case literary language is overshadowed by its referential function (as in Realism), in the former case it "draws attention to its autonomy" ("zwraca uwagę na swoją autonomię") and thus takes on a "reflexive character" ("character samozwrotny"; 12). What Bolecki is aiming at, is not necessarily the numerous meta-poetic utterances in many of these works, but first and foremost a manifest "semiotic overorganization" ("nadorganizacja znakowa"; 13) on all narrative levels – i.e. including the lexical (stylistic) as well as the compositional, fabular or semantic structure of the text. Leaving aside Bolecki's actual analysis of different manifestations of this "poetical prose model" in Polish interwar fiction, it should be clear that the suggested reading of the complete narrative structure of such reflexive novels as *Pałuba* and *Ferdydurke* offers the opportunity to determine these texts' similarities more accurately than when merely interpreting them as re-

presentations of a number of shared opinions on human nature or of the inappropriate ambition of their authors to impose a certain analysis of their works on the reader.<sup>12</sup>

Although many critics have acknowledged the protean quality of the narrator of *Pałuba* and *Ferdydurke*, it seems to be generally accepted that in both cases the story world is predominantly presented by an 'authorlike', heterodiegetic (*Pałuba*) or – to a certain extent – homodiegetic (*Ferdydurke*) I-narrator. Hence, whenever this 'narrating author' comes to the fore, the reader, who senses the real author to be behind it, stops questioning what is told. In other words, when the narrator of *Pałuba* discusses certain artistic ideas, the reader accepts them as Irzykowski's own ideas, and when in *Ferdydurke* the story line is interrupted for yet another digression on Form, this aside is ascribed to Gombrowicz, the writer – cf. Malić's statement that in *Ferdydurke* "the 'non-fabular' part is rather an authorial commentary than a literary text" ("część [...] niefabularna [...] jest raczej odautorskim komentarzem niż tekstem literackim"; 1968: 149). The more the narration moves away from this reliable authorial center, on the other hand, 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. Thus, when in an explanatory essay at the end of *Pałuba* the narrating author considers the enigmatic novella 'The Dreams of Maria Dunin (A Palimpsest)' at the beginning of the novel as artistically outdated and its narrator as fallible, the reader is tempted to adopt the suggested narratorial hierarchy. In a similar way, the frequent narratorial switches in *Ferdydurke* between the thirty-year-old narrating author and the seventeen-year-old Józio are perfectly logical in the light of the former's opinions on interhuman Form: as soon as the narrating author is exposed to public opinion (in this case to professor Pimko), he can take on a different form (in this case that of an adolescent). To put it another way, critics of both novels tend to naturalize certain narrative inconsistencies by ascribing them to an omnipotent narrating author, who can easily transform himself from an evaluating observer into an experiencing character (*Ferdydurke*) or from a commenting I-narrator into a describing third-person narrator

(*Patuba*).<sup>13</sup> Instead of installing a clear hierarchy of narratorial positions and relying on the authority of the narrating author, however, one could also question both authors' entire fictional world by focusing on the structural unreliability of all of its mediators.

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 Irzykowski and Gombrowicz who have been aware of both novels' particular 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*" (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" (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" (65).

In my opinion, if critics would look more closely at the peculiarities of the speakers or observers through whom Gombrowicz's and Irzykowski's story worlds are mediated, they

would notice that, after the authorial mask of the main voice has been thrown off, a multitude of 'speakers' or 'observers' in the broadest sense of the word come to the fore. As a matter of fact, both *Pałuba* and *Ferdydurke* turn out to be playgrounds for conflicting versions of reality, none of which appears to be authoritative. More exactly, the story world which Irzykowski and Gombrowicz depict seems to be overgrown by the numerous 'forms' which the narrating author and the different characters have imposed on it. Unable to represent a final version of reality, each subsequent 'form' or story ends in a disappointment. Even the account of the seemingly omniscient narrating author reveals many inconsistencies upon closer examination and seems to be nothing more than an ill-fated attempt to keep all narrative threads together.

The most obvious examples of this conflict between the ambition to impose a certain (narrative) order on the world and the tragicomic disillusion of this epistemological project can be found in *Pałuba*. On many occasions, for instance, the narrating author of *Pałuba*, who is 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 *Pałuba* 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"; Irzykowski 1976: 573),<sup>14</sup> but also does it anticipate such future versions as "a popular edition" ("popularne wydanie"; P 362), "a school edition" ("szkolne wydanie"; P 419, P 533) or even "the ideal *Pałuba*, the one which should have been written" ("idealna *Pałuba*, taka, jaką się powinno było napisać"; P 569). In addition, if we believe the narrating author when he argues that "*Pałuba* is the completion of the framework which is vaguely outlined in 'Maria Dunin'" ("*Pałuba* jest [...] wypełnieniem ram mglisto zarysowujących się w 'Marii Dunin'"; P 569), the novella serves as yet another version of the main literary concept. At the very end of the novel, the impossibility of a final representation is even openly admitted:

I do not care about the reader's grimaces, conveniences and caprices, but I am giving him lectures on *Pałuba*, the version which lies somewhere in my head in a completely different form, and I am teaching him like a professor who gives part of the lecture aloud and in an accessible way, while he reads the other part, of which he doubts whether someone will understand it, with his face turned around to the wall.

(Ja [...] nie troszczę się o miny, wygody i kaprysy czytającego, [...] lecz urządzam mu wykłady o *Pałubie*, tej, która gdzieś tam napisana całkiem inaczej spoczywa w mojej głowie, a wykładam mu jak profesor, który część prelekcji mówi głośno i przystępnie, a druga część, o której wątpi, czy ją kto zrozumie, mówi obrócony do ściany; P 579)

As a consequence, no matter how many illustrations, footnotes, cross-references and explanatory comments are inserted, the narrator's account will never be free of the inevitable concealments and ellipses – all of which clearly illustrates another metapoetical utterance, i.e. that “a work of art, insofar as it is made under the pressure of an inner need, is but a trace, an echo of the changes in the soul of the ‘creator’” (“dzieło sztuki, o ile robione jest pod naporem wewnętrznej potrzeby, [...] o tyle jest tylko śladem, echem przełomów w duszy ‘twórcy’”; P 559).

Whereas the narrating author (i.e. the narrator when evaluating his novelistic project) still partly admits the lacunae in the narration, many inconsistencies on the level of both the embedded stories (i.e. the love stories of Piotr Strumieński in the ‘actual’ novel and of the archaeologist in ‘The Dreams of Maria Dunin’) seem to be exposed unintentionally. The introductory novella, for instance, commences with the oral account by the homodiegetic I-narrator (apparently an archaeologist) of “a certain incident” (“pewien wypadek”; P 7) which he has experienced. In the course of his report, however, the narrator gradually be-

trays that he has actually written his adventure down (e.g. when he mentions some “clever fellow who has read the opening chapters of these loose sheets”/“bystry jegomość, który czytał początek tych luźnych kartek”; P 34), all of which is only a prelude to the closing sentence of the novella, in which he eventually reveals that the entire story is a falsification (more specifically a palimpsest – hence the novella’s subtitle). It remains unclear, however, whether all of the account is false (i.e. including the last sentence, which would make the novella end in the famous Cretan paradox), or all sentences except for the last one, or only the parts which have been overwritten (as in a palimpsest). Anyhow, it should be clear that in this example, notwithstanding the authorial pretences of the narrator, the reader is left behind with no clue whatsoever as to the reliability of what is narrated.<sup>15</sup>

In the ‘actual’ novel, to conclude, the production of deceitful ‘texts’ of reality is taken over by some of the main characters. Piotr Strumieński, for instance, to whom most of the attention is devoted, is depicted as a fabulist *pur sang*, who incessantly attempts to impose his mythical ideal of posthumous love on everyday reality – an ill-fated project which is evaluated by the narrating author as the struggle between the “constructive element” (“pierwiastek konstrukcyjny”) of human culture and the “palubic element” (“pierwiastek pałubiczny”) of Nature. As Ewa Szary-Matywiecka has correctly suggested, both Strumieński (in the biography *Księga miłości* or *The Book of Love*) and his rival Gasztold (in the novel *Chora miłość* or *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) with which the ‘real’ events (i.e. what really happened to Strumieński and the other characters) are overwritten:

If *The Book of Love* and *A Sick Love* are characterized by the mythology of love, then one of the goals of *Pałuba* is to lay bare the ideology of love which is concealed in them. Compared to the former texts, *Pałuba* is 'another' text, even though it was generated by the same story. As a consequence, in *Pałuba* the story as such appears to be a variable type of text. For the texts which have been generated by it, and particularly the text of *Pałuba*, evoke ever new interpretations.

(Jeśli [...] *Księgę miłości* oraz *Chorą miłość* cechuje mitologia miłości, to *Pałuba* napisana została po to, by odkryć między innymi ideologię miłości w nich ukrytą. *Pałuba* jest w stosunku do tamtych tekstów 'innym' tekstem, choć generowanym przez tę samą fabułę. Okazuje się więc, że fabuła jako taka [...] jest w *Pałubie* wariantnym typem tekstu. Albowiem generowane przez nią teksty, a w szczególności tekst *Pałuby*, są terenami sensu ruchowego i relacyjnego; Szary-Matywiecka 1979: 28)

As a matter of fact, this series of unreliable interpretations of reality is brought to a climax in the final chapters of the novel, when Pawełek, who is literally an incarnation of his father's ideals, ironically exposes Strumieński's myth of metaphysical love by starting a sexual relationship with the loose village idiot Kseńka Pałuba, who clearly (and even literally) represents the "palubic element".

In *Ferdydurke*, the proliferation of competing versions of reality is less intense than in *Pałuba*. On the other hand, the fact that most of the story is told by a homodiegetic I-narrator makes the account more vulnerable when compared to Irzykowski's novel. In fact, it is often unclear whether certain events are really happening, or if they are merely misevaluated or misread within the context of the narrating author's theory of form. Some striking examples of this can be found in the chapters dealing with Józio's stay at the house of the Młodziakowie (the Youngbloods). Afraid of being definitively deformed by Zutka Młodziakówna - the



“modern schoolgirl” (“nowoczesna pensjonarka”) – and her parents, Józio strikes back by incessantly casting his gaze on their daily activities (cf. the chapter title “Podglądanie i dalsze zapuszczanie się w nowoczesność”/“Peeping and Further Incursion into Modernity”).<sup>16</sup> In the scene in which he peeps at Zutka through the keyhole, for instance, he seems to overestimate what is happening. More specifically, his mere voyeurism is described as a real battle of forms: “The girl with the peeped-at profile fought long and hard in silence, and the fight consisted of her not batting an eye” (FF 151; “Dziewczyna z podpatrywanym profilem walczyła ze mną czas dłuższy ciężko i w milczeniu, a walka polegała na tym, że nawet nie mrugnęła okiem”; F 173). After a grotesque “nasal duet” (FF 151; “dwugłos nosowy”; F 173), however, the keyhole episode ends in a draw. At the end of the chapter, Józio resumes his attack as “an idea of a plot [dawns] on [him]” (FF 166; “zaświtał pomysł pewnej intrygi”; F 186). The plot consists of arranging some kind of triangular relationship between Zutka, her admirer Kopyrda, and Józio’s guardian, professor Pimko, by forging two identical letters from Zutka to both men in which she proposes a rendezvous in her room around midnight. Again, Józio presupposes an immediate impact of this fresh ‘form’ on the other characters. All subsequent events are perceived by him through the spectacles of the new plot which has been imposed on them, whereupon these everyday events take on grotesque features and eventually culminate in a big fight between all protagonists, except for Józio, who further complicates the narrative situation upon his departure by casting doubts on the entire episode: “Farewell, oh modern one, farewell Youngbloods and Kopyrda, farewell Pimko – no, not farewell, because how could I say farewell to something that didn’t exist anymore” (FF 190; “Żegnaj, nowoczesna, żegnajcie, Młodziakowie i Kopyrdo, żegnaj, Pimko – nie, nie żegnajcie, bo jakże żegnać się z czymś, czego już nie ma”; F 209).

Just like in *Pałuba*, the narrative instability in *Ferdydurke* is not restricted to the level of the story. When arriving at his second ‘Preface’, for instance, the narrating author starts to display features ranging from helplessness to madness as well:

And again a preface... and I'm a captive to a preface, I can't do without a preface, I must have a preface, because the law of symmetry requires that the story in which the child runs deep in Filidor should have a corresponding story in which the child runs deep in Filibert, while the preface to Filidor requires a corresponding preface to Filibert. Even if I want to I can't, I can't, and I can't avoid the ironclad laws of symmetry and analogy. But it's high time to interrupt, to cease, to emerge from the greenery if only for a moment, to come back to my senses and peer from under the weight of a billion little sprouts, buds, and leaves so that no one can say that I've gone crazy, totally blah, blah. (FF 193)

I znowu przedmowa... i zniewolony jestem do przedmowy, nie mogę bez przedmowy i muszę przedmowę, gdyż prawo symetrii wymaga, aby *Filidorowi dzieckiem podszytemu* odpowiadał *dzieckiem podszyty Filibert*, przedmowie zaś do *Filidora* przedmowa do *Filiberta dzieckiem podszytego*. Choćbym chciał, nie mogę, nie mogę i nie mogę uchylić się żelaznym prawom symetrii oraz analogii. Ale czas najwyższy przerwać, przestać, wyrzucić z zieleni chociażby na chwilę i spojrzeć przytomnie spod ciężaru miliarda kiełków, pączków, listków, by nie powiedziano, że oszalałem ble, ble i bez reszty; F 212)

In other words, after his brilliant move to throw off the form of the novel by subsequently prefacing and inserting the story of Filidor, the narrating author now has no other choice than to admit being trapped in a new form. Even more, in his struggle not to go crazy, he actually does, as the following, completely distorted overview of all the different "torments" ("męki") of his book, in my opinion, clearly proves. In other words, the narrating author, whom so many critics have considered to be an authoritative source for interpreting the

novel, turns out to be a madman. In a similar way as in *Pałuba*, the reader is left behind with almost nothing to go on in naturalizing what is represented. Even those readers who still believe in some stable interpretative horizon see their exegetic project dismissed as being sheer nonsense as they read the famous last sentence: "It's the end, what a gas, / And who's read it is an ass!" (FF 291; "Koniec i bomba / A kto czytał, ten trąba!"; F 292).

To summarize, in both of the novels under scrutiny the reader is faced with a seemingly omniscient narrating author, who appears to direct the reader towards the text's interpretation, until it turns out that he has merely increased the mystery. After the construction of a consistent story world out of the entirety of the narrative data has been thwarted, however, a new and surprising reality can come to the surface: the reality of the novelistic text itself, in all its palimpsestic complexity.<sup>17</sup> As the objectified 'author' turns out to be nothing more than a defective representation of the ever-absent authorial subject of this textual reality, the reader is invited to become the subject of the text himself and to recommence his reading on the metafictional level of the text. As Mark Currie has argued, this level should not be confused with the 'discursive' (metaliterary, metapoetical) parts of a certain novelistic text. Rather does it constitute in itself a "borderline discourse [...] between fiction and criticism, [...] which takes that border as its subject" (1995: 2), of which the 'discursive' (metaliterary, metapoetical) parts of a given text are merely explicit representations. What a metafictional reading of both *Pałuba* and *Ferdynand* can learn us, then, is that any representation of reality, and *a fortiori* a literary representation, is always a form, a cultural construct which can merely offer us an approach to some truth, but never the truth as such.

### *Conclusion*

The aim of the present paper was to determine what made such leading literary voices of the interwar period as Schulz and Sandauer conclude that *Ferdynand* was a direct descendant of, if not simply influenced by Irzykowski's only novel *Pałuba*. The critical reconstruction of

both Schulz's and Sandauer's comments has revealed that two important sources of similarity between these novels are highlighted in their accounts: a shared belief in the inevitable inauthenticity of mankind and all of its cultural (linguistic, literary) constructs on the one hand, and an analogous self-informing ('autothematical') layer on the other. Upon closer examination, however, it appears that neither these critics nor many of their successors have sufficiently taken both texts' narratorial complexity into consideration. As a result, the peremptory comments and reading guidelines of the novels' narrating authors have too easily been attributed to their real authors, whereupon the pure 'literariness' of *Ferdydurke* and (in particular) *Paľuba* has too often been overshadowed by the novels' 'discursive' (philosophical as well as literary critical) value.

In the second part of the article, therefore, I have strongly argued in favor of a more cautious approach to both novels' 'discursivity' on the basis of contemporary narratological insights. More specifically, I have suggested to throw off the texts' authorial mask and to probe into the reliability of the narrator's account. It appears that not only do the different protagonists incessantly impose new artificial forms on their fictional reality, but also do the seemingly omniscient narrating authors at times expose the fallibility of their account, thus undermining their own claims on narrative authority. As a result, the reader is left behind in the middle of a purely textual reality which is open to an infinite series of interpretative activities, none of which will appear to be the ultimate one. In fact, the impossibility of a final reading was already announced by the novels' titles, which, notwithstanding their signifying pretenses, both turn out to be mere nonsense words – *signifiants* without a *signifié*.<sup>18</sup> Whereas a referential reading of the textual structure must inevitably result in an infinite hermeneutic spiral, however, a metafictional reading of the textual process will at least allow the critic to become conscious of the relativity of any representational form – including his own literary critical account.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is what he wrote to Artur Sandauer in 1958, in a comment on one of the latter's essays on *Ferdydurke* (taken from a French translation in Jelenski & de Roux 1971: 127): "Je ne sais pas si vous n'avez pas exagéré un peu le rôle de Irzykowski et de sa *Pałuba*. Irzykowski je le connais a peine et je n'ai jamais vu de mes yeux *Pałuba* (quoique vous m'attribuiez une "nette dépendance" de *Pałuba* [...]) ("I am not sure if you did not exaggerate a bit the role of Irzykowski and his *Pałuba*. I hardly know Irzykowski and I have never seen *Pałuba* with my own eyes (although you ascribe to me a "pure dependence" on *Pałuba*))."

<sup>2</sup> *Pałuba* was published in Lwów (Lviv) in 1903 (by B. Poloniecki) and was not reprinted until 1948 (by Wiedza in Warsaw).

<sup>3</sup> More specifically, the novel consists of five parts: the introductory novella 'Sny Marii Dunin (palimpsest)' ('The Dreams of Maria Dunin (A Palimpsest)'), the 'actual' novel 'Pałuba (studium biograficzne)' ('Pałuba (A Biographical Study)'), and three explanatory essays. 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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: 'Konstruktywny nihilizm' ('Constructive Nihilism'; 1969 [1947]), 'O ewolucji sztuki narracyjnej w XX wieku' ('On the Evolution of Narrative Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century'; 1981a [1956]), 'Samobójstwo Mithrydatesa' ('Mithridates' Suicide'; 1981b [1967]), and 'Mała estetyka' ('A Small Aesthetics'; 1981c [1970]).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Sandauer's definition of *autotematyzm* (termed here *samotematyczność*) in 'Constructive nihilism': "The content of the work - in our country Irzykowski once has hazarded to do this in *Pałuba* - 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” (“Treścią dzieła – porywał się na to kiedyś u nas Irzykowski w *Pałubie* – ma być jego własna geneza, samo ma służyć sobie za historię i komentarz, zamknięte w koło doskonale i samowystarczalne, perpetuum mobile nicości. Powstaje nowy rodzaj literatury – samotematycznej”; 1969 [1947]: 42).

<sup>6</sup> As for Schulz, Sandauer’s seminal essay ‘Rzeczywistość zdegradowana (Rzecz o Brunonie Schulzu)’ (‘The Degraded Reality (A Contribution on Bruno Schulz)’; 1964 [1956]) should be mentioned.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Sandauer’s statement that *Ferdydurke* was written “in the form of fantastic memoirs” (“w formę fantastycznego pamiętnika”; 1981e [1957]: 440) because “wanting to compromise everything, Gombrowicz could not spare himself, and wanting to compromise himself, he had to introduce himself in the plot” (“chcąc skompromitować wszystko, nie mógł oszczędzić i siebie, a chcąc skompromitować siebie, musiał wprowadzić się do akcji”; 440-441).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gombrowicz’s own statement mentioned earlier.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> This tradition includes such postwar critical works as Wyka 1977 [1948], Lipiński 1949, Zengel 1958, Dąbrowska 1963, Werner 1965, Głowiński 1969, Stępnik 1973, Taylor Sen 1972, Budrecka 1981, Drozdowski 1987 and Eile 1996: 42-45.

<sup>11</sup> The most important critical works on the discursive value of *Pałuba* have already been mentioned. As for Gombrowicz, there seems to be a general tendency to treat both his strictly literary (narrative and dramatic) and his more ‘discursive’ (essayistic, literary critical, epistolary) writings predominantly as equivalent and fully reliable accounts of the real author’s personal opinions. It is common knowledge, of course, especially since Janusz Sławiński devoted his influential paper ‘Sprawa Gombrowicza’ (‘The Gombrowicz Case’) to this problem,

that the author himself has provoked such a sterile reading by continuously imbuing his works with all sorts of self-commentaries and interpretative clues (cf. Bielecki 2004: 7-22 for a critical view on this permanent threat of an “interpretative impasse” (“interpretacyjny impas”; 12) in *gombrowiczologia*). Whatever the case may be, in the last couple of years only, numerous monographs have been published on Gombrowicz’s philosophical views or eccentric personality as represented in both his literary and ‘discursive’ works, rather than on his poetics *sensu stricto* (e.g. Fiała 2002, Jaszewska 2002, Margański 2001, Nowak 2000, Markowski 2004, Millati 2002, Peiron 2002, Pieszak 2003 & Salgas 2004). Yet, however much the critical reception of both Irzykowski’s and Gombrowicz’s works will always be obscured by their inevitable self-informing (metaliterary and even ‘meta-authorial’) dimension, one should try to overcome this methodological aporia by distinguishing, at least, between the two writers’ literary (narrative) and non-literary (discursive) output.

<sup>12</sup> Similarly to Bolecki’s new approach towards the interwar period, Brygida Pawłowska (1995 and again in Pawłowska-Jądrzyk 2002) and Krzysztof Kłosiński (2000) have argued for a more comprehensive reading of earlier works such as *Pałuba* as well – the former by stressing previously unnoticed grotesque and parodic elements in Irzykowski’s novel, the latter by launching the notion of “stylization” (“stylizacja”; 2000: 21) as central to the entire corpus of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Polish experimental fiction.

<sup>13</sup> Propagators of this idea of an unequivocal narratorial split between the level of the narration (discourse) and the level of the story include Michał Głowiński (1969) and Bogdana Carpenter (1977). Głowiński, for instance, explicitly connects the dual narration in *Pałuba* 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 this world” (“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"; 261-262). In a similar way, Carpenter posits a "duality of the narrator" in *Ferdydurke* by arguing that "[e]very action, gesture, and thought of the fifteen-year-old [sic] Johnnie is doubled by a reflection of its meaning and significance by his thirty-year old double" (155). In the same paper, as a matter of fact, Carpenter gives a good example of how critics eventually keep relying on the authority of the narrating author: "Whenever the situation becomes fictional the narrator is both the subject and object of the narrative. Johnnie, Pimko and all the other characters in the novel are after all only the narrator's fabrications, necessary to make the author's experience real. They are just devices in a narrative invented and manipulated by the 'novelist's narrating persona'" (155).

<sup>14</sup> I will hereafter refer to the Polish version with the abbreviation P. All English translations are my own.

<sup>15</sup> In my opinion, although many critics have considered it sufficiently clear, even the narrating author's comment on the novella's narrator does not alter this situation. Quite the contrary, as the narrating author considers the 'actual' novel and the novella to be similar (cf. supra), he seems to suggest that one should not trust him either: "The author officially expresses his beliefs, under which one ought to detect his other beliefs, which are diametrically opposed to the former. Given that at the end of the novella even these other beliefs are put in quotation marks by the author, one can state that 'Maria Dunin' is a palimpsest to the second power" ("Autor wypowiada oficjalnie przekonania, pod którymi należy dopatrywać się innych jego przekonań, wręcz przeciwnych tamtym. Ponieważ zaś przy końcu autor nawet i te drugie przekonania ujmuje w cudzysłów, przeto można powiedzieć, że 'Maria Dunin' jest palimpsestem do kwadratu"; P 560).



<sup>16</sup> The original version of *Ferdydurke* employed here is Gombrowicz 2000a. All English translations will be taken from Gombrowicz 2000b. I will hereafter refer to these versions with the abbreviations F (Polish) and FF (English).

<sup>17</sup> As Colleen Taylor Sen has correctly remarked, both novels contain “earlier works written by the same author” (1973: 300), more specifically ‘The Dreams of Maria Dunin’ and the inserted stories on Filidor and Filibert, all of which had been written (and some even published) several years before. In my opinion, this shared device can be interpreted as a deliberate strategy to affirm the novels’ textuality rather than their fictional reality.

<sup>18</sup> Whereas *Ferdydurke* at best refers to Freddy Durkee, a character who appears in chapter 6 of Sinclair Lewis’s novel *Babbitt*, *Pałuba* has stronger claims on being a clue to the novel’s final meaning. As Krzysztof Kłosiński has appropriately remarked, however, “the function of this word, which is a nickname, then becomes a name and eventually the title of the book, continues to be the function of a pure *signifiant* (“[f]unkcja tego słowa, które jest przezwą, staje się imieniem, w końcu tytułem książki, [...] pozostaje funkcją czystego *significant*”; 2000: 35).

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