

Pałuby in Bruno Schulz's Workshop

DAVID A. GOLDFARB
Barnard College, Columbia University

ABSTRACT

The word, *pałuba*, figures prominently in Schulz's *Traktat o manekinach*. The waxwork figures that Schulz mentions are *pałub* of a very interesting sort. They are cast from underlying stories. Schulz writes, 'Demiurge, that great master and artist, made matter invisible, made it disappear under the surface of life. We, on the contrary, love its creaking, its resistance, its [pałubiasta] clumsiness' - again the elusive hag, here as an adjective, is lost in translation. A few pages later, the author of the treatise asks, 'Can you imagine the pain, the dull imprisoned suffering, hewn into the matter of that dummy (*pałuba*) which does not know why it must be what it is, why it must remain in that forcibly imposed form which is no more than a parody?' This is not the 'dummy' (manekin, mannequin) of the title, but a powerful effigy, commensurate with the inchoate power of matter imprisoned in form.

Among the interwar Polish avantgarde, the central question is that of 'form', and this paper considers the concept of *pałuba* as an element in a Schulzian theory of form. The term, *pałuba*, enters the language of Polish modernism as the title of a radically experimental novel by the critic and essayist, Karol Irzykowski, and it could be argued that this novel served to liberate writers like Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz in their experiments in prose. Schulz's contribution to this debate might be the notion that there is nothing that does not partake of sublimity when viewed through the 'poetic' imagination capable of identifying and reassembling the lost mythologies in any degraded scrap of matter, revealing the spectrality of its pałubiastość.

Pałuba is a word that confounds all of Schulz's translators and perhaps even native Polish speakers. Jerzy Jarzębski has said that *pałuba* is a Polish word that needs to be translated into Polish every time it is used¹. Celina Wieniewska cannot settle on a single English word for it in her translation of Schulz, using in one instance 'effigy' and in another case 'dummy', but usually she simply passes it over². She is not alone in this difficulty. One of Schulz's French translators, Georges Sidre, renders it alternately as *idole* and *mannequin*³. *Mannequin* or 'dummy' risks conflation with the tailor's mannequins or dummies of Schulz's *Traktat o manekinach* (Treatise on Tailor's Dummies) in Wieniewska's version, and while *idole* captures some of the sense of

¹ Jarzębski said this in an oral response to an earlier version of this paper in Montreal at the conference entitled *Bruno Schulz: New Readings, New meanings*, May 4-5, 2007.

² B. Schulz, *The complete fiction of Bruno Schulz*, tr. C. Wieniewska, Walker & Co, New York, 1989.

³ B. Schulz, *Les Boutiques de Cannelle*, tr. G. Sidre, T. Douchy, G. Lisowski, Denoël, Paris, 1974, pp.82-84.

mystery around the word *pałuba* and hints at Schulz's fascination with idolatry in his stories, in his drawings on masochistic religious themes and, above all, in *The Booke of Idolatry* (Xięga bałwochwalcza). *Idole* does not convey the rough-hewn ugliness suggested by *pałuba*. Joseph Hahn renders it consistently, if innocuously, in German as 'der Puppe' (puppet)⁴. The German translator's consistency acknowledges the status of *pałuba* as a keyword (in Raymond Williams' sense) for Schulz, and 'Puppe' is a very interesting choice, since puppets as they are used in the theatre can produce a feeling of the uncanny, but while Schulz's *pałuby* might be seen as puppets, most puppets could not be seen as *pałuby*. Colleen Taylor Sen, in one of few articles in English⁵ on Karol Irzykowski's radically experimental novel entitled *Pałuba* (1903)⁶, discusses the word extensively without translating it, acknowledging its resistance to translation in her first footnote.

In the relevant sense for Irzykowski and Schulz, *pałuba* might be translated as 'hag', and it would usually refer to an effigy or doll in the form of a hag. In section two of *August*, for instance, Schulz describes a garden

there, those protuberant [pałuby of] bur clumps spread themselves like resting peasant women, half-enveloped in their own swirling skirts⁷

The image suggested here (omitted by Wieniewska) is of a roughly carved folk doll, perhaps like a wooden 'świętek' or the straw-stuffed effigy of Marzanna, burned and drowned in an annual festival celebrating the end of winter and the arrival of spring. The assonance of this line

tam te wylupiaście pałuby łopuchów wybałuszyły się

which Wieniewska hints at in her English version, suggests that perhaps Schulz found a

⁴ B. Schulz, *Die Zimtläden*, tr. Josef Hahn, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich, 1961, pp.51-52.

⁵ C. T. Sen, *Karol Irzykowski's Pałuba: A Guidebook to the Future*, SEEJ. 17, Autumn 1973, pp.288-300.

⁶ K. Irzykowski, *Pałuba, sny Marii Dunin*, ed. A. Budrecka. Biblioteka Narodowa Ossolineum, Wrocław, 1981.

⁷ B. Schulz in *Opowiadania, wybór esejów i listów*, ed. J. Jarzębski, Biblioteka Narodowa Ossolineum, Wrocław, 1990, p.7.

particular poetic quality even in the sound of this word.

The critic and essayist Karol Irzykowski brings the word *paluba* into the discourse of Polish modernism with his novel, which begins with a dream sequence, followed by a psychoanalytic biography of the main character, and then layers of notes and pseudo-scholarship amending, correcting and negating the previous text. Irzykowski was not otherwise known for fiction, though he was a prolific critic and one of the first European critics to write about cinema in a serious way. While his novel is virtually unknown outside of Poland, it was the break with historical and psychological realism that would free writers like Witkacy, Witold Gombrowicz and Schulz to invent new forms of prose fiction. Schulz in fact mentions Irzykowski's novel in a review of Gombrowicz's novel, *Ferdydurke*, proposing that *Paluba* was the true predecessor to *Ferdydurke*, but had failed because it was ahead of its time⁸.

Irzykowski is pointedly unclear about the meaning of his title. The authorial persona in the text asserts that it was chosen for its symbolic value, which he only begins to explicate toward the end of the text⁹. It enters the narrative mysteriously as an appellation that Pawełek, the son of the main character, Piotr Strumieński, applies to his deceased mother, Angelika Kauffman. Pawełek is later seduced by the village idiot, known as Kseńka Pałuba. Given that the most relevant meaning of *paluba* for Irzykowski is a doll in the form of an ugly hag (*paluba* can also refer to a covered wagon or various other kinds of covering - more on this later), perhaps the title might be taken as a reaction to the *sine qua non* of the nineteenth-century Polish realist novel, another famous 'doll', Bolesław Prus's *Lalka* (The Doll). *Lalka* exemplifies all the characteristics of the genre - a wealthy merchant of the rising middle class in love with a young lady of the declining aristocracy, rich descriptions of material reality, lengthy internal monologues, the background of world politics, the tension between the country and the city, the margins of Europe and the center (i.e., Paris). Irzykowski's *Paluba* relies on a

⁸ *ibid.*, p.389.

⁹ K. Irzykowski, *op. cit.*, pp.390-391.

thin plot - Angelika dies; Strumieński is remarried to a cousin, Ola; Strumieński spends the rest of his life longing for Angelika - relatively little dialogue or direct reporting of characters' thoughts and vague descriptions of places and material culture. Irzykowski regards all these narratives typical of realist fiction as 'little cloaks' (płaszczki) - conventions of social life that stand in the way of authenticity. Irzykowski's ardently modernist stance toward realism is much like the disdain for Sentimentalism among realists like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Irzykowski buries plot beneath piles of metafiction and interventions of the authorial voice.

Irzykowski raises the word *pałuba* to the status of philosophy in the phrase *pierwiastek pałubyczny* - the 'pałubic element'. In the last section of the work, Irzykowski offers something of an explanation, acknowledging that he has self-consciously used an obscure term, rather than something more obvious like 'rectifying element' as a defamiliarizing gesture. Note that *Pałuba* was published fourteen years before Shklovskij would theorize *ostranienie* ('estrangement' or 'defamiliarization') as a literary device in *Art as Technique*. Irzykowski writes

That which is unlike anything else, should take a name which is unlike anything else, wild and strange, uncombed and unpleasant - uncomfortable to use, and therefore unlikely to become a worn coin¹⁰.

He wants a word that is unsettling in its own language, let alone in translation.

Sienkiewicz, for instance, uses the word in a brief internal monologue in his novel *The Połaniecki Family* (*Rodzina Połanieckich*), as a colorful expression that conveys the bluster and naïveté of the character who speaks it to himself. Thinking disdainfully of Aneta's attraction to a 'cherub with the mind of an idiot' by the name of Kopowski, Zawilowski - a character who admittedly only understands women insofar as he has read about them in books - muses

A poodle knows better what to say to him. [...] And a woman with such aspirations to understanding, to knowledge, to artistry, to understanding all the shades of thought and feeling could lower herself for such a pałuba. This he did not know how to interpret, even with what he had read about women¹¹.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 391.

¹¹ H. Sienkiewicz, *Rodzina Połanieckich*, vol.III, *Dziela*, vol 34, PIW, Warsaw, 1949, p.32.

What better word to invoke in describing an uninterpretable behavior but a seemingly uninterpretable word. Now interestingly, *pałuba* refers here to the male character - perhaps we would translate it as 'hulk' rather than 'hag' suggesting a lumbering empty shell of a man, recalling the meaning of the word that refers to a covered wagon, which would be the oldest definition, with a citation dating to 1394 in Stanisław Urbańczyk's *Słownik staropolski*. Linde's dictionary also gives the possibility of the masculine *pałub* as the stump of a tree. In Karłowicz's dictionary, the character Zawilowski's usage of *pałuba* as a stupid person (głupiec) is the last of eleven definitions and it would correspond nicely to the common English metaphor 'dumb as a stump'.

Irzykowski writes:

'Pałuba' is the symbol of everything that shatters the imaginary boundary of a situation from the outside or from the inside, in brutal and dangerous or shameful and shaming form, everything in man that is doubt and uncertainty, pangs of conscience and feelings of incongruity, sin against the Holy Spirit and at the same time His voice, a sentence from the prison tower of egoism to the monstrous precipice of sincerity, the cutting of a nerve that feels only itself and coming to feel the nerve of the world. It is a symbol of the moment in which the ground of what is best and most valued in life is consciously pulled out from under one's feet, the moment of the greatest tribulation and the greatest concentration, the moment of a sudden broadening of the horizon in all directions, the moment of enchantment as the source of a new age, the moment of hyperemotion and hyperoriginality¹².

As Czesław Miłosz interprets this passage,

[t]he word *pałuba* (roughly 'hag') [...] stands for all those moments when [...], for a short instant, authenticity penetrates a basic inauthenticity¹³.

We might see *pałuba* in this sense as a reflection of the aesthetic goals of Expressionism - that the artistic work be a direct expression of emotion, a precursor to Witkacy's theory of 'Pure Form' and, as Schulz observed in his review of *Ferdydurke*, a source of

¹² K. Irzykowski, op.cit., p. 391.

¹³ C. Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, 2nd edn., University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983, p. 363.

Gombrowicz's fascination with 'immaturity' or the raw core of desire concealed by fashion and social norms¹⁴.

Among the interwar Polish avantgarde, the central question is that of 'form', and this *paluba* might be the beginning of a Schulzian theory of form. The struggle for 'form' is joined most stridently by Witkacy with his theory of 'Pure Form', which is not exactly form as distinct from 'content' as one might associate with 'purity', but a kind of artistic representation that can be taken in whole and without mediation, producing 'the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence'. This idea is rooted most deeply in the theory of the Sublime, but perhaps more immediately in the aesthetics of Expressionism - the idea that a painting like Edward Munch's *The Scream* is not a representation of a man screaming into the fjord, but is in fact itself a scream. The key theorist of Expressionism was the Polish writer of the literary generation before Witkacy and Schulz, Stanisław Przybyszewski who wrote the text for Munch's first Berlin exhibition and is said to have suggested the concrete name *The Scream* for Munch's most famous painting, over Munch's original emotive title, *Despair*¹⁵. Witkacy argued that poetry, painting, and drama were capable of Pure Form, while prose in general could at best only represent the experience of the individual in the face of Pure Form - the exception being the prose of Bruno Schulz, which possessed this quality of poetry for Witkacy.

In Schulz the word figures most prominently in the *Treatise on Tailor's Dummies* (Traktat o manekinach). As the father articulates his theory of matter and form, he states,

The Demiurge, that great master and artist, made [matter] invisible, made it disappear under the play of life. We, on the contrary, love its creak, its resistance, its palubiasta clumsiness¹⁶

Again the elusive hag, here as an adjective, is lost in the English translation. This *paluba* cast here in the adjective form, *palubiasta*, offers its own creak (zgrzyt), resistance

¹⁴ B. Schulz in *Opowiadania...*op. cit., p. 389.

¹⁵ R. Heller, *Munch: His Life and Work*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, p. 130.

¹⁶ B. Schulz in *Opowiadania...*op. cit., p. 36.

(oporność), and clumsiness (niezgrabność). This word frustrates Schulz's translators precisely because it introduces the element of defamiliarization that Irzykowski found in it some thirty-odd years earlier.

An interesting analogue to *paluba* might be the word 'fetish', which has certainly become the worn coin that Irzykowski was attempting to avoid, through repeated use in Marxist and Freudian contexts. To understand the rhetorical power, however, of Marx's and later Freud's use of the term, we need to defamiliarize it by recalling its original sense from nineteenth-century ethnography. A fetish is originally a doll or object that carries spiritual power not inherent in the material of the object itself. When blues singers like Muddy Waters and Junior Wells sing, "I'm goin' down to Louisiana, to get me a mojo hand," they are referring to a spice bag that was thought to bestow sexual power on the wearer. This is a fetish. So when Marx refers to 'commodity fetishism', he is saying that capitalists are like primitives ascribing mystical power to iron, coal, and pork bellies. Freud, writing in the context of modernist primitivism, borrows from this underlying primitivistic analogy in his analysis of psychological sexual fetishism. By the time Schulz is writing his stories, the word 'fetish' had lost its original primitivist *mana*, but *paluba* retains this spiritual power to this day.

A few pages later in his description of the waxwork figures in a 'panopticon' or carnival sideshow, the author of the treatise asks,

Can you imagine the pain, the dull imprisoned suffering, hewn into the matter of that *paluba* which does not know why it must be what it is, why it must remain in that forcibly imposed form which is no more than a parody?¹⁷

The published English version renders *paluba* here as 'dummy' and the French version as 'idole'. This is not the 'dummy' (manekin, mannequin) of the title, but a powerful effigy, commensurate with the inchoate power of matter imprisoned in form. The contrast between the material reality of the wax figures and their 'forcibly imposed form' is very

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 38.

much analogous to Irzykowski's contrast between the 'pałubic element' and the 'cloak' of accepted social norms that conceal the reality of life.

Father refers to these figures three more times as *paluby*.

From this flows, gentlemen, the terrible sadness of all the jesting golems, of all the pałuby, brooding tragically on their funny grimaces¹⁸.

The golem of course is a monster of Jewish myth - a figure of coarse features like a *paluba*, recast in late versions as a superhuman figure who rescues the Jews from persecution, and seen by some contemporary scholars as the model for comic book characters like Superman.

Later Father asks,

Is there in this pałuba truly anything of Queen Draga, her double, or even the remotest shadow of her existence?¹⁹

He goes on to acknowledge that the name 'Queen Draga' carries more meaning than the figure. It is perhaps acknowledged that the tale of the Serbian common woman who married King Aleksandr Obrenovic, both killed in a conflict over succession to the Serbian throne in 1903, had begun to fade into obscurity by the time of Schulz's stories.

These waxwork figures are *paluby* of a very interesting sort. They are cast from underlying stories. The wax museum might be seen as another form of *The Booke*, Schulz's *Xięga*, or perhaps as a collection like Schulz's stamp album, rendered in three dimensions. Imprisoned in each figure is a substrate of mythic narrative - like the lost tale of the golem or the forgotten story of Queen Draga - which is reality for Schulz, as we would recognize from the frequently quoted passage in his essay, *The Mythicization of Reality*:

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 39.

Every fragment of reality lives by virtue of partaking in a universal sense²⁰.... Poetry happens when short-circuits of sense occur between words, a sudden regeneration of the primeval myths.... Not one scrap of an idea of ours does not originate in myth, isn't transformed, mutilated, denatured mythology. The most fundamental function of the spirit is inventing fables, creating tales.... [T]he building materials [that the search for human knowledge] uses were used once before; they come from forgotten, fragmented tales or "histories." Poetry recognizes these lost meanings, restores words to their places, connects them by the old semantics²¹.

Draga's story is after all a fairly conventional tale - the commoner who marries a king. Like many fairy tales it ends darkly. The wax figure with its uncanny physical realism utterly fails to tell the story. Schulz's fiction restores the lost connection.

In the father's final reference to *pałuby* he hints at the other possible meaning of *paluba*, related etymologically to 'kadłub', meaning the shell of a structure or the hull of a ship, or the alternate meaning of *paluba* as the cab of a wagon.

Have you heard at night the terrible howling of these waxen pałuby, shut up in the booths of the fair, the lamenting chorus of these hulls (kadłuby) of wood and porcelain, banging their fists on the walls of their prison?

The idea of the body as an empty shell, perhaps like a 'zombie', certainly resonates with Irzykowski's idea of the 'cloak' that conceals underlying reality, but it is a connection that Irzykowski leaves as implicit. Schulz again recovers lost meaning by bringing these words into proximity in a single sentence. We might ask whether this is what he meant all along, but the first reference to *pałuby* in the story *Autumn* unquestionably compares the clumps of burs to peasant dolls.

Aleksandr Brückner draws the connection in his etymological dictionary between 'kadłub' and the derogatory sense of *paluba* to mean an 'old hag' by virtue of the idea of concealment or covering, referring perhaps to the head scarves associated with old women, or possibly referring to their bodies as empty 'hulks'. By Schulz's time this would have become a submerged metaphor, another worn coin in Irzykowski's sense, or perhaps a palimpsest. To look at the worn coin and defamiliarize it in this way brings the

²⁰ I have chosen not to capitalize 'sense', as it is not capitalized in the original text. My ellipses.

²¹ *Letters and Drawings of Bruno Schulz with Selected Prose*, ed. J. Ficowski, tr. W. Arndt with V. Nelson, Fromm, New York, 1990, pp. 115-116.

sunken meaning to the surface, in contrast to Sienkiewicz who uses the term in a way that relies on layers of hidden implications below the surface to flesh out the colorful character who speaks such a word. We can see how both approaches are valid methods of artistic expression. For Sienkiewicz, the layers of submerged meaning contribute to Zawilowski's overall gestalt. Schulz unmasks these hidden layers as a way of exploring forgotten narratives and adds a layer of complexity to Irzykowski's theory of the 'pałubic element'. Schulz's contribution to the struggle for form in the interwar period might be the notion that there is nothing that does not partake of sublimity when viewed through the 'poetic' imagination capable of identifying and reassembling the lost mythologies in any degraded scrap of reality.