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(In)sincerity as a narrative strategy in Karol Irzykowski's "Sny Marii Dunin. Palimpsest"

Karol Irzykowski. Sincerity. Unreliable narrator. Liar's paradox. Palimpsest.

This article focuses on Karol Irzykowski's novella "Sny Marii Dunin. Palimpsest" (The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest, 1903) in relation to the author's understanding of the concept of sincerity. The novella provides several examples of rhetorical (in)sincerity: the untrustworthiness of the narrator, the liar's paradox, and the motif of the palimpsest-mystification. Drawing on Magdalena Popiel's distinction between intellectual and emotional modernist sincerity, and her assertion that Irzykowski is a leading representative of the former, as well as on Irzykowski's well-documented polemical stance towards the Młoda Polska (Young Poland) movement, the study argues that the novella can be read as an ironic commentary on emotional modernist sincerity and symbolist aesthetics.

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The writer, literary critic, and polemicist Karol Irzykowski (1873–1944) played a prominent role in Polish modernist and avant-garde literary life. His polemic writing was preoccupied with the aesthetic and philosophical concerns of his time, as he perceived literary criticism as “a way to expose the banal artistic solutions, while presenting new literary possibilities”¹ (Panek 2006, 27). One of the targets of his critique was the aesthetics of the *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland) movement, whose “stylistic mannerism”, according to Irzykowski, lay in the excessive use of “metaphors, vagueness, similes, creating an atmosphere of indefiniteness and unwanted ambiguity” (94).

Most English-language scholarship on Irzykowski has focused primarily on the experimental aspects of the novel *Pałuba*² ([1903] 1981), its metaliterary and autothematic elements (see, for example, Pietrkiewicz 1951; Sen 1973; Baer 1984; De Bruyn 2007, 2009), and the author’s psychoanalytical and pre-Freudian concerns (see the Eng. trans. of Dybel 2020; Magnone 2023). This article examines Karol Irzykowski’s novella “Sny Marii Dunin. Palimpsest”, often referred to in English academic texts as “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest”, published as part of *Pałuba*, as an example of an ironic critique of Young Poland’s style. Building on existing Polish scholarship on Irzykowski’s novella and on narrative theories, it synthesizes these interpretations while also foregrounding the role of the unreliable narrator.

KAROL IRZYKOWSKI’S CONCEPT OF SINCERITY

The concept of sincerity played an important role in the literary production of the Young Poland movement (1890–1918). Magdalena Popiel notes that “in the literary prose, the convention of the confession is realized most thoroughly in the diary type of novel and the first-person narration” (2008, 270). Furthermore, she differentiates between two types of sincerity: “sincerity as a language of feelings” and “sincerity as an art of thinking, intellectual sincerity” (272). Popiel identifies Irzykowski as a leading representative of the second tendency.

Several Polish scholars have examined Irzykowski’s understanding and literary representation of the category of sincerity in his numerous fictional and non-fictional texts, written in the last decade of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Jan Jakóbczyk (2005) and Kamil Kaczmarek (2024) analyze Irzykowski’s doctrines of “intimism” and sincerity in his diaries, epistolography, and polemics in the interwar period, pointing out his ever-evolving understanding and reconceptualization of sincerity – a process spanning half a century, numerous literary trends and several artistic generations. This observation aligns with Ryszard Nycz’s conclusion that “Irzykowski does not value (or is unable to attain) a systematic, immanent and logical order in which his own discourse could unfold,” but despite the “changeability” of his formulations there is “a level of continuance, coherence and fundamental stability in both his thinking and his critical style” (2017, 136–137).

Irzykowski integrates his theoretical reflections and metacommentaries in his seminal novel *Pałuba* (1903), where he admits that in the 1890s he and Stanisław Womela came up with the concept of “intimism”, to which he remained “faithful to this day”, even though he finds the intellectual secrets of the Self more important

than sexual ones³ (Irzykowski 1981, 413). In the programmatic essay manifesting his ideas about art “Czem jest Horla?” (What is Horla?, [1896] 1906), drawing inspiration from Maupassant’s short story, he connects sincerity to artistic expression. Furthermore, in *Paluba*, the author reinforces this connection by following the “dictate of absolute sincerity of the writer during the writing process”, which calls for alignment with one’s own personal experience (Budrecka 1981, V). In this complex and multifaceted novel, Irzykowski explicitly proposes “a culture of sincerity”, or “rather, a culture of wisdom”⁴ (Irzykowski 1981, 361–362). At the same time, he employs “the principle of contradiction and misleading the reader” as methods for achieving sincerity, operating with the tools of insincerity and “conventions of game and play” (Kaczmarek 2024, 87), thus showing his nuanced understanding of the notion.

A similar approach can be observed in the novella “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest”. The text was written in the late 1890s, around the same time as “What is Horla?”, but it was published in 1903 as part of the volume containing the novel *Paluba* and three metacommentaries, one of which is titled “Wyjaśnienie ‘Snów Marii Dunin’ i związek ich z *Palubą*” (Explanations of ‘The dreams of Maria Dunin’ and its connection to *Paluba*). Critical evaluations of “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest” range from viewing it as a curious experiment, which pales artistically in comparison to *Paluba*, to considering it an autonomous work of art with its own “complete fabular distinctiveness” (Budrecka 1981, XI). The novella also proposes, as Jerzy Franczak notes, “a game with the architext, with literary conventions and linguistic styles, while at the same time leading to reflection on the (im)possible absolute originality and the necessity of the game itself” (2007, 59). Moreover, it is an example of a rhetoric of (in)sincerity – or rather, of insincerity posing as sincerity – which can be read as an ironic undermining or even a parody of the modernist emotional sincerity Popiel describes.

THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR AND THE CLAIMS OF (IN)SINCERITY

The novella “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest” contains the confessions of the narrator, who during one of his archeological expeditions finds himself immersed in the oneiric world of the titular character and the workings of the vaguely described secret society of the Brotherhood of the Great Bell. As Colleen Taylor Sen briefly outlines the novella’s plot in one of the earlier English articles on *Paluba*, “their lives are dedicated to digging for a bell buried thousands of years ago, for legend has it that if the bell should ever ring destruction and chaos would descend upon the earth,” while Maria Dunin is “their leader’s daughter, a young girl who spends most of her time dreaming of a cruel and mysterious lover” (1973, 297).

Irzykowski regards the fantastic element, from which the novella originates, as less important than its core idea – the conviction that “certain ideals [...] if taken seriously and carried through the end would have to destroy a person”⁵ (1981, 461). Despite (or precisely because of) its fabular vagueness and symbolism, the novella is also playful and ironic, an effect that it achieves through the narration, which

abounds in implicit clues about its own unreliability, as well as explicit hints about its insincerity posing as truthfulness. As a first-person narration with a fictional homodiegetic narrator, Irzykowski's novella can be seen as an example of a story full of plot omissions, logical discrepancies, and manipulative rhetorical appeals to the listener/reader. Thus, the sincerity of the narrator in "The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest" can be called into question, marking him as clearly unreliable (De Bruyn 2009, 104; Markiewicz 2011, 132).

Vera Nünning identifies three key criteria for assessing a narrator's character and trustworthiness: reliability ("the expectation that speakers will act according to their words and manifest intentions"); sincerity ("the belief that someone is giving a truthful account of his or her beliefs, knowledge, feeling and motives"), and competence ("the belief in the ability of the speaker to do what he or she intends"; 2015, 7). Nünning presents three types of clues that signal the presence of an unreliable narrator and which are "employed in structural and cognitive narratology": "text-internal" ("inconsistencies concerning the story and/or the discourse level as well as stylistic features"), "text-external" (general knowledge about the world) and "paratextual" ("such as signals in the title or foreword"; 10).

A paratextual clue, an authorial verdict of the doctor of archeology's trustworthiness, is given in "Explanations of 'The dreams of Maria Dunin' and its connection to *Patuba*", where the narrator is described as someone "with whom the author does not sympathize, on the contrary, he seeks to undermine him"⁶ (Irzykowski 1981, 458). However, in the text of the novella itself, the reader encounters a narrator, who insists on the veracity of his story and protests whenever it is being questioned, claiming that he is both reliable and sincere. The storytelling unfolds according to a rule of three, involving the introduction of a detail, its reinforcement for the audience, and a final resolution or subversion. After an evening in a socialites' salon, the narrator promises to recount an older adventure sincerely, in which he played "a role more difficult than humiliating"⁷ (3). The second time the narrator highlights the nature of his story, it is presented as a written account, for which a reader accuses him of "pushing [himself] into the foreground", while ridiculing Maria Dunin and "leaving her in the shadows"⁸ (23). Despite the discrepancy between the oral and written form, the narrator again underlines his honesty ("the loyalty and reliability of my statements are beyond doubt"⁹; 23). The third time the story is mentioned – at the very end of the novella – the narrator subverts his whole account. He admits its fraudulent nature, confirming the reader's suspicions suggested by numerous clues in the text, and hints at a possible logical incongruity (i.e. a liar's paradox).

The intertextual clues of insincerity and unreliability in Irzykowski's novella are numerous and varied, yet interestingly, they could also be explained as signs of emotional involvement rather than malicious intent. The narrator's (rather brief) romantic infatuation with Maria Dunin, along with his alleged eagerness to help with her mysterious condition and to act as her lover and savior (self-diagnosed as "quixotism"¹⁰; 19) could reflect genuine emotional investment, which in turn might explain the distortions in his account. As Liesbeth Korthals Altes notes, there is not necessarily a clear opposition between sincerity and "other notions, ranging from prudence

and irony to dissimulation or lying” (2008, 109), and that “many of the signals listed for unreliability [...] might just as well be interpreted as stressing a narrator’s or a speaker’s sincerity” such as expressiveness, direct appeals to the reader’s sympathy, emotional involvement, and reflections on one’s credibility (119).

However, the accumulation of suspicious details in the novella begins to cast doubt on any plausible deniability on the narrator’s part. He presents his account with authority, valuing it above Maria’s perspective: “To avoid my lover’s chaotic expressions, I will tell everything myself”¹¹ (Irzykowski 1981, 11). Discrepancies begin to accumulate. His initial reaction to Maria Dunin’s ethereal beauty is soon replaced by ridicule of the conventional depiction of it (see Franczak 2007, 59–60). He makes unsubstantiated claims without prior confirmation (“as I already said”¹² introducing entirely new information; Irzykowski 1981, 15), and often omits crucial details as if to withhold uncomfortable or compromising information: “I recounted it immediately, naturally leaving out the indecent details”¹³ (7); “a letter, reproduced below, omitting words that could be misunderstood”¹⁴ (25). Moreover, he admits to being secretive and deliberately hiding details, albeit for a seemingly noble reason (“a certain holy idea, of which I will reveal only as much as duty allows me”¹⁵; 8), and even acknowledges faking his behavior to suit his plans for (helping?) Maria Dunin: “There were days when I was in a very false position, and often I did not know [...] where pretense ends and love begins”¹⁶ (27).

All those dubious statements, narrative inconsistencies and (semi)revelations are confirmed as deliberate misdirections in the novella’s closing lines. The narrator claims to have distanced himself from the case of Maria Dunin and her tragic fate and admits to having a selective memory of the past (“My mind records only those events that correspond to my principles and I have developed an admirable ability to reject uncomfortable impressions”¹⁷; 41). His last two confessions include revealing his pastime as a royal librarian – introducing fake texts among the old manuscripts – and admitting that “of all these palimpsests this one [i.e. the whole story of Maria Dunin] stands out for its sophistication, for I am the most distinguished member of the Brotherhood of the Great Bell!”¹⁸ (41). All pretense of sincerity is abandoned and the text reveals its true nature – that of a hoax.

THE LIAR’S PARADOX AND THE PALIMPSEST

The famous self-referential statement, known as the Epimenides paradox, named after the Cretan philosopher, asserts that “All Cretans are liars”. “The dreams of Maria Dunin”, however, ends with a logical contradiction resembling John Buridan’s sophism (“What I am saying is false”), described as a “stronger version of the liar’s paradox”¹⁹ (Lehner 2020, 478). What defines the liar’s paradox is its contradictory nature, its reversibility (“When we try to establish 1 as true, 2 becomes true; when we try to establish 2 as true, 1 becomes true, and so ad infinitum”), and self-referential character (“What makes the liar’s paradox unique is that it is taken to say nothing about anything except its own truth conditions”). Lehner even questions whether the reader could imagine a novel “that is as completely consumed in its truth conditions as the liar’s paradox is” (479–480).

It could be argued that “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest” employs the paradox as a narrative device to question the narrator’s motives and to examine the construction of its fictional world. The novella’s last sentence renders it both contradictory and reversible, while also drawing attention to the act of storytelling, because of the first-person homodiegetic narrator. As Lehner notes about Buridan’s sophism, it “somewhat” fulfills the requirement of self-referentiality through the use of “the first-person singular pronoun for the referring element, thereby making the statement’s reference dependent only on the existence of the individual speaker” (479). Aleksandra Budrecka, analyzing the possible logical implications of the liar’s paradox in Irzykowski’s work, argues that “the reality presented in the novella is the narrator, someone who says sentences and then observes their falsehood” and that “the fiction becomes the subject of the narrator’s conscious action. This action is the only fact of the work” (1981, XIX–XX).

On the other hand, Jerzy Franczak points out that Irzykowski questions whether “using the categories of truthfulness and falseness has any sense or only leads to paradoxes” (2007, 58). Franczak contends that “Irzykowski is not interested in finding a way out of the paradox” as he “decides to reject” these categories as elements of what he terms “shells of nomenclature” (58) – the system of notions and ideals that interpret and falsify the world (81).

Dieter De Bruyn also comments on the importance of the “logical paradox of the Epimenides type” in the interpretation of Irzykowski’s novella and follows Budrecka’s line of reasoning about it, adding that “the creative use of the principle of the palimpsest also results in a *foregrounding* of the textual character of *Patuba*. The act of ‘overwriting’ other texts confronts the reader with the finiteness of the visible text as opposed to the infinity of all possible texts” (2009, 105–106).

The palimpsest-forgery appears on both a paratextual level (in the title of the novella), in the text itself (again with three variations, as if the narrator tries to first embed an idea in the audience’s mind, then repeat it with a variation, and finally surprise with the reveal), and in the author’s commentary after the novel *Patuba*. Thus, it becomes a key concept in understanding the novella, or more precisely, understanding its contradictory nature, because, as Franczak claims, “what we initially take as guidepost, turns out to be a trap waiting for us, the depth – a *trompe l’oeil* illusion, and the original – a palimpsest” (2007, 56).

When claiming to seek a remedy for Maria Dunin’s intrusive dreams, the narrator devices a “brilliant trick” to falsify cases and insert fragments in the books she reads about her ailment “as if unintentionally”²⁰ (Irzykowski 1981, 17). When presented with a strange old manuscript, which appears to confirm the fantastic explanation of Maria’s condition, he tries to reject it as fake, claiming that he “was competent in this, because [his] eye had long been accustomed to recognizing old manuscripts”²¹ (21). The third time the palimpsest is mentioned, it is again related to the narrator’s “extraordinary abilities and extensive knowledge”²², which secured him the position of royal librarian. The doctor of archeology, before confessing the fraudulent nature of his whole account, admits that he produces “artificial palimpsests on a large scale”²³ (41).

The palimpsest functions not only as a motif in the novella but it also draws attention to the underlying cultural traditions, textual predecessors, and genre conventions and tropes, which are alluded to and parodied (Maria as a damsel in distress, the castle as a topos, the ominous atmosphere and the secrecy of the Brotherhood, etc.; see Franczak 2007, 61). It acquires an additional meaning in the metacommentary “Explanations of ‘The dreams of Maria Dunin’ and its connection to *Paluba*”, which states that:

Maria Dunin is a palimpsest, that is, essentially a mystification. [...] The author officially expresses certain beliefs, under which one should discern other beliefs of his, often directly opposed to the former. Since at the end the author even places these second beliefs in quotation marks, one can say that *Maria Dunin* is a palimpsest squared.²⁴ (Irzykowski 1981, 457)

Irzykowski adds one more detail, which confirms the notion of the work being “a palimpsest squared”. Despite embedding textual clues (in plain sight) that reveal the narrator’s untrustworthiness and undermine his supposed sincerity, and despite claiming to stand “against the Brotherhood on the side of Maria Dunin”²⁵ (464), the author ultimately declares his allegiance to the Brotherhood. Its function as a metaphorical “safety valve” reflects a “self-preservation instinct”²⁶ in human nature against the perils of taking an ideal to its extreme. Irzykowski goes a step further suggesting that this mechanism concerns those, who “ring the Great Bell the most”, such as poets and thinkers, who “at the decisive moment retreat from the consequences and murder Maria Dunin within themselves”²⁷ (462–463).

CONCLUSION

One might wonder why the proponent of a “culture of sincerity” (i.e. “the culture of wisdom”) would preface his novel *Paluba* with its very opposite – the figure of an insincere and untrustworthy narrator, whose manipulations are both evident in the text and explicitly commented on by the author. In “Explanations of ‘The dreams of Maria Dunin’ and its connection to *Paluba*”, Irzykowski connects the novella to his seminal novel *Paluba*, which is “the realization of a program, the fulfilment of the framework that vaguely took shape” in the previous text²⁸ (Irzykowski 1981, 466), while at the same time diverging entirely from its style and motifs. Thus, the oneiric vagueness and symbolism of the novella give way to the metaliterary commentary and the autothematic technique of the novel, while also parodying the style of Polish modernist works (see Franczak 2007, 12; Jauksz 2015, 60). This ironic and polemic approach is further corroborated by Małgorzata Okulicz-Kozaryn and Radosław Okulicz-Kozaryn’s analysis which interprets the novella as a concealed debate with Zenon Przesmycki, one of the Young Poland movement’s leading authors. This debate – which took place “in secret, using a code, in fact borrowed from the ‘adversary’” (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020, 63) – shows Irzykowski’s ambiguous attitude towards Young Poland’s aesthetics and ideas. On the one hand, as Marcin Jauksz points out, in the 1890s Irzykowski was “not yet the unequivocal advocate of self-awareness and intellectual control” and his writing was showing similarities to other Young Poland’s writers (2024, 45). On the other hand, it can be

contended that Irzykowski “did not see a place for himself outside Young Poland, but he reserved a separate place for himself within it – as a kind of contesteer” (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020, 62).

Considering the novella’s ironic potential and following Magdalena Popiel’s distinction between emotional and intellectual sincerity in Polish modernism, one could argue that the novella’s insincere narration also functions as a form of parody. It targets the emotional and exalted sincerity of many of Irzykowski’s contemporary writers, standing in contrast to the intellectual sincerity advocated in *Paluba*. As the novella’s final twist suggests, sincerity is difficult both to define and achieve, since it can take many forms, even that of “insincerity, as lie is in the service of truth”²⁹ (Irzykowski 1981, 362).

NOTES

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Polish are by the present author.

² The title of the novel – *Paluba* – has a few different meanings, which are commented on by the narrator in the work itself: “this is the name of a huge wooden ram used to drive poles in the river, or a mannequin used for trying women’s dresses, and the word is commonly used as a contemptuous nickname for ugly, unpleasant women” (Irzykowski 1981, 372). Additionally, the narrator cites in a footnote to this description Samuel Linde’s dictionary, which offers three meanings of the word: “1) a curtain, a covering for a wagon; 2) a stump, the hull (of a ship); 3) an old, malicious woman” (372). Some authors, who refer to Irzykowski’s work in English, use the translation “The Hag”, narrowing its meaning to the last definition; a translation, which – according to Joachim Baer – “is likely to mislead the reader” (1984, 32). Dieter De Bruyn also argues that the polysemic word *paluba* “has produces a heterogeneous novel of the same name” (2009, 124). Thus, in the article the novel is referred to as *Paluba*, its original title in Polish, while the novella “Sny Marii Dunin. Palimpsest” is translated as “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest”.

³ “Kierunkowi temu wierny dotychczas zostałem, tylko że zamiast tajemnic seksualnych [...] uznałem tajemnice intelektualne za ważniejsze.”

⁴ “A więc kultura szczerości? [...] Więc raczej kultura mądrości.”

⁵ “niektóre ideały [...] wzięte na serio i przeprowadzone aż do końca musiałyby zniszczyć człowieka”

⁶ “z którym autor się nie solidaryzuje, owszem, stara się go [...] skompromitować”

⁷ “rola raczej trudna niż upokarzająca”

⁸ “że się zanadto wypycham na pierwszy plan”, “zostawiam ją w cieniu”

⁹ “lojalność i rzetelność moich wynurzeń żadnej nie podlega wątpliwości”

¹⁰ “donkiszoteria”

¹¹ “Aby uniknąć chaotycznych wyrażań mojej kochanki, opowiem sam wszystko.”

¹² “Mówiłem już”

¹³ “opowiedziałem go natychmiast, naturalnie z opuszczeniem nieprzyzwoitych szczegółów”

¹⁴ “pismo, przytoczone poniżej z opuszczeniem słów, które by można fałszywie zrozumieć”

¹⁵ “pewnej świętej idei, z której tyle zdradzę, ile mi obowiązek pozwoli”

¹⁶ “Nastaly dnie, w których byłem w bardzo fałszywym położeniu, i nieraz sam nie wiedziałem [...] gdzie kończy się udawanie, a zaczyna miłość.”

¹⁷ “W moim umyśle zapisują się tylko te wypadki, które przystają do moich zasad, a wyrobiłem w sobie podziwienia godną zdolność odrzucania wrażeń niewygodnych.”

¹⁸ “A z owych palimpsestów ten właśnie celuje wyrafinowaniem, bo ja sam jestem najznakomitszym z Bractwa Wielkiego Dzwonu!”

¹⁹ David Lehner (2020, 478–479) provides the schema for this paradox: “1. If the sophism is true, it is false. 2. If the sophism is false, it is true. 3. If the sophism is true, it is both true and false (from 1).

4. If the sophism is false, it is both true and false (from 2). 5. Either the sophism is true, or it is false (principle of bivalence). 6. The sophism is both true and false (from 3, 4, 5)".
- ²⁰ „światny wybieg”, „niby nieumyślnie”
- ²¹ „byłem w tym kompetentnym, bo oko moje od dawna nawykło rozpoznawać stare manuskrypta”
- ²² „Moje niepospolite zdolności i rozległa wiedza”
- ²³ „sztuczne palimpsesty na wielką skalę”
- ²⁴ „*Maria Dunin* jest palimpsestem, to znaczy tyle co mistyfikacją. [...] 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.”
- ²⁵ „stoję niby przeciwko Bractwu po stronie Marii Dunin”
- ²⁶ „klapa bezpieczeństwa”, „instynkt samozachowawczy”
- ²⁷ „najwięcej biją we Wielki Dzwon”, „W rozstrzygającej chwili cofają się oni przed konsekwencją i mordują Marię Dunin w sobie.”
- ²⁸ „*Pałuba* jest niejako wykonaniem programu, wypełnieniem ram, mglisto zarysowujących się w *Marii Dunin*.”
- ²⁹ „forma nieszczerości, bo u prawdy jest kłamstwo na służbie”

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