

DOROTA KIELAK

**A MODERNIST PALIMPSEST: A MODEL  
OF READING—A FIGURE OF IDENTITY**

The notion of the palimpsest, which appeared in the literature of the turn of the twentieth century, was clearly constructed by the crisis in scientific thinking. Teresa Walas used this term while writing about the process of the ‘sedimentation’ in the 1890s of the positivist, naturalist and decadent ideologies.<sup>1</sup> The process in which “a positivist text was transformed into a naturalist text”,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ewa Ihnatowicz wrote: “Teresa Walas while dealing with philosophical frames of decadence uses the word ‘palimpsest’. It is used to refer to a naturalist text generated by a positivist text, and then a decadent text was overwritten on it. The fact of the palimpsest features of decadence means also the ambivalence of its elements. Walas shows that the decadent conviction of the crisis of truth and cognitive possibilities could lead not only to an attitude of resignation from searching for truth, but also to a philosophical syncretism characteristic of modernism in general; the acceptance of multiple truths” (E. Ihnatowicz, *Młodopolski palimpsest w powieściach Michała Choromańskiego*, in *Modernistyczne źródła dwudziestowieczności*, ed. by M. Dąbrowski, A. Z. Makowiecki, Warszawa 2003, 131; 2).

<sup>2</sup> T. Walas, *Ku otchłani (dekadentyzm w literaturze polskiej 1890-1905)*, Kraków—Wrocław 1986, 38. “How did it happen that a positivist text was so easily dominated by a naturalist text, despite its apparent lack of attractiveness? Why did the tendency to unify the whole, clear in any ideology, have this particular direction? Firstly—and here the comparison with palimpsests will come in handy—naturalism was a new text, therefore it was so distinct, more visible.” (ibid., 39) “Activity of this consciousness [decadent] is [...] limited, it can produce only such types of sentences which are allowed and permitted by a naturalist text, In fact it is inside the other that a new answer is slowly revealed, for which naturalism will be a modelling frame and a bundle of approved suppositions.” (op. cit., 43)

and then into a decadent text has the nature of a palimpsest. Ewa Ihnatowicz claims that Walas's musings are testimony to how the "modernist conviction of a palimpsest nature of texts is in a way confirmed in the language of the history of literature used to describe it".<sup>3</sup> We can turn this problem around and state the this language of the history of literature—because it is being shaped in the relationship with the object of its research—is the best testimony that the palimpsest figure of the imagination, appearing in literature of the turn of the century, could not be read only as detached from the consciousness of the period and of a universalized metaphor of multiple meanings.<sup>4</sup> The figure of the palimpsest was generated from the consciousness of the age as integrally connected with the experiences shaping the cultural identity of this generation. It exemplifies the process of the diffusion and disappearance of the basic field of meanings which were the basis of the positivist-naturalist world view and the process of the construction of the new plane of senses which turned the optimism of scientists into decadent pessimism. It depicts a situation in which "a positivist text [...] by its very appearance resulted in the contradictory text [...]"<sup>5</sup>. This text:

because it is produced within the same modelling frame and in relation to the same hierarchy of values, is based clearly on the formula of a latent dispute: the sentences of which it is made of are selected in such a way as to deny sentences of a positivist text, apparently agreeing with its pre-suppositions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E. Ihnatowicz, op. cit., 131.

<sup>4</sup> This is the way in which Ewa Ihnatowicz wrote about the palimpsest, although at the same time she clearly stressed its modernist origin (see op. cit., 131-144). Krzysztof Mrowcewicz was another scholar who while writing about the specific features of poetry of Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński, argued that the way to read palimpsests "does not lead through putting them in order and hierarchy, but through admitting that they have multiple meanings. (K. Mrowcewicz, *Sęp palimpsestowy. Kilka uwag o stylu Mikołaja Sępa Szarzyńskiego*, „Teksty Drugie” 2004, 3, 29).

<sup>5</sup> T. Walas, op. cit., 38-39.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

Using the image of the palimpsest while dealing with a text from the turn of the twentieth century is also predominantly a statement of its semantic multiplicity of layers, which create an effect of the experience of crisis in the scientific world view. It points to the ambivalence of the senses, to internal dialogues of meanings undergoing transformations which were the results of the ideological changes at the end of the nineteenth century. It is in this function that an image of the palimpsest appears in the first part of *Trylogia księżycowa* (*The Lunar Trilogy*) by Jerzy Żuławski entitled *Na srebrnym globie* (*On the Silver Globe*), in which a journal written during an international expedition to the moon is referred to as the palimpsest. It was made into the palimpsest by a young scientist who, after fifty years from the moment of the launch of the space ship beyond the earth's orbit, found it and worked on it in such a way so that it could have been read.

I supposed—and as it later turned out—I was right, that the ink which had been used to write it contained mineral elements, and therefore spots blackened with it would give more impedance to X-rays than charred paper itself. Therefore, I carefully glued each page of the manuscript onto a thin film, stretched it on the frame and took X-rayed photos. In this way I had films which after movement onto paper gave me a sort of palimpsests, where letters, written on both sides of the paper, were joined. It was difficult to decipher, but not impossible.<sup>7</sup>

Converting a journal into a palimpsest influences its reading. On the one hand, it forces the reader to treat it as a document of a scientific expedition, a testimony of a scientific belief in the lack of limitations of man's cognitive powers, and on the other hand it fashions the perception of it as a document which in its scientific frame had a set of convictions and ruminations offering the possibility to analyse it in a non-optimistic fashion. The palimpsest status

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<sup>7</sup> J. Żuławski, *Na srebrnym globie. Rękopis z Księżyca*, foreword S. Lem, afterword. K. Kortylewski, Kraków 1956, 20.

of the manuscript, that is of Jan Korecki's journal—a Pole who was a member of the international lunar expedition—offers an opportunity to search for trust in science, embedded in it, as the only source of knowledge about the world, and therefore trust in progress and the wisdom of nature, with which are described: monumental lunar landscapes, landscapes so similar to the Biblical Eden, with lush vegetation, animals with no killing instinct, and plentiful rains watering the whole in a manner similar to the Biblical deluge. The fact that members of the expedition have taken a copy of the Bible, with the Book of Genesis, is additional proof that they not only had a strong belief in the goal underlying the laws of nature, but also of the fact that they thought about nature in lofty, elevated terms. The charred journal undoubtedly became the sign of conviction that “man in his reason moves into goodness, and more knowledge means more morality.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, through the reports enclosed in it we can ‘discern’ the truth that

there is no connection between laws of nature and morality; man is an object driven by instincts and biological laws as well as by social laws which are based on biological laws and cannot be judged in terms of ethics.<sup>9</sup>

Such convictions are clear in the descriptions of and musings about the nature of the lunar society, which is founded by the descendant of Marta—a Hindu woman who became a member of the expedition just a moment before it took off. The lunar space—which, after all, was a space of the fulfilment of scientific ambitions of the members of the expedition, and in this sense the part of their identity, allowed them to learn about the wisdom of the laws of nature—also became a place of the life of people experiencing the disintegrating process of evolution, people who can be described as ‘little’ in all possible senses—weak physically, short, limited in their spiritual and intellectual capabilities, devoid of the ability of abstract thinking,

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<sup>8</sup> T. Walas, *op. cit.* 41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem.*

of short life expectancy, terrified, helpless, susceptible to all earthly desires, living under constant pressure of death—fearing the unknown inhabitants of the planet. The pessimistic vision of the world, clear in the journal, is born against its author's intentions. It is a symbol of the scientific consciousness of this character, who "maddened by the desire to know,"<sup>10</sup> spent most of his life on the moon. The manuscript becomes a document showing how "a positivist text generates out of itself its variant and its opposite at the same time: naturalism".<sup>11</sup> While naturalism, in turn, becomes a basis for a set of claims which destroy its unity and which—most importantly—re-interprets its basic assumptions. It can be said, using once again a quotation from Teresa Walas, that the key aspect of this document is "co-existence of the world views placed in the same frame, but hostile to one another," which "creates an impression of a certain latitude".<sup>12</sup>

The palimpsest is a metaphor of the transience of the senses, a sign of them losing their distinctness in the process of long existence. Walas wrote that scientific truths after some time discouraged mostly those people who "did not participate directly in their formulation",<sup>13</sup> generating values which checked the scientific optimism of an earlier generation (it is worth stressing that in Żuławski's novel the lunar journal becomes a deciphered palimpsest and is published by a scientist who is meaningfully referred to as "young" and who represents the next generation). The fact that they last in time so long makes scientific ideas sterile and disintegrates them, allowing new ideological values to bud—in accordance with the logic of the palimpsest. The sense of flowing time and the recognition of the temporal perspective of the world shake the stability of axiological identity, in which the ideas—because of the flow of time—lose their unity and clarity.

[...]The given world wears out by the very continuity in time, even in these places where it is not directly connected with any life experience,

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<sup>10</sup> J. Żuławski, op. cit., 304.

<sup>11</sup> T. Walas, op. cit., 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 39.

it is not subjected to falsification through “a test in real life”. Truths which are seen for too long in the same shape, which do not appeal to any authority apart from human reason, tire and discourage.<sup>14</sup>

The palimpsest becomes an important figure of the imagination at the turn of the century as a metaphor of consciousness in crisis, decadent, at the same time making it apparent that this phenomenon of crisis is based on the distance to the ideological changes in the second half of the nineteenth century, which is created as a result of experiencing time flow.

It could be said that the palimpsest is the figure of evolutionary ideology. However, identification of the term “long existence” with the notion of evolution would simplify things too much. The conviction of the temporal dynamics of any ideas metaphorically imagined with the use of the palimpsest helps with the evolutionary categories of thinking about reality. However, in this way, it fosters to break borders. Because it opens a perspective of musings about regaining values, which have been changed and obliterated by the passage of time, encouraging the gesture of reintroducing things seemingly lost and elusive, while in fact present all the time, because hidden under the contemporary forms of civilization and waiting to be ‘excavated’. If the image of the palimpsest was good at presenting decadent consciousness, becoming the figure of decline, it also just as well allowed the thinking that—as Stanisław Przybyszewski wrote in *Requiem aeternam*—“backward metamorphosis may begin”.<sup>15</sup> The image of the palimpsest was the transposition of the crisis experienced at the beginning of the new century, automatically opening the perspective to overcome it. A palimpsest model of reading—through the effort of reconstruction—of what is hidden and obliterated, at the same time became a call to reach for what is ‘archaic’ and ‘primordial’, not only in order to research

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> S. Przybyszewski, *Requiem aeternam*, in *Wybór pism*, ed. by R. Taborski (BN I 190), Wrocław 1966, 84.

the process of the evolutionary loss of values, but predominantly to get to the sources of their reintegration.

In this context it is quite important that the daredevils from Żuławski's novel set out for the moon, not anywhere else, and that the goal of their scientific penetration is not any other planet on which the knowledge of the writer could be equally impressive.<sup>16</sup> The international expedition landed on the Moon, because—as the main hero states—it was united with the Earth in the transcendent 'One'—the space so marked in the consciousness of modernists, who were looking for an area of primordial union as an antithesis to the experience of the collapse of values in the contemporary civilization.

Earth! Forgive me that I have forsaken you, maddened by the frenzy to learn more, which you have induced in me, seduced by the silver face of this dead globe, you discarded from yourself long ago to lighten your nights and rock your seas!<sup>17</sup>

The palimpsest model of reading allows to read this—seemingly scientific—information about the unity of both planets, which was broken many millions years ago, as a new sense, generated in the old ideological frame. This model allows us to give new meanings to the associations—mentioned above—of lunar fauna and flora with Eden. From the perspective of perceiving the lunar space as some form of substitute—some remnant of the lost 'One'—the vision of lunar Eden seems to support only in part the conviction of the wisdom of nature and its ethical edge, mostly expressing a longing for the life in the world unspoilt by civilization, and faith

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<sup>16</sup> K. Kortylewski writes with great admiration about the astronomical knowledge of Żuławski: "There are very few works of science-fiction in which an author took so much care to check its content with the scientific facts, as Jerzy Żuławski did in the first part of his *On the Silver Globe*. A detailed map of the surface of the Moon, which Żuławski drew himself, is based on scientific sources which remain valid till today". (K. Kortylewski, *Uwaga astronoma*, in J. Żuławski, op. cit., 331).

<sup>17</sup> J. Żuławski, op. cit., 304-305.

in the possibility of turning this longing to reality.<sup>18</sup> And here we come across a paradox of kinds. The palimpsest, which directed imagination in the direction of the idea of regression, did not reduce itself, and therefore it strengthened its nature as the palimpsest. Because it opened the perspective of 'self-interpretation', within the frame of the ideology constructing it, of one more layer of meaning, not decadent any more, but clearly such which overcame decadence. Thinking in categories of the palimpsest was very good at expressing the will to find ways of escape from the evolutionary vision of reality towards affirmation of myth and the idea of 'eternal return' characteristic for this myth.<sup>19</sup> The palimpsest model of reading eliminates the distance between what is old and what is contemporary. Opening a perspective of understanding things chronologically remote, of making contemporary what is out-dated, it gave hope to create a common space for existence of phenomena from different periods. It reduced tension connected with the evolutionary conviction that the present is shaped by the relationship with the past, allowing to break the barrier of time and cause-and-effect logic of the order of history. In other words, it helped to reject the deterministic nature

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<sup>18</sup> See Trzeźniowski, *Młodopolskie źródła fantasy. „Trylogia księżycowa” Jerzego Żuławskiego*, in *Modernistyczne źródła dwudziestowieczności*, ed. by M. Dąbrowski, A. Z. Makowiecki, Warszawa 2003, 202: "The Bible influences the language in which travellers describe their experiences. The Earth slowly starts being perceived as Paradise Lost, the expedition is called 'Exodus', the dark side of the Moon, on which life is possible, is 'the Promised Land', Marta and Tomasz are forefathers of the new lunar tribe, the young selenites will have their Deluge soon, and the spaceship will serve as an Ark.

<sup>19</sup> See Teresa Walas's arguments about the ideology of Stanisław Przybyszewski, whose road took him from evolutionary thinking about the world to the conviction of the influence of the 'spirit' in it. He made an "ideological turn", replacing the "mechanistic vision of nature and the mechanistic vision of evolution [...] with a different perspective: spiritualist, energetic, creationist", and objecting to "the linear image of time and the idea about the end of evolution". (T. Walas, *Przybyszewski a dekadentyzm*, in *Stanisław Przybyszewski. W 50-lecie zgonu pisarza: studia*, ed. by H. Filipkowska, Wrocław 1982, 61-63).



of time in favour of taking root in "historical timelessness,"<sup>20</sup> and, incidentally, it also helped to ask a question about the relationship between early modernist fascination with myths and the naturalistic basis of the age's ideology—a relationship which also became one of the key issues of Żuławski's trilogy.<sup>21</sup>

It is in the context of the reformist ideas of this period that the notion of the palimpsest should be considered, as it was placed in the extended version of the title of *Sny Marii Dunin (Dreams of Maria Dunin)* by Karol Irzykowski. This text opens the perspective to analyse the meanings hidden in its deep structure, which at the same time explain the sense of another text by Irzykowski: *Pałuba*.

*Maria Dunin* is a palimpsest, which means that it is a hoax. Historians use a term 'palimpsest' for a parchment on which one script was erased in order to overwrite something else on it. Recently it became possible with the help of chemical solutions to unravel the primary texts, and then it turned out, more than once, that the older script is more important than the newer. And this is the case of *Maria Dunin*. Irzykowski presents his official convictions under which different convictions can be expected, even totally contradictory to them. As,

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<sup>20</sup> This expression has been taken from the text of Kazimierz Wyka on the motif of myth in the writings of Władysław Reymont (K. Wyka, *Próba nowego odczytania „Chłopów” Reymonta*, in *Reymont, czyli ucieczka do życia*, Warszawa 1979, 168.) Wyka claimed that while writing about 'historical timelessness' "we speak about timelessness not in the sense of a violated rule of locating the text in the given historical chronology, but we assign a certain philosophical value to it. Such timelessness means placing events in the repetitive circle and the assumption of the primacy of the circular over the linear perspective."

<sup>21</sup> This is the key issue, particularly because it was also presented as such in other parts of the trilogy as well. Stanisław Lem wrote that Żuławski deals in his trilogy with the theme of the genesis of myth as a category of human consciousness: "The real event, the heroic 'Exodus' from the Earth to the Moon, while losing its human, real perspective, becomes an object of cult for future generations, congealed into symbols, signs and religious rituals." (S. Lem, *Przedmowa*, in J. Żuławski, op. cit., 6). D. Trzeźniewski writes the same issues (op.cit., 199-219), and states that "the myth is a superior category organizing the world of *The Lunar Trilogy* [...]" (op. cit., 201).

at the end Irzykowski puts these other convictions in parenthesis as well, it might be argued that *Maria Dunin* is the ultimate palimpsest.<sup>22</sup>

So stated Irzykowski and added: “It is not difficult to find the ideological similarities of *Pałuba* with *Maria Dunin*. *Pałuba* is, in a way, an implementation of the programme, the completion of frames only sketchily drawn in *Maria Dunin*.<sup>23</sup> In the quoted fragments of “Wyjaśnienia *Snów Marii Dunin*” (“An Explanation of *Dreams of Maria Dunin*”) the notion of the palimpsest (whose ‘hero’, incidentally, is an archaeologist—a person who professionally looks for ‘meanings’ hidden under the subsequent ‘layers’ of history) has been clearly used to define the specific features of the text creating the rules to interpret the whole novel; the novel which has been referred to by researchers as “the only serious attempt—in Polish literature—of ‘consistent naturalism,’ which attempts to formulate a new concept of artistic truth,”<sup>24</sup> Irzykowski, writes Ewa Paczoska, was fascinated by the works of German naturalists, among others by Arno Holz, a ‘consistent naturalist’, of whom he wrote that “he attempted to present the soul in a cinematographic manner”. Holz connected “the images of the external world moving across the mirror of the soul to give birth to associations of thoughts and senses” in such a way that they form a “seemingly random, but very carefully constructed whole”<sup>25</sup> Irzykowski, at the beginning of the introduction to his work, through the notion of the palimpsest, established the principle of its open reading; open to constructions characterized by a multiplicity of senses. They are multiple in the sense of being paradoxical (“The author officially presents convictions under which other

<sup>22</sup> K. Irzykowski, *Pałuba. Sny Marii Dunin*, ed. by A. Budrecka (BN I 240), Wrocław 1981, 466 (*Wyjaśnienie „Snów Marii Dunin”*).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>24</sup> E. Paczoska, *Tajemnice „Pałuby”*, in J. Kulczycka-Saloni, D. Knysz-Rudzka, E. Paczoska, *Naturalizm i naturalności w Polsce. Poszukiwania, doświadczenia, kreacje*, Warszawa 1992, 232.

<sup>25</sup> K. Irzykowski, *Niezrozumialcy*, in *Czyn i słowo. Pisma*, ed. by A. Lam, Kraków 1980, 436, quoted in :E. Paczoska, *Tajemnice „Pałuby”*, 232.

convictions, totally contradictory to them, should be expected"<sup>26</sup>) and of being multi-layered. Creating a project of searching for the sense in the space of ambivalent meanings, at the border of contradictory claims, he proposed a principle of 'descending' interpretation, by which he meant a descent into the 'depths', the search for the sense of the text in the confrontation of the hidden sub-consciousness of both the main character and the author. Such a gesture would be supported by reference to the works of Sigmund Freud, who is represented by the character of Mr. Achereton Movebo, the father of Maria Dunin, the character whose name and surname are constructed from the cluster of two words from the fragment of the Aeneid by Virgil, which had been used by Freud as the motto to his *Theory of Dreams*<sup>27</sup> published in 1900. Irzykowski proposed the principle of interpretation, which was best expressed by Kazimierz Wyka, who accepted the palimpsest model of reading of *Pałuba* and called this text a multi-layered whole constructed out of the novel proper, the analytical quasi-novel, and the quasi-novel about the novel.<sup>28</sup> This interpretation is also a very good example of one of the key critical claims raised by Irzykowski—the claim of the necessity to reach

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<sup>26</sup> K. Irzykowski, *Pałuba. Sny Marii Dunin*, 457.

<sup>27</sup> See K. Irzykowski, *Pałuba...*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> K. Wyka, *Młoda Polska*, v. II: *Szkice z problematyki epoki*, Kraków 1987, 198: "Pałuba consists of a few books at the same time. It is a novel built of a few novels. While writing these words I am referring not only to the structure given to it by Irzykowski: the palimpsest of *Marii Dunin*, the biographical study *Pałuba*, commentaries to both these parts and commentaries [...] I am referring also to the fact that the main part of the whole work, a biographical study about Piotr Strumieński and his two marriages, is built out of the mixture consisting of a few novels written at the same time, but not a single one of them is finished. And if one wants to understand and evaluate *Pałuba*, one would have to dissect these individual novels, analyse each of them individually, and then to try to recreate the mechanism which Irzykowski used to put them together." "The main part of *Pałuba* consists of three books: a normal novel about the double marriage of Piotr Strzemieński, an analytical treatise of the author about this novel, and a guide-book about writing books. In other words: of the novel proper, the analytical quasi-novel and the quasi-novel about the novel" (*ibid.*, 209).

the truth about man through exposing hypocrisy, rejecting subsequent layers of psychological falsehood.<sup>29</sup> The palimpsest model of reading which is embedded in Irzykowski's novel clearly places it among the reformist ideas of this period, which were understood then in the sense of the renaissance of man, of making man healthy through revealing all the stages of falsehood, and in so doing of achieving the renaissance of literature, being renewed in the act of breaking the barriers of conventionality.

The novels of Żuławski and Irzykowski are texts in which the notion of the palimpsest of a literary text has been exposed as the key to their reading. It can be said that it became an element of the automatic reflection embedded in these texts. However, as stated at the beginning of this paper, the figure of the palimpsest grew out of the period's consciousness as integrally connected with the experience which constructed its cultural identity. In this situation it seems obvious to state that dealing with the problem of the palimpsest model of reading allows us to move beyond auto-thematic reflection of the type which was used to deal with such texts of the turn of the century and to consider this model as one which constitutes rigours of thinking not being limited to the interpretation of individual literary texts, but clearly present in them. In the same way as the statement that the palimpsest imagination of the period was based on the conviction of the temporal grounding of all ideas allowed us to find room for this imagination in the modernist reformist projects, the conviction of the role of the palimpsest imagination to articulate ideas breaking decadent pessimism, opens a perspective to look at this type of imagination not only as making rules for the interpretation of an individual text, but primarily as

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<sup>29</sup> Irzykowski postulated the search for truth through the "experiencing of it through reason [...]". Irzykowski approved of the Freudian idea that the worse evil was "secret evil, unconscious". "What really matters" he wrote "is if people manage to realize what it is, and thus, to destroy it." Ethics here is inextricably connected with epistemology (W. Głowala, *Sentymentalizm i pedanteria. O systemie estetycznym Karola Irzykowskiego*, Wrocław 1972, 35).

creating a model of attitudes revealing themselves in the sphere of literary explications. The popularity of the notion of the palimpsest in the area of ethical reflections at the turn of the century, making of it a symbol of efforts to reclaim values lost in the process of evolutionary changes, forces, in a way, the considering of this notion also as a figure of the cultural consciousness of this period. The palimpsest model of reading—by projecting an attitude of virtual receptor—opened it to the perspective of intellectual confrontation with a multiplicity of artistic senses, a perspective which was centred around an effort “to give them order and hierarchy”<sup>30</sup> not only in relation to the world of literary meanings, but primarily in relation to the ethical horizon of the period, which gets revealed in the process.

In the literature of the early twentieth century the palimpsest imagination—in the sense of the figure of identity—is particularly clearly seen in descriptions of cityscapes. A city, particularly in its historical meaning of a space on which a flow of times is revealed in constantly stratifying architectural styles, in an obvious way was ideal for attempts to interpret and reconstruct old events under subsequent layers of history. Cezary Jellenta, in his notes from his travels in Umbria, sees Assisi in this way; he admires the town so specifically shaped, layer over layer of ruin, inviting a traveller to compare “those grey bundles of nests or hiding places high over there to equally grey slopes”, to examine “stone towns and settlements, seemingly distant empty and mute like ruins—while inside busy, heated, noisy”.<sup>31</sup> Jellenta, while walking the paths of Assisi, is on the lookout for traces of the past. What is characteristic is that he makes the oldest part of the town the beginning of his reflections revealing subsequent layers of history; the part in which he finds “a huge stronghold, half in ruins”.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>31</sup> C. Jellenta, *Z ziemi umbryjskiej*. (Notatki z podróży), „Literatura i Sztuka” 1912, no. 1, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem.

The central backbone still holds, the colossal monument of old, pre-Langobardic days. The walls which surround it spread over long distances from tower to tower. Foreshortened by perspective, this pyramid, made of redoubts, towers, buttresses and arcades, looks so lively, as if encouraging people to use it now. They have traditionally been considered as a system of natural bastions, as a random configuration of rocks, rather than as manmade, and they have been called: Rocca maggiore.<sup>33</sup>

Jellenta identifies the ruins of this stronghold with the primordial plain of an architectonic palimpsest, which have been ‘overwritten’ many times since. This perspective is strengthened by focusing on the stronghold at the very beginning of the narrative, but also on stressing that it forms “the highest point, reigning over Assisi”,<sup>34</sup> and therefore seen from afar, serving as an eye-catcher and showing the way of cognition, as a way upwards, so to say metaphorically—upwards to heaven. Pointing to the highest place in town, which is also the oldest, is an introduction to the discovery of the palimpsest structure of the town.

The tour, beginning at the bottom of the hill on which the town is spread, towards the furthest in time and central place—central in the sense of a foundation on which all the subsequent ‘over-writings’ of history have been placed—will consist of searching for, under the nineteenth century layers of the town, older layers, Renaissance and finally Roman.

Each visit in the town is rewarded with a new finding and a new beauty, which dazzles and moves deeply as it is so quiet and peaceful. Everywhere one encounters is beautiful: tall towers spread over an inn or a granary. Arches are brave and interesting, although seemingly on the verge of collapse. This is one of the town gates, ancient, but strong, romantically feudal. Every moment you can see in the façades of houses bricked in windows, with gently pointed arches characteristic of the early Renaissance. You can see that these houses

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<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

have been built out of old houses. Quite often you meet fragments of travertine, taken out of old Roman buildings, which stone masons shape to be the material for new houses.<sup>35</sup>

Going upwards allows the discovery of an even older tradition of Assisi space—a temple of Minerva built in the Hellenist period.

It is difficult to describe what you feel when you see the main square, today called 'Vittorio Emanuele'—as all larger squares in Italy. You enter it suddenly, totally unprepared for the big space, and you find yourself almost in front of a strange guest. Yes—for he seems to be the guest, a random curiosity, he who was the host—the façade of the Minerva temple. Corinthian columns—broken and notched all over—squeezed between later buildings, make you instantly forget about everything. In the chaos of the Middle Ages there stands this irrepressible monument—a regulator, a model of beauty and harmony. And straight away, everything around it turns grey, as possibility confronted by necessity, whim or caprice confronted by eternity of law, a plaything confronted by an ageless canon.<sup>36</sup>

The tour of the Assisi palimpsest ends in the discovery of the last—and in this sense truly primordial—layer, which forms the foundation for the subsequent "over-writing" of history. This last layer is nature.

It is only here that you begin to understand truly great architecture, how it has become a normal extension of nature—the ductile, yielding, but nevertheless triumphant external cover of the earth.<sup>37</sup>

The nature of Umbria—one may dare to coin this metaphor—is this primordial "ideological frame", within which all later texts of culture have been generated, testifying to the ever increasing process of the civilization interfering with the primordial harmony of man and nature. Jellenta, when he discovers the centre of the labyrinth,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., no. 2, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 19.

and in the process gets to the primordial layer of the Assisi palimpsest, states:

Even for a moment you are not overcome by a feeling of loneliness or of bitter, haughty elevation above the world and nature. You are connected and tied with it; wield it with the fullness of love and admiration. You are caressing and being caressed in turn.<sup>38</sup>

One more thing becomes obvious: why wandering in the manner of the logic of the palimpsest imagination is rendered in this narrative as a move upwards. It is from the top that the view of the town is most magnificent.

O happy, those who live here! Happy those who can behold the Umbrian valley from here! Even if we were morons, we would have to understand it, even if we had no hearts, we would have to love it and disperse in its space.<sup>39</sup>

But the idea of wandering upwards in the attempt to discover the thing, which is most deeply hidden under layers of history, has a special sense here.

It confirms the status which nature had in modernists' consciousness—nature understood as the primordial spiritual-material 'One', nature made spiritual and ethical.<sup>40</sup> It allows us to repeat the idea conveyed here earlier, that the modernist palimpsest illustrates the idea of regression, so crucial in this period, regression understood as the release of the re-integrative power of primordiality.

Palimpsest consciousness reveals itself in the gesture of perceiving the world as a multi-layered structure, which encourages its evaluative reading. It should be borne in mind, though, that according

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., no. 1, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., no. 4, 55.

<sup>40</sup> “[...] The modernist experience of ‘One’ is realized in the form of integration and identification with nature.” (M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Młodopolskie doświadczenie transcendencji*, in Idem, *Wolność i transcendencja. Studia i eseje o Młodej Polsce*, Kraków 2001, 78). See also M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Obraz Boga wśród światopoglądowych przemian Młodej Polski*, in Idem, 104.



to the same logic palimpsest consciousness manifests itself also in the practice of the reading and recognizing of values as located within this structure, in this specific location. Palimpsest categories of consciousness manifest themselves in the attitude to search for values which should be re-stored, that is these values should be recovered from under the layers of history obliterating them. Palimpsest consciousness obliges us to recover ideas from under stratifying plains of civilization and human thoughts. Jellenta's narrative illustrates this very well. This original treatment of Assisi as the palimpsest turns out to be an introduction to considerations about St. Francis. These considerations are the culmination of the 'descending' wandering towards the origins of Assisi's history, although he is not the first person—in the chronological sense—in the history of the town. There is a reason behind introducing St. Francis in the context of the close relationship between the architecture of Assisi and its nature. The statement that the architecture of this town is "the extension of nature" became an introduction to the musings about Franciscan spirituality.

The powers of curiosity and contemplation are kept tense not only by the picturesque qualities of this town, but also by the two poles of its history. Let us bear in mind that in this town there were born three important people: St. Francis—one of the most original and creative minds of Christendom. And St. Clara—twelve years later—one of the most remarkable women. But also the famous Latin poet Propertius.<sup>41</sup>

This fragment clearly shows the internal structure of Jellenta's narrative, which—while opening Assisi to the palimpsest reading and revealing subsequent layers of cultural achievements—creates a perspective to focus on St. Francis.

New life springs out of old walls, the future gently and freely shoots out of the past, which, as it seems, closed its mission once and for

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<sup>41</sup> C. Jellenta, *Z ziemi umbryjskiej...*, no. 2, 20.

all—this is one of the nicest surprises and one of the culminations of Assisi. And, at the same time, against those young minstrels there appears a great, incorrigible troubadour, who mingled his immortal spiritual crystallizations with the singing of French songs and playing the guitar. It was St. Francis himself, a bird with an inspired voice, singing the glory of creation. It is to him that thoughts keep turning, thoughts straying briefly in the direction of things present, or very ancient, pre-Christian ones. The climate and benignity of Assisi's nature suggests all the time, perhaps groundlessly, that it helped the spirit to be created in this particular way, that there exists a causal relationship between the spirit of this land and the spirit of the holy poet. I have an impression that these groves and valleys give us an explanation of his extremely ecstatic nature. Here, we can understand much better his unprecedented brotherhood with the world of plants and animals, his love of the elements, of the sun and stars, days and nights, clouds and light, fire and rain, with everything created by God, and finally with death itself. He felt that they were his brothers and sisters, as if he himself was winged as a bird or wind, and airy like the smell of lilies or budding May flowers. Here we can understand his two obstinacies, seemingly so inconsistent with the dogma of humility and obedience: obstinacy in the love of freedom, and obstinacy in solving the mysteries of the world and being with pure goodness alone.<sup>42</sup>

In Jellenta's narrative, Franciscan ideas, which were axiologically consistent with the project of modernism, received a 'palimpsest identity'. Perceiving the Franciscan attitude as fundamental for European culture, because it allowed the construction of its values on the basis of ideas of the primordial harmony of order between spirit and matter, was one of the most important tropes of St. Francis's reception at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> However, in Jellenta's notes it received an autonomous sense. The palimpsest model of Franciscan ideas not only pointed to their value, but first

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., no. 4, 55-56.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example., .T. Garbowski, *Św. Franciszek z Asyżu w świetle filozofii przyrodniczej*, Kraków 1910.

of all it focused on the issues of cognition. It moved away from the area of considering their axiological phenomenon onto the very process of their recovery from underneath the layers of time, which is an act of recognition.

The palimpsest model of reading mirrored the consciousness of crises, an awareness of cultural values becoming sterile with the flow of time, but also—primarily—revealed the particular sensitivity of modernists to the issues of cognition, the search for meanings in the world, the axiological clarity of which gets obliterated in the process of permanent changes. This model explained, therefore, the search for cultural meanings as belonging to different ideologies, appropriated by ideas belonging to different cultures and temporal perspectives. It suggested the right to read cultural meaning through the light of different philosophical systems, showing them as merging with different ideologies. In other words, it opened a perspective of cultural syncretism in the search of values. The palimpsest figure of consciousness did not appear in the town of St. Francis accidentally. It appeared because the figure of St. Francis was at the turn of the century an object of interpretation; the search for the truth about him was placed within a constellation of different types of consciousnesses, placing his spirituality within the orbit of doctrines which were clearly contradictory with Franciscan ideals of humility,

poverty and the oneness of all creation. The discovery of the body of Francis Bernardone in 1818 and of St. Clara in 1850<sup>44</sup> gave an impulse, at the end of the nineteenth century, for reflections which re-introduced the unquestioned role of values—which Poverello, with his actions and attitude, introduced both to the history of the Church and of the history of the culture—through their introduction to contemporary dilemmas and ideological quests. The spirituality of St. Francis became understandable in the context of anti-bourgeois rebellion, a modernist idea of faith outside the institution

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<sup>44</sup> See Z. Kijas OFM Conv, *Duchowość franciszkańska XIX i XX wieku*, in *Dzieło św. Franciszka z Asyżu. Projekcja w kulturze i duchowości polskiej XIX i XX wieku*, ed. by D. Kielak, J. Odziemkowski, J. Zbudniewek, Warszawa 2004, 15.

of the Church, “of the faith breaking with the compulsion, freeing individual aspirations”.<sup>45</sup>

The figure of St. Francis was re-created through ideas—so important for the reformist movements of literature of the turn of the century:

of the newly formulated joy of life, acceptance of the world, or rather anti-world, contrasted with the order of the civilization, the revealing of the beauty of common, everyday life, the values of folk primitivism.<sup>46</sup>

It also became important in the context of the modernist discourse of artistic individualism<sup>47</sup> and “Nietzsche’s idea of the ruling of sense and the flow of history”.<sup>48</sup>

The palimpsest model of reading—both the one revealing the rigours of a literary construction and the one allowing one to read the world—shows the conviction of modernists that values are not to be searched for as given and permanent, but in their historical variations; they are to be searched for carefully in the labyrinth of time. The use of the metaphor of the labyrinth in this context is not accidental. Not without a reason it was with the category of the labyrinth that Jellenta depicted the space of Assisi. Jellenta, while relating his wanderings through the nooks and corners of this extraordinary place, did not refrain from immortalizing impressions which very clearly suggest a comparison of the narrow streets of the town with the labyrinth.

Narrow streets and even narrower parallel streets will any moment, it seems, lead to meadows. An air, made denser between tall houses does not promise any wide things.[...] However, this web, although it tires at times, or forces one to go up or down the stairs, at the same time, draws into itself and excites.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> D. Trześniowski, *Modernistyczny wizerunek buntownika*, in op. cit., 188.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>47</sup> See U. Kowalczyk, „Profile” świętego Franciszka – wersja Leopolda Staffa i Bolesława Leśmiana, in *Dzieło św. Franciszka z Asyżu...* 201-218.

<sup>48</sup> D. Kielak, *Franciszkanizm w projekcie polskiej tożsamości*, in op. cit. 249.

<sup>49</sup> C. Jellenta, *Z ziemi umbryjskiej* no. 1, 5.

In this fragment we can see very clearly how thinking in terms of the palimpsest corresponds nicely with the labyrinthine imagination. The perception of the town as a web of entwined streets, forming a sort of a trap—involving, captivating and forcing to a ceaseless run—allows the wanderer to experience almost sensually the multi-layered structure of Assisi:

[...] streets go up, one above another almost to the stronghold on the top of the mountain.[...]Raise your head and you will see above you gardens, vineyards, patios, porches, balconies. Many very old dilapidated buildings, where very poor people live, have a beautiful 'loggia' on the upper floor, which not one palace of a duke would not be proud to possess.<sup>50</sup>

The impression of being lost in the labyrinth of streets makes one sensitive to experience their palimpsest structure. An attempt to recognize the space of the town in the horizontal dimension leads, in a natural way, to the wish to write about the vertical dimension, while the labyrinthine trap turns out to be an initiation into history which shapes the townscape.

Revealing the Assisi palimpsest is performed through the gesture of recognizing the labyrinthine nature of the town.

The figure of the palimpsest meets in literature with the figure of the labyrinth, allowing for an excellent exposition of the essence of the palimpsest as a symbol of the cognitive activity of man. Elżbieta Rybicka wrote that:

Labyrinthine novels have shaped [...] a specific type of a literary character—lost, errant, although constantly searching for meaning. The main character in the realistic model of the novel was, in a way, a full man [...], he was a man, who preserved internal integrity which reflected the integrity of the world, and even in his inconsistency he had to be consistent. However, starting from modernist literature, despite the search for the form that would lead to some union, the model of the 'full' character is not present. The destruction

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<sup>50</sup> Ibidem.

of man's subjective unity and his de-centring results in making him not logical and unpredictable. Governed by contradictory motivations, endowed with mobile features, such a man will ever stronger regard his existential situation either as imprisonment in the closed labyrinth of the world, or as getting lost in errant corridors of either reality or psyche.[...] As the "self" is not undisputed or constant, it sometimes becomes a mission to be accomplished, a project, an attempt to find a point of anchor in reality. Because of this, the modelling of characters in labyrinthine novels is on many occasions an initiatory process.<sup>51</sup>

The meeting of palimpsest and labyrinthine imaginations happens always in the space marked by the crisis of knowledge and cognition, as we can learn from Krzysztof Mrowcewicz's paper on the palimpsest aspects of the poetry of Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński. Mrowcewicz defines this type of palimpsest as "acceptance of polysemy", which is not connected in any way with the creating of hierarchies, and he puts it (automatically) with the labyrinth, which he calls "mannerist". According to Mrowcewicz "a text [included in the palimpsest] becomes a picture of an incomprehensible world, a labyrinth without a centre, which we enter not to accomplish some mission, but to wander in and be lost."<sup>52</sup> This merger of the figures of labyrinth and palimpsest becomes, at the same time, a sign of the experiences of a man who lives in times of "the final end of the traditional vision of the world, when the ways of knowledge and faith diverge, and when the unity of western Christianity ends forever, when the sceptical silence takes over, together with agnosticism and lack of certainty."<sup>53</sup> The palimpsest-labyrinthine imagination of the Baroque poet, according to the premise that "the style is closely connected with the ideology of an artist",<sup>54</sup> becomes from this perspective the best

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<sup>51</sup> E. Rybicka, *Formy labiryntu w prozie polskiej XX wieku*, Kraków 2000, 51-54

<sup>52</sup> K. Mrowcewicz, op. cit., 29.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 26.

testimony of confusion in the world, governed by the permanent tension between the logic of reason and the need to believe.

Both the Baroque period and the twentieth century, writes Michał Głowiński (following the arguments of Paolo Santarcangelo and GustavRené Hocke),<sup>55</sup> are labyrinthine in nature, and the literary labyrinths of the twentieth century show their epistemological orientation equally clearly. Andrzej Kowalczyk writes in this way about the labyrinth—as a figure related to the palimpsest—as revealed in the journals of Jerzy Stempowski. In the sketch entitled "Labirynt. Palimpsest. Dzienniki Jerzego Stempowskiego ("Labyrinth. Palimpsest. Journals of Jerzy Stempowski") Kowalczyk reconstructs Stempowski's emotional descriptions of the destruction caused by World War II, in which "destroyed cities become labyrinths of death, which no longer defend anything."<sup>56</sup>

This new type of labyrinth holds no mystery, no treasure, all its routes lead really nowhere. The real labyrinth, including the one created by the streets of a town, is a testimony of the fact that the space has been overcome by thoughts and imagination, and a quirk has been dominated by order and hierarchy. Towns destroyed by bombs and emptied by fires are the proofs for the triumph of chaos, *of the humiliation of faith and reason*, and create the impression of loneliness and melancholy. (emphasis—D.K.)<sup>57</sup>

The lack of a labyrinthine centre represents the emptiness of the world, which has been sterilized by the cataclysm of war. Wandering through the labyrinth shows the whole range of tension, experienced by a man who is confronted by the magnitude of war destruction, searching for an answer to a haunting question, creating (in Stempowski's journals) the foundation for the use of the palimpsest

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<sup>55</sup> M. Głowiński, *Labirynt*, in: *Mity przebrane. Dionizos. Narcyz. Prometeusz. Marchoń. Labirynt*, Kraków 1990, 136.

<sup>56</sup> A. S. Kowalczyk, *Labirynt. Palimpsest. Dzienniki Jerzego Stempowskiego*, „Przegląd Polityczny” 2000, no. 45, 63.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

metaphor. This metaphor in this world of ruins enables a “descent into depth”, “allows the confrontation with the mystery of history, the riddle of the unavoidable transformation of life to stone, moment to eternity, light into the darkness of the underworld”.<sup>58</sup> The use of the palimpsest figure of imagination in Stempowski’s journals allows—according to Kowalczyk—the identification and differentiation between the orders of culture and nature. The comparison of these two palimpsests—the one created by the civilization and the one which is the result of the changes in the order of nature—leads to the following statement:

The first one is linear, permanent, preserving; the second is an alternation of catastrophes and periods of development. Culture meticulously preserves and repeats, nature lavishly destroys and re-creates. The first may rely solely on memory, mimicry and repetition; the second one knows the mystery of regeneration, the deep powers of destruction are answered by life forces, death is answered by spontaneous re-birth of life out of ashes.<sup>59</sup>

The palimpsest imagination—related to the figure of the labyrinth—not only helps musings about the loss of values, but primarily allows us to recognize the logic of the re-birth of values, to gauge the chances of their reconstruction.

The ethical nature of palimpsest imagination and its epistemological orientations open a perspective of perceiving it as a category of modernist consciousness, although (as we can see in the analysis of Stempowski’s journals or in “palimpsest” approach to Gombrowicz, which has not been discussed here, but is another good example of it.<sup>60</sup>) This problem should not be chronologically restricted

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>60</sup> See .M. Bielecki, *Gombrowicz palimpsestowy*, „Teksty Drugie” 2005, no. 3, 104-108. The fact that the palimpsest has become a useful metaphor of the contemporary world is also supported by the following texts: S. Nowak, „*Novi Jerusalem*” *Borislava Pokicia jako palimpsest*, „Pamiętnik Słowiański” 2002, vol. 52, 1, 37-50; M. Halicki, *Palimpsest*, „Kino” 2006, no. 9, 76; M. Oleszczyk, *Palimpsest Terence’a Daviesa*:



to the beginnings of the twentieth century. It should be remembered that treating the palimpsest imagination as a key to cultural awareness opens a research reflection onto different variants of auto-thematic deliberations on the nature of poetry,<sup>61</sup> debates of existential identities<sup>62</sup> or about the forms of contemporary culture.<sup>63</sup> As Andrzej Kijowski stated: "each culture creates its own figure of a thinking process."<sup>64</sup> For Rybicka, "in the modern world such a figure is, to a large extent, the labyrinth and the motives of wandering and straying."<sup>65</sup> In the context of what has been discussed here, we could just as well use the image of the palimpsest, which is so strongly connected with the labyrinthine imagination. The palimpsest, similarly to the labyrinth, set forth the conviction about the chaos of the world and its potential order. It fosters questions about the cognitive powers of man, "about the meaning of tradition, the condition of intelligentsia, about the continuity between the past and the future. It is also concerned with the issue important in modernist literature—the acquiring

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„Dalekie głosy, martwe natury”, „Kwartalnik Filmowy” 2006, no. 53, 60-66; J. Gondowicz, *Palimpsest Eldorado*, „Twórczość” 2007, no. 1, 144-147; J. Wierzejska, *Autoportret palimpsestowy*, „Nowe Książki” 2007, no. 1, 47; G. E. Karpińska, *Palimpsestowe oblicze miasta: przykład Łodzi przemysłowej*, „Ochrona Zabytków” 2004, no. 3-4, 127-140.

<sup>61</sup> See, e.g., R. Bąk, *Palimpsest*, „Topos” 1998, no. 1/2, 76: "Poetry is words. It uses words. If it aims at the truth, at the essence of things, I trust its words. But words themselves are not poetry. They become poetry when the vision appears out of them. The vision-metaphor raises an ordinary description of things onto a higher level. But in order to achieve this, it must go down, under the surface of things which can be touched, it must go down to life. Then, it connects a few layers of reality. It becomes the palimpsest."

<sup>62</sup> See K. Wierzyński, *Palimpsest*, in Idem, *Poezja*, Kraków 1981, 337.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, G. Niziołek, *Apokryfy i palimpsesty (Teatr Krystiana Lupy*; p. 2), „Dialog” 1996, no. 8, 134-144; B. Kita, *Telewizyjny palimpsest*, „Kwartalnik Filmowy” 201, no. 35/36, 152-159; D. Kołodziejczyk, *W poetyce palimpsestu .O Wspólnocie Kulturowej „Borussia”*, „Sprawy Narodowościowe” 2000, 16-17, 205-208; Jorge Machín Lucas, *Region jako palimpsest*, transl. by B. Jaroszek, „Literatura na Świecie” 2007, no. 1-2, 56-65; A. Rogoś, *Palimpsest Muzeum*, „Orońsko” 2004, no. 4, 40-43.

<sup>64</sup> E. Rybicka, op. cit., 56.

<sup>65</sup> Ibidem.

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of consciousness.”<sup>66</sup> It could be said that it helps with the same questions, which are revealed from the perspective of the image of the labyrinth, with this difference: that it makes it a part of the experience of the world in crisis. Pointing to the key problems of the twentieth century consciousness, it also, in a way, explains its genesis.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 100.