

Literature's *Perpetuum Mobile*, or A Few Words on Self-Referentiality

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Autotematyzm (hereafter “self-referentiality”) belongs to the particular type of concept in literary theory that, created by one thinker, evolved in scholarly thought and in the course of its development through new contributions and polemics from others, came to define its own history. The term was proposed by Artur Sandauer, who refined its meaning in three works written over twenty years: *Konstruktywny nihilizm* (Constructive Nihilism) in 1947, “O ewolucji sztuki narracyjnej w XX wieku” (On the Evolution of Narrative Art in the Twentieth Century) in 1956, and *Samobójstwo Mithrydatesa* (Mithrydates’ Suicide) in 1967.¹ Sandauer traced the problem of self-referentiality from Romantic irony and Byronic auto-irony, following its transposition from the nineteenth century novel in verse to early twentieth century prose, its transformation from an extemporaneous device into a technique of composition whose purpose was to highlight the act of narration and thematize the process of how a story is told. Sandauer simultaneously linked the origins of self-referentiality in modern prose with the secularization of art, the idea of progress and the potentializing of the creative personality. Understood in this way, self-referentiality was both a reaction to the naturalistic artistic current of the nineteenth century and a response to the actual practice of writers, especially avant-garde writers, who were experimenting with form and seeking new means of expression. Sandauer cited such works as Karol Irzykowski’s *Pałuba*,* André Gide’s *Les faux-monnayeurs* (The Counterfeiters) and the poetry of Paul Valéry. He

¹ See A. Sandauer, *Liryka i logika. Wybór pism krytycznych* (Lyric and Logic. Selected Critical Writings), Warszawa 1971, p. 61. [Translator’s note: “Self-referentiality” is, to say the least, a very approximate equivalent. I am indebted to, and strongly recommend, Dieter De Bruyn’s effort to deal with the term *Autotematyzm* in his paper “The Problem of *Autotematyzm* in Polish Literary Criticism, or How to Immobilize a Perpetuum Mobile of Nothingness” in *Perspectives on Slavic Literatures. Proceedings of the First International Perspectives on Slavistics Conference*, D.S. Danaher and K. Van Heuckelom, eds., Amsterdam 2004, pp. 127-139. T. D. W.]

*Translator’s note: the title of this work is highly ambiguous and multi-layered; following the English-language critical tradition (see C.T. Sen, “Karol Irzykowski’s *Pałuba*: A Guide book to the Future” in *SEEJ*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 1973), I have refrained from trying to translate it. T.D.W.

employed the term *autotematyzm* (self-referentiality) with reference to the newest developments in literature, but also to non-representative, functional art – architecture, dance and music, which he opposed to other-referential, externally directed art. Self-referentiality in literature was for him something like abstract art, rejecting the choice of a subject, focused on itself and formal questions, making its material shape or the work's own meaning its theme (the *samosłowo*, self-referential language with regard to form, or *samotreść*, self-referential language with regard to content).² In postulating its inward-directedness, Sandauer at the same time designated a condition for an impossible literature, quite consciously building an unachievable horizon of self-referentiality as a-referentiality.

In *Constructive Nihilism* yet another term appears, *samotematyzm* (self-thematicity):

I aim to describe the adventure of one who is tempted, having rejected all events thrust upon him by the external world and the imagination, to create poetry not about what is seen or thought, but about the very concept of seeing and thinking, a pure drama, destitute of all of the incidental content of consciousness.³

Sandauer thus shifts focus: what should be more important than the content presented is the structure of a work and its own genesis, which “should serve as story and commentary, closed in a perfect and self-sufficient circle, a *perpetuum mobile* of nothingness.”⁴ We are struck here by the way, typical for the critic's analyses, in which he uses a negative means of definition, accenting the absurd and unattainable goal of self-referentiality – Sandauer refers to a “vicious circle” and a fundamentally impossible “communication that communicates nothing”⁵ and “disinclination toward self-definition”⁶: “The impossibility of fulfillment, the vain efforts and horror of the failed work will be the subject of the realized work, focused on non-existent means, organized around the suction of a central void”⁷; while in another passage we read: “the disinclination toward self-definition tells the poet to move the work back to that preparatory stage where opposites are joined, where the refusal to choose is a choice, the absence of a subject itself a subject, barrenness creativity.”⁸

Precisely this negative mode of formulation provokes discussion from scholars who, seizing upon the term, will redefine and complete it, treating it simultaneously as a watchword for a broader range of creative problems. Sandauer's term turned out to be contentious and productive, both revelatory and reverbatory, considering its successive theoretical mutations, especially heightened in the late 1960s and early '70s. Polemicists' arguments at that time moved in several directions at once: challenging the thesis of such literature's barrenness or indefiniteness and attempting to escape the trap of tautology that Sandauer imposed on its understanding, they sought above all to narrow the definition of the concept while expanding its range,

² A. Sandauer, *Liryka i logika*, p. 387. [See D. De Bruyn, “The Problem of *Autotematyzm*,” 130. T. D. W.]

³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

placing it within a historical and cultural context. Participants in the discussion of what self-referentiality meant included Edward Balcerzan,⁹ Danuta Danek,¹⁰ Michał Głowiński,¹¹ Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska,¹² Ewa Szary-Matywiecka,¹³ Andrzej Werner,¹⁴ Kazimierz Wyka,¹⁵ and Stefan Żółkiewski.¹⁶ These scholars proposed terms that were related or were potential alternatives to self-referentiality, such as “the statement in the work about the work,” “the metapoetic function,” “novelistic methodology of the novel,” “quasi-novel about the novel,” “signalling of authorial commentary,” “workshop literature,” and “symbolism of artistic creation.” The development of the concept also encroached on neighboring territories – it analyzed authorial commentary, the question of works’ genesis, pure poetry, literary communication, metatextuality and intertextuality, revealing a whole series of related issues in literary theory. The negative framing of Sandauer’s term first drew opposition from Andrzej Werner, who claimed that the self-referential technique enabled “the fullest and most exact possible definition in relation to known reality,” becoming “precisely a form of ‘workshop’ literature, specific to the twentieth century, experimental literature, testing the expressive and cognitive possibilities of existing literary conventions.”¹⁷ He proposed calling self-referentiality “the quasi-novel about the novel, – a reflection expressed in and woven into the fabric of the novel on the creative process and on the creation of literary fictions.”¹⁸ In the process, the term ceased to be understood as tautologically or inwardly turned – “it is not an escape from having a theme, into the sphere of writing about nothing, about writing; it defines not the artist’s psyche at the moment of creation, but quite the contrary, it places the accent on the external theme, enabling the most perfect possible development of it.”¹⁹ Self-referentiality thus crossed beyond the closed circle of artistic problems, becoming more tightly connected with social activity and context, with cultural communication, unavoidably entering the realms of psychology and sociology of literature. Stefan Żółkiewski used the term “workshop literature” from the perspective of culture and history in presenting the transfiguration of the nineteenth and twentieth century novel: in each new literary era, the novel would avail itself of that era’s critical potential. Ewa Szary-Matywiecka analyzed self-referentiality from a communications perspective, treating it as a way of playing with the binding canons of literariness. Szary-Matywiecka particularly emphasized the critical role

⁹ E. Balcerzan, “Zagadnienie ważności elementów świata przedstawionego” (The Question of the Importance of Elements of the Represented World), in *Styl i kompozycja* (Style and Composition), Wrocław 1965.

¹⁰ D. Danek, “Wypowiedzi w dziele o dziele (w formach narracyjnych)” (Utterances in the Work About the Work [in Narrative Forms]), *Pamiętnik Literacki* (Literary Diary) 1968, p. 3.

¹¹ M. Głowiński, “Powieść jako metodologia powieści” (Novel as Methodology of the Novel), in *W kręgu zagadnień teorii powieści* (In the Sphere of Problems of Theory of the Novel), Wrocław 1967.

¹² M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, “Symbolika kreacji artystycznej” (The Symbolism of Artistic Creation) in *Młodopolskie harmonie i dysonanse* (Harmonies and Dissonances of Young Poland), Warszawa 1969.

¹³ E. Szary-Matywiecka, *Książka – powieść – autotematyzm (od „Pałuby” do „Jedynego wyjścia”)* (Book – Novel – Self-referentiality [from *Pałuba* to *The Only Way Out*]), Wrocław 1979.

¹⁴ A. Werner, “Człowiek, literatura i konwencje. Refleksja teoretycznoliteracka w „Pałubie” Karola Irzykowskiego” (Human Beings, Literature, and Conventions. Literary Theory in Karol Irzykowski’s *The Deck*), in *Z problemów literatury polskiej XX wieku* (Some Problems of Twentieth Century Polish Literature), vol. 1, Warszawa 1965.

¹⁵ K. Wyka, “Wstęp do ‘Pałuby’” (Introduction to *Pałuba*), in *Modernizm polski* (Polish Modernism), second edition, Kraków 1968.

¹⁶ S. Żółkiewski, “Powieść polska w 1961 roku” (The Polish Novel in 1961), in *Przepowiednie i wspomnienia* (Prophecies and Reminiscences), Warszawa 1963.

¹⁷ A. Werner, “Człowiek, literatura i konwencje,” pp. 344, 345.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

of self-referentiality as a term that problematizes the place and role of literature: “the essence of these functions is an active, critical relationship to cultural empiricism.”²⁰ “Writing about nothing” is thus revealed in the perspectives provided by the comments cited above to be: not a refusal to participate, but an act of engagement with thought on the state of culture, writing about how it is understood, and communicative mechanisms. Analyses of self-referentiality in the ‘60s and ‘70s confirm the productive dynamism of the issues referred to and problematized at that time, when they were located at the center of structuralist thought, drawing together exploration of artistic and scholarly cognition, sensitive to the discursiveness of literary texts and simultaneously injecting greater rigor in the scholarly approach to the study of language in the literary utterance. For scholars, questions on scholarly thought in literature itself and the relationship between theory and literature, demonstrated by those formulations that privilege the methodological aspect of the utterance over the work within the work – for example, Michał Głowiński and Edward Balcerzan’s proposals to conceptualize corresponding operations in prose and poetry respectively.

The problem of self-referentiality also relates to the scope of the practice’s use in literature. We find ourselves confronted with the assertion that self-referential literature can be defined historically as well as the belief that it has been a permanent, fixed feature of culture. The question arises whether self-referentiality is a particular case, relating to the choice of a definite problem, or a potential state of every text – “the ostentatious manner in which other-reference reveals itself: making distinctions, which is the basis of every authorial practice.”²¹ Because in fact self-referentiality, despite being historically connected to the modernist turning-point, and especially with twentieth century avant-garde movements, can be considered a wider phenomenon, present across many centuries in literature’s self-reflexive gestures. Edward Balcerzan claims that its nucleus is found in even the most other-referential works:

Self-referentiality reveals the potential musical score, present in every literary work, for the “scholar.” Each poetic text, being a realization of the basic rules of poetic language, can be treated as a model of poetry “in general.” [...] The orientation toward a text as a discourse on poetry is precisely, one might say, a search for the “scholar” in the “reader.”²²

Sandauer was aware of the impossibility of fully relinquishing other-referentiality, and later explications of self-referentiality assert no such aim – since there is no way to eradicate narrative entirely; the methodology of the novel’s creation, externalized in the novel itself, invariably carries other themes with it. As literary practice has shown, there is no shortage of the traditional elements and tropes of romance, adventure, morals, or suspense in “workshop” novels, while the specifically “‘workshop’ themes exist and in some way are ‘tested’ within those contexts.”²³

²⁰E. Szary-Matywiecka, *Książka – powieść – autotematyzm*, p. 7.

²¹Ibid.

²²E. Balcerzan, *Przez znaki. Granice autonomii sztuki poetyckiej. Na materiale polskiej poezji współczesnej* (Through Signs. The Boundaries of Autonomy of Poetic Art. A Study in Contemporary Polish Poetry), Poznań 1972, p. 77.

²³E. Szary-Matywiecka, “Autotematyzm” (Self-referentiality), in *Słownik literatury polskiej XX wieku* (A Dictionary of Polish Literature of the Twentieth Century), Wrocław 1992, p. 60.

Both the concept itself and its evolution are closely linked to literary empiricism – “posing the problem and naming it as *pałuba*” was Irzykowski’s contribution, while Sandauer’s was “the first ‘critical’ reading of this problem and its second naming,” Szary-Matywiecka underscores.²⁴ The intuitive symbol was thus replaced by the controversial term, a perfect example of how close reading brings theory and practice together: depending on the interpreted material, there follows a reevaluation of self-referentiality, understood as workshop literature, or in other readings as metatext or metalanguage, or heightened authorial self-consciousness and self-reflexivity. At the same time, in the reflections of these diverse scholars we see a distinct division into formulations oriented toward the novel or toward prose, with the preponderance in the first category. An exceptional entry among the work done in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s on self-referential prose is Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska’s 1970 article “U źródeł dwudziestowiecznego autotematyzmu (ze studiów nad poezją okresu Młodej Polski)” (At the Roots of Twentieth Century Self-Referentiality [From Studies on Poetry of the Young Poland Era]). Podraza-Kwiatkowska offers a different and broader understanding of self-referentiality than scholars who treat the novel as “a phenomenon of heightened creative self-consciousness expressed in a literary work, whether in the form of a direct utterance or in the way a work is shaped, or also through a layer of symbolism.”²⁵ Podraza-Kwiatkowska looks for the source of the twentieth century turn to self-referentiality in the lyric poetry of the Young Poland period, and finds the following propitious factors: the autotelic understanding of art, the aspiration to autonomy, the break with mimesis, and the development of critical, theoretical and programmatic literature.

Scholars have certainly devoted more work to prose, however, and explored it in greater depth, in studies of the phenomenon of self-referentiality within the context of twentieth century literature: Szary-Matywiecka claims that the turning points in the development of this type of novel are Irzykowski’s earlier-mentioned *Pałuba* (1903), Wilhelm Mach’s *Góry nad czarnym morzem* (The Mountains Over the Black Sea, 1961) and Jerzy Andrzejewski’s *Miazga* (Pulp, 1982) – novels that indicate the varied functions and, consequently, modify our understanding of the practice of self-referentiality.²⁶ In addition to pre-war literature (chiefly the work of Irzykowski, Gombrowicz, and Schulz) works from the period after 1956, what Bogusław Bakuła called the “decade of self-referentiality” in Polish postwar prose.²⁷ Works by Kazimierz Brandys, Teodor Parnicki, Tadeusz Breza, Wilhelm Mach, Adam Ważyk, Andrzej Szczypiorski, and Jerzy Andrzejewski provided the impetus toward refining and replenishing the ambivalent concept of self-referentiality. Bakuła underscored the importance of prose experiments, combining fiction with autobiographical and workshop elements: these novels “tell about the artist, the writer and his art, they are autobiographical or cryptobiographical in nature, containing many kinds of reflections on the craft, entangled in literary polemics.”²⁸

²⁴E. Szary-Matywiecka, *Książka – powieść – autotematyzm*, p. 13.

²⁵M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, “U źródeł dwudziestowiecznego autotematyzmu (ze studiów nad poezją okresu Młodej Polski)” (At the Roots of Twentieth Century Self-Referentiality [From Studies on Poetry of the Young Poland Era]) in *Problemy literatury polskiej lat 1890-1939* (Problems of Polish Literature in the Years 1890-1939). Series II, ed. H. Kirchner, Z. Żabicki, assisted by M. R. Pragłowskiej, Wrocław 1974, pp. 225-226.

²⁶E. Szary-Matywiecka, “Autotematyzm,” p. 59.

²⁷B. Bakuła, *Oblicza autotematyzmu. (Autorefleksyjne tendencje w polskiej prozie po roku 1956)* (Faces of Self-Referentiality [Self-reflexive Tendencies in Polish Prose After 1956]), Poznań 1991, p. 7.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 7.

The wave of self-referentiality in the '70s was no less intense, embodied in what Ryszard Nycz called modern incarnations of the *silva rerum* (home chronicles / scrapbooks kept by the old Polish nobility) and in the self-reflexive novel – the rough draft novel, diary, notebook or chronicle, strongly accenting the autobiographical and non-literary aspects of the utterance. Shifts in the understanding of self-referentiality bring it closer here to issues of intertextuality, which reveals itself to be a more expansive and inclusive concept than self-referentiality and appears to appropriate some of its meanings. The authorial practices of the '70s and '80s clarify distinctly how:

the collision [...] of the novelistic code with the autobiographical-documentary one, the focus of their protagonists not so much on writing a particular literary work as in engaging in the rudimentary activities themselves of writing, recording, description and so on, engaging in work that is quasi-creative, more personal than “artistic” or “literary.”²⁹

At the same time, there are starkly visible changes in the definition of and terminology related to self-referentiality. Sandauer spoke of composition methods and self-referential technique being dependent on the presence in the work of references to the writing of said work, as well as to the problems of writing and to the self-referential sign, referring to itself, weakening or contradicting – in an impossible gesture – referentiality. In successive studies, the notion of technique is increasingly replaced by the form or type of literature, whose genre attributes scholars attempt to determine based on the emerging contemporaneous phenomenon of self-referential novels. Where poetry is concerned, however, the process is less intertwined with categorical boundaries – for example, Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska uses self-referential symbols, while Edward Balcerzan uses a self-referential conceit. Meanwhile, in prose we see the appearance of the workshop novel, the self-referential novel, and the novel-about-itself (*autopowieść*). Michał Głowiński proposes – using the example of the *nouveau roman* – forms of the novel that function as their own methodologies, or “a group of concepts consciously included, openly or concealed in the work, referring to the literary devices used therein and the form of their use.”³⁰ These texts are thus theoretical utterances about themselves, and “the most important issues play out in them not at the level of plot or style, but at the level of metalanguage.”³¹ Turning his attention to narrative experiments, Głowiński at the same time underscores the authors' reflections on literature in literature, thus bringing his interpretation of self-referentiality closer to the theory of the metatext. Ewa Szary-Matywiecka devoted her book to the self-referential variant of the genre novel, whose plots not only represent a reality, but also “the conditions that determine the formation of those plots as a kind of authorial practices.”³² Bogusław Bakuła, in his analysis of self-referential prose, went beyond matters of technique toward “the individual poetics of the self-referential work, but in reference to the aesthetic perspective outlined in it” – he understood self-referentiality as “the exposure of the referenced process of creation together with its entire literary psychology and philosophy or metaphysics, or historiosophy, thus revealing the flickers of intertextual

²⁹E. Szary-Matywiecka, “Autotematyzm,” p. 57.

³⁰M. Głowiński, “Powieść jako metodologia powieści,” pp. 82-83.

³¹Ibid., p. 83.

³²E. Szary-Matywiecka, *Książka – powieść – autotematyzm*, p. 6.

relations at various levels of the text.”³³ Departing thus from device, method of composition, or poetics of the self-referential work, we arrive in the process at perspectives that surpass poetological boundaries, placing the emphasis on the worldview hidden behind them, culturally marked contexts, and the valuation of self-referential writing.

What seems crucial is this shift in the understanding of self-referentiality from a narrow meaning, relating to texts that exhibit the process of those texts’ writing to the concept’s expansion to include all works that deal with the role of literature and its authors, poems and novels that thematize the literary programs contained within them. Texts that concentrate on themselves and take an interest in their own language, revealing the process of their formation, are self-referential in the narrower sense; works that have something to say about literature in general, whose action is set in a literary-artistic context, whose protagonist is a poet or novelist, or that present a literary program, are self-referential in a wider sense. Thus adjacent to self-referentiality in its larger sense of “literature-referentiality,”³⁴ introducing some distance toward literature and its forms, traditions and conventions, and dealing overtly with literature, the writer, and culture, we have self-referentiality *sensu stricto* – concentrating on the work within the work or the text within the text. The boundaries between self-referentiality and the related literary theory concepts of metatextuality, self-reflexivity, and intertextuality also remain permeable and uncertain. For Andrzej Niewiadomski, who, following Głowiński, treats the phenomenon we are discussing as “immanent literary methodology,” a more convincing notion than self-referentiality is the category in poetry of “metapoeticism, because it constitutes [...] the broadest formula for capturing the question of self-consciousness, and all related concepts are subordinate to it.”³⁵ Self-referentiality, inscribed in the framework of metatext, intertextuality or poetology, remains nonetheless at the center of those problems, though metapoetic reflection, as defined by Niewiadomski (and reigning supreme in the study of poetry), in a certain sense takes the place of broadly understood self-referentiality:

- 1) the subject admits to being a poet or poeticism becomes manifest as an attribute of the poet’s self;
- 2) the subject references the situation of writing
- 3) the subject speaks out on the topic of the creative process, reception, mechanisms of creativity or the work being written (self-referentiality); the function of poetry and the tasks of poetry;
- 4) the subject constructs a poetic program (poetology) and theorizes on the topic of programmatic formulations and the essence of poetry.³⁶

Thus our understanding of self-referentiality describes a circle, returning to its beginnings – narrowly grasped, it remains close to the meaning intended by Sandauer. The fluid and simultaneously rapacious nature of terminology is here apparent – under the influence of changes

³³B. Bakuła, *Oblicza autotematyzmu*, p. 33.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 29.

³⁵A. Niewiadomski, Światy z jawnych słów i kwiatów ukrytych. O refleksji metapoetyckiej w nowoczesnej poezji polskiej (Worlds From Words Seen and Flowers Unseen. On Metapoetic Reflection in Modern Polish Poetry), Lublin 2010, p. 11. On problems with defining these concepts in relation to poetry, see also: A. Kluba, *Autoteliczność – referencyjność – niewyrażalność. O nowoczesnej poezji polskiej (1918-1939)* (Autotelicity – Referentiality – Inexpressibility. On Modern Polish Poetry [1918-1939]), Wrocław 2004; J. Grądział-Wójcik, *Poezja jako teoria poezji. Na przykładzie twórczości Witolda Wirpszy* (Poetry as Theory of Poetry. A Case Study of Witold Wirpsza’s Work), Poznań 2001.

³⁶J. Grądział-Wójcik, *Poezja jako teoria poezji*, p. 18. See also Bakuła’s definition of self-referentiality, *Oblicza autotematyzmu*, pp. 22-23.

in literature and the languages used to describe it, reorganization and redefinition of related terms, absorbing self-referentiality or oscillating in its orbit, has taken place.

The development of self-referentiality as a concept may be understood as a result of the linguistic turn that reclaimed the structure of a work and its linguistic form of expression as priority concerns: in literature and cognition there is nothing that can originate outside of language, or in other words, to cite the self-referential poet *par excellence*: “You’ve got to examine the language, the language will tell you everything.”³⁷ Self-referentiality also encouraged autonomous, non-instrumental aesthetic goals in art, pursued and implemented above all by the avant-garde visions of modernism: the cult of experimentation and tendency to provide theoretical justification for works of art, the rejection of mimesis (embodied by nineteenth-century realism and naturalism) and the treatment of a work as a carefully and deliberately organized product. That concept problematizes like no other the opposition between construction (form) and subjective, individual expression at the heart of modernism, bringing into sharp relief its dominants such as essentialism, relationism, conventionalism, poeticism and constructivism.³⁸ The act of directing the audience’s attention to the conventional nature of artistic creation is also self-referential and modernist, as is the opposition to naturalist conceptions in favor of understanding art as a document or diagnosis of the crisis of representation of reality, and the emphasis on forms that highlight subjectivity. Self-referentiality brings into focus the basic problems of modernism, becoming an operative tool of interpretation of modernity, testing the self-consciousness of twentieth-century art, for which it constitutes one of the central questions. And all of this takes place, importantly, in literature itself, as it becomes a meta-utterance, encapsulated theory, resolving or posing general problems in a given text.

Self-referentiality as a distinct term functioned beautifully within the framework of Structuralist studies, but its attractiveness decreased – while never disappearing – after the Post-Structuralist breakthrough, and the revaluation it accomplished with regard to subjectivity, its redefinition of the relationship between literature and life. For it seems that self-referentiality these days functions in the orbit – not to say the shadow – of the autobiographical, a phenomenon now singled out for its own “turn.” These two concepts have always been mutually complementary, but the protagonist in the contest between them has changed. In all of its iterations, beginning with Sandauer’s conception, self-referentiality problematizes the relationship between realism and the autobiographical, postulating a change in the convention of how the world is mirrored – from objective to subjective. The author of *Constructive Nihilism* spoke of the tension or barrier between author and work, of the unmasking of the antiquated, naïve notion of the “true story,” and the undermining of the fictionality of the realist novel by interrupting the act of narration and exposing the curtain: “it is an attempt to connect fiction with authenticity.”³⁹ Self-referentiality thus defies the separability of author and work, simultaneously drawing the author out into the foreground and underscoring the subjectivity of

³⁷W. Wirpsza, “Dzieje rymopisa czasu swego” (The History of a Rhymesmith of His Time), *Kultura* (Paris) 1981, 7/8, p. 172.

³⁸See W. Bolecki, “Modernizm w literaturze polskiej XX w. (rekonesans)” (Modernism in Twentieth Century Polish Literature—a Reconnaissance), *Teksty Drugie* 2002, p. 4.

³⁹A. Sandauer, *Liryka i Logika*, p. 69.

textual cognition – the artist, in writing, seeks to show himself: “self-expression henceforth becomes his purpose, to which all others are subordinated.”⁴⁰ That which is realistic turns out to be fabricated, made, filtered through the consciousness of the writing subject – it is thus, as jest Sandauer claimed, as much fictional as it is mental and psychological. An unmistakable stress on subjectivity is also found in Podraza-Kwiatkowska’s conception, which accents the self-consciousness of the writer, and in her analysis of architectural symbols in the poetry of Young Poland defines self-reflexivity as “the type of self-reflexivity in which the problem of the consciousness of some kind of artistic activity is indivisibly linked with attempts to probe the depths of one’s own psyche.”⁴¹ In the novel as well, self-referentiality is connected with the widespread tendencies toward the autobiographical after 1956, becoming an inseparable result of the interaction between fictional and documentary, essayistic and autobiographical discourse. The fact that the self-referential is thus always to some extent autobiographical concerns the category of the author and related questions.

In modernist literature, the text in its autonomous relationship to reality became dependent on the figure of the author and the method of his utterance as the source of creation. Self-referentiality was therefore, from its beginnings, a form of testing the potential for the autobiographical in the text. Despite all number of shifts in the definition of self-referentiality, this thread that privileges subjectivity in the thought about it will always remain present, though simultaneously dependent on the vicissitudes of subjectivity in literature and its definition – the author wants to express himself or create his persona, or finally – through storytelling – to construct and confirm his identity.

Self-referentiality and the autobiographical seem to be two sides of one problem. Małgorzata Czermińska, for example, underscores how the expansion of non-fiction forms in recent decades has been accompanied by:

self-referentiality and overt metaliterary reflection, the presence of which always brings in its wake thoughts about the text’s generation. The autobiographical and the self-referential appear to originate from opposite poles. Writing about oneself calls (in a state of primary naivete) for a non-fictional document (a utopia of sincere confessions), whereas writing about writing, placing the illusionist plot in quotation marks, lays bare literariness, thickening it into an extract of metaliterariness, creating art for art’s sake. In fact, however, many autobiographies of late modernism manifest a conscious creativity, frequently transforming from confession into confrontation, ambiguously playing with the reader through self-referential digressions. On the other hand, in certain late twentieth century novels, the self-referential threads often drift from meditations on the writing process toward the person writing and elements of his biography, known to the reader from other sources.⁴²

Czermińska proposes a self-portrait as an example of an “overtly autobiographical” work, meaning one in which the presence of the author’s person is thematized, linking itself this

⁴⁰Ibid., 63.

⁴¹M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, “U źródeł dwudziestowiecznego autotematyzmu,” p. 249.

⁴²M. Czermińska, “Autor – podmiot – osoba. Fikcjonalność i niefikcjonalność” (Author – Subject – Person. Fictionality and Nonfictionality), in *Polonistyka w przebudowie. Literaturoznawstwo – wiedza o języku – wiedza o kulturze – edukacja* (Polish Studies Under Reconstruction. Literary Studies – Linguistics – Cultural Knowledge – Education). vol. I, ed. M. Czermińska, S. Gajda, K. Kłosiński, A. Legeżyńska, A. Z. Makowiecki, R. Nycz, Kraków 2005, p. 212.

time not with psychologizing, but with the problem of representation. A self-portrait thus understood therefore has immanent self-referential features, and as a verbalized gesture of exposing the author in the text becomes a kind of self-reflexivity. Likewise Ryszard Nycz, tracking transformations of subjectivity in modern literature, points to the connection between fiction and autobiographical writing in illustrating two tendencies he designates in literature: the fictionalization and the empiricization of the authorial voice, between which self-referentiality can play a mediating role, constituting the explicit textualization of the subject:

the impersonal subject of fiction turns out – seen from behind the curtain of the artist’s presentation – to be held together by personal empiricism, the result of the objectivization and universalization of the existential experience of the writing individual. Seen in this same perspective, the subject of the autobiographical utterance in turn reveals fictional features, or rather the features of a deliberately designed construct. Textualization thus endows the sense of a totality of life actions, imposing selection and order, which mask and deform the source “selfness” of the individual.⁴³

Nycz does not use the term self-referentiality, but writes about “the process by which personality is constituted” and ties it to “the process of discursive articulation” and “the act of self-creation on the stage of writing, [...] which makes accessible, activates, and complicates narrative, symbolic, and social models of personal integration and identification.”⁴⁴

It is important, in understanding and reformulating the points of emphasis in the domain of self-referentiality, to see its criticism of the relationship between literature and reality, not susceptible today to being defined in the categories of opposition or alternatives: “once the person appears in the text, the boundary is broken and obliterated,”⁴⁵ and likewise the situation and comprehension of self-referentiality itself, though it remains a relevant context for problems of subjectivity and identity, must change. If each literature reveals itself to be to some degree autobiographical, each can also be made self-referential (in a broad, non-Sandauer sense). The thematization of creative activity these days works toward the expression of the writer’s subjectivity – “the narrator here thus becomes a character in the story, separable neither from his experiences nor from the thread of the narrative; in this process ensuring a feeling of the duration and integration of one’s own person, one’s empirical identity.”⁴⁶ Perhaps self-referentiality, like autotelicity or intertextuality, needs to be seen as a certain state of literature in general, a *perpetuum mobile* of self-conscious creation, effacing the boundaries between life and fiction, exposing the syllepticity of the contemporary subject, who exists, when he writes; who exists, because he writes.

⁴³R. Nycz, “Osoba w nowoczesnej literaturze: ślady obecności” (The Person in Modern Literature: Traces of Presence), in *Osoba w literaturze i komunikacji literackiej* (The Person in Literature and Literary Communication), ed. E. Balcerzan, W. Bolecki, Warszawa 2000, p. 16.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 19.

KEYWORDS

Artur Sandauer

twentieth-century Polish literature

ABSTRACT:

The article presents a short history of the development of the concept of autotematyzm, a term proposed in the mid twentieth century by Artur Sandauer, referring to a kind of self-referentiality, that evolved considerably in scholarly thought in subsequent decades. Problems in defining the term relate to both its terminological fluidity and the scope of its use, dependent on the influence of literature as it changed and the languages used to describe and analyze it. The author proposes to formulate the development of the term as a result of the linguistic turn and thus situates it at the center of modernism, whose dominants it expresses, becoming an operative tool for the interpretation of modernity. At the same time, she directs readers' attention to the current that privileges subjectivity in the reflection on self-referentiality, and its close connection with autobiography, particularly visible after the post-structuralist rupture.

autobiography

self-referentiality

MODERNISM

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