

Literariness against the culture of autobiography

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Anti-literariness and life

The terms I deal with in this article have a long history and various, sometimes mutually exclusive definitions. In journal discussions they are often used intuitively, which is not surprising: feeling the weight of decades'-long debates every time one attempts to articulate a critical literary conclusion could certainly hinder or at least slow down the flow of current discussions about books. What I find interesting, however, is under what conditions and for what purposes some of such loaded categories return today in reviews, essays and discussions. This article explores two particular pairs: literature and life, and literariness and anti-literariness. These antinomies were central to major twentieth-century critical programmes and interpretations, often in more nuanced forms than seen in today's debates. In order to trace the history of certain simplifications that weigh on today's critical-literary discourse, I will not reconstruct exactly how these concepts have functioned in recent decades, but rather focus on those issues which are the most relevant to my considerations.

As Anna Legeżyńska rightly pointed out, "literariness [...] does not exist as an ahistorical concept; on the contrary, it can only be defined from the perspective of the experiences and

expectations of a specific reading public”¹. In this sense, then, anti-literariness is a struggle against conventional expectations of audiences/consumers, against the consolidation and stabilisation of a single image of literature, which is why it cannot be universal and could hardly be treated as a fad or trend.

Most often, however, “anti-literariness” is invoked in a much more conventionalised way. This was pointed out by Wojciech Głowala who, in his 1972 article *Ze „Słownika współczesnych komunałów krytycznoliterackich”* [*From the dictionary of contemporary critical literary clichés*], quoted the following cliché of the language of criticism:

Against literature. The critical text is purposefully pitted against literature, which is synonymous with all that is bad, trivial, unimportant and untrue. Paradoxically, such a cliché is often used as an argument for the abolishment of the cliché itself in the literary work.²

By recognizing “anti-literariness” as a category that connotes taking the side of experience (as opposed to convention, language, etc.), Głowala pointed to an important problem, namely the common identification of literariness with falsity or an assumed pose.

Two discussions

The claim that life in literature can only be faked (i.e. one can only create a literary image of life) seems a truism today. Yet these oppositions, i.e. of life and literature, experience and convention, testimony and form, have been returning with surprising intensity in the reception of books published over the recent few years. I will discuss this phenomenon as exemplified by voices and disputes concerning two texts: *Kwiaty rozłączki* [*Flowers of the splitter*] by Aleksandra Wstecz and *Oto ciało moje* [*This is my body*] by Aleksandra Pakieła. These titles seem to be symptomatic: on the one hand they belong to different genres (the former is a poem, the latter – a novel, at least declaratively). On the other hand, they are an expression of the same tendency, present in recent Polish literature, namely one we could tentatively call “the strategy of the authentic”.

Jerzy Jarzębski used a similar term in his essay *Kariera „autentyku”* [*The career of the “authentic”*]. Analysing the expansion of non-fiction mechanisms into prose works, he attempted to identify and describe their functions.

“I call an “authentic””, Jarzębski wrote, “[...] such an element of a work which – by virtue of the author’s agreement with the reader – is treated by the reader as a reflection of a real, individual fact (an object, a person, an event), related to the sphere of the writer’s personal experience as a flesh-and-blood human being”.³

¹ Anna Legeżyńska, „Białoszewski na «biegunie»: uwagi o głównych regułach strategii twórczej” [„Białoszewski on the „pole”: comments on the main rules of creative strategy”], *Kresy* 4 (1996): 27.

² Wojciech Głowala, „Ze «Słownika współczesnych komunałów krytycznoliterackich»”, *Teksty* 2 (1972): 135.

³ Jerzy Jarzębski, „Kariera „autentyku””, in: *Powieść jako autokreacja* [The novel as self-creation] (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984), 339.

The critic recognised the fact that Polish literature gravitated towards autobiography in the early 1980s and proposed the term “‘authentic’ literature” to describe new, non-obvious forms of non-fictionality in prose. He also asked questions about the consequences of those transformations at the level of intra-textual communicative instances and popular stylistic procedures. Although Jarzębski was primarily interested in highly conventionalised games with self-creation (e.g. by Gombrowicz), he also drew attention to a certain “resistance of the non-fictional material” and pointed to changes in the attitude of the recipient of such texts.⁴

Interestingly, the author of *Kariera „autentyku”* highlighted the role of technological changes in the development of “authentic” literature. Because the informative function of the written word has been diminishing since the appearance of television (and the new media nowadays), some non-fiction genres have moved away from journalism towards literature⁵. Thus, the meaning of facts in literary forms has been reduced, not least in favour of reinforcing the importance of protagonists⁶. Somewhat updating Jarzębski’s considerations, it would seem appropriate to analyse the important role of the internet, especially of social media. Bearing in mind the conclusions of new research on the emotional economy produced by social media⁷, one can argue that categories such as experience or expression are gaining in importance in contemporary culture. It is these shifts and contexts that constitute the backdrop for my reflections on recent critical literary discussions.

In his review of *Kwiaty rozłączki* Wojciech Szot wrote: “Aleksandra Wstecz can be brutally honest and doesn’t beat around the bush, whereas a “walk through a disconnect” can be an opportunity to trigger one’s own memories and stop to rethink life”⁸. This observation, which also appears in other blog posts about the book (e.g. on the Facebook fan page “kontekstualni” [“the contextual ones”]), proved to be surprisingly accurate. Wstecz’s poem indeed acted as a trigger for readers’ and critics’ memories, as evidenced, for example, by Adam Kaczanowski’s review (published under the pseudonym “Adam Remis”), who responds to the confessions of *Kwiaty rozłączki* with his own confessions. These, as a result, provide a framing for his account of the book (he begins with a scene featuring his own family and ends with a recollection of his parents’ divorce). Significantly, when discussing the reception of Wstecz’s poem, Kaczanowski does not use terms such as “to read”, “to interpret” or “to evaluate”. Instead, he focuses on “experiencing”. The book needs to be experienced, similarly to the descriptions of experiences it contains but also to one’s own experiences, which return to the reader through communing with *Kwiaty rozłączki*. Although Kaczanowski declares that he is aware

⁴ Cf. the concept of “challenge” as the orientation of the autobiographical text towards the receiving “YOU”; Małgorzata Czerwińska, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt: świadectwo, wyznanie, wyzwanie* [An autobiographical triangle: testimony, confession, challenge], 2nd edition, revised (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

⁵ Cf. Zygmunt Ziątek, “Reportaż jako literatura” [“Reportage as literature”], in: *Obraz literatury w komunikacji społecznej po roku ‘89* [The image of literature in social communication after 1989] ed. by Andrzej Werner, Dariusz Żukowski (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2013), 421-458.

⁶ See Jarzębski, 356-364.

⁷ See Ariel Hasell «Robin L. Nabi, «Emotion, Information Sharing, and Social Media», in: *Emotions in the Digital World*, ed. by Robin L. Nabi and Jessica Gall Myrick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 381-400, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197520536.003.0020>.

⁸ Wojciech Szot, „[REVIEW] Aleksandra Wstecz, «Kwiaty rozłączki»”, *Zdaniem Szota* (blog) [According to Szot], 12.03.2020, <https://zdaniemszota.pl/2975-recenzja-aleksandra-wstecz-kwiaty-rozlaczki>.

that sincerity in literature remains as much a convention as any other⁹, this awareness does not seem to matter at the level of the argument itself. It is by remodelling the thinking about the reception of this poem in the review that the distinction between the literary narrative (that which is read, interpreted) and therapeutic narrative (that which serves to relive past experiences and sort them out) is blurred.

However, while Kaczanowski's voice in this matter seems justified (he operates similar narrative mechanisms as the author whose work he is reviewing¹⁰), pointing out the "anti-literary" nature of the book under discussion is ultimately a programmatic rather than a critical gesture and similar interpretative tropes in other reviews of Wstecz's poem are arguably more problematic. In her text on *Kwiaty rozłączki* Paulina Dąbkowska writes that "this is a collection devoid of traditional attributes of literariness |", "there are no metaphors here, no literary distortion that stimulates the imagination and encourages one to sink into the text. There is none of what we usually look for when we reach for books"; "the author renounces traditional poeticism", and the protagonist "does not misrepresent anything, she tells it like it is. And what she wants to say is tangible, close, immersed in the current of life". All of that leads the critic to the following conclusion:

I think depicting the "naked life" in literature and, above all, combining authentic human experience with the highly evocative power of poetic reflection is a difficult skill. Wstecz's debut seems to me to be the realisation of this vision (of removing unnecessary "literariness" from the text), and for a specific reason: because life does not look the way poetry would like it to, breakups do not look the way they are usually described. In the senselessness of a loss, disappointment and the pain of a breakup there is probably no room for literary passion, certainly not for pretence. What counts is judgement, distance.¹¹

It is not only the direction in which the tropes taken up by Kaczanowski in Dąbkowska's review developed that matters (there was, after all, an ignoring of the conventionality of sincere confession and a complete trust in the transparency of the text), but also that both the reviewer and the author of *Stany* [States] ultimately reduce the reading of Wstecz to the knowledge of life (abstracted from its literary context). It is "worth living through", says Kaczanowski. In the context of traumatic events, "what counts is judgement, distance", adds Dąbkowska. These are terms associated less with reflection on literature and more with therapy, self-narration, reflection towards the storytelling "I".

⁹ Kaczanowski writes: "I can imagine somebody being against this book. It will be my whipping boy. Let's say that while I am writing this text, he runs around my flat and every now and then exclaims: "honesty for the naïve!", "confessions worse than farts!". I get up from my chair only to hit the boy with the door as he is running into the room. I tell him, "what do you think honesty is, if not a convention like all the others?". Adam Remis, „Czy wszystko trzeba przeżyć? (Aleksandra Wstecz, „Kwiaty rozłączki”) [„Does everything have to be lived? (Aleksandra Wstecz, „Kwiaty rozłączki”), *Wizje: Aktualnik*, 8.03.2020, <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/adam-remis-aleksandra-wstecz/>.

¹⁰ It should be noted at this point, however, that Kaczanowski uses similar narrative mechanisms in a much more conceptually nuanced manner; perhaps because he has different objectives: the author of *Stany* [States] rarely seems to aim for an adequate description of a specific subject experience; rather, he focuses on a variety of social mechanisms.

¹¹ Paulina Dąbkowska, «Kwiaty rozłączki». Zbiór anty-miłosny [„Kwiaty rozłączki”. An anti-love collection], *Nowy Napis Co Tydzień* 57 (2020), <https://nowynapis.eu/tygodnik/nr-57/artykul/kwiaty-rozlaczki-zbior-anty-milosny>.

A referential or an autobiographical pact?

The problems of literariness and authenticity may direct us towards a literary-theoretical reflection on autobiographism: this is the context for the debate on whether such type of writing is an example of a literary, authorial “self-creation” or of the “subordination of the literary function to the anthropological meaning”¹². As Małgorzata Czermińska wrote, since the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the biggest problem of research on intimate diaries has been their transformation into a literary genre. This process was a natural consequence of the very fact that such records were made public¹³. The growing popularity of non-fiction literature juxtaposed with the literary habits of the public (or at least of the professional, “expert” readers) influenced the ego-document literature in the twentieth century in two ways. On the one hand, it led to “novelistic readings”¹⁴ of intimate records; to treating their authors as protagonists as well as (wo)men of letters, and thus to paying particular attention to the role of stylistic moves or conventions. On the other hand, the gradual absorption of the personal document into the realm of literature exerted a meaningful impact on the novel, leading to its subjectification and essayization¹⁵. This does not, of course, mean that any close reading of fiction is subject to the same tensions within the “autobiographical triangle” (introspective confession, extravert testimony and persuasive challenge) as an autobiography or a memoir are. It does point out the importance of borderline cases, allowing us to note the tendency for genres to intermingle, and to draw attention to the consequences this process has for literary criticism.

The growing importance of such phenomena was pointed out, among others, by Tomasz Burek in his 1971 book *Zamiast powieści* [*Instead of a novel*]¹⁶. As the title suggests, the critic diagnosed the unravelling of the novel framework under the influence of the expanding forms from outside the genre (and often non-fiction ones). Importantly, the scholar, known for contextualising his own reflections in history, emphasised the changing popularity of categories such as “literariness” and “anti-literariness”.

“It is often said: literariness is the main offence against literature”, wrote Burek. “But literariness can also be a virtue”¹⁷. The critic reconstructed the career of these notions as follows: a response to literature “losing the direction of its own search”¹⁸ are avant-garde directions of writing, focused on formal and stylistic search. Writing then “concentrates its forces, systematises its methods, sharpens its tools”¹⁹. However, the triumph of programmatic literariness quickly turns into domination, which, in turn, becomes easily reproducible and thus leads

¹²Cf. inter alia. Artur Hellich, *Gry z autobiografią: przemilczenia, intelektualizacje, parodie* [Games with autobiography: silences, intellectualisations, parodies] (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2018), 33-35.

¹³Czermińska, 364.

¹⁴Czermińska, 159.

¹⁵Czermińska, 357-358.

¹⁶Tomasz Burek, *Zamiast powieści* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1971).

¹⁷Burek, 46.

¹⁸Burek.

¹⁹Burek.

to derivative, uninteresting works. In response to these changes comes a programmatic anti-literariness and the “barbarians” who want to renew the face of literature in a spontaneous, ignorant and authentic manner. These three phases (“of a philosophically and aesthetically justified literariness”, “literariness devoid of theoretical justifications, non-programmatic and reproductive” and “anti- or a-literariness”²⁰) essentially form a circle: they pass seamlessly into each other and co-create the historical-literary process.

It is worth noting that what Burek means is an anti-literariness that cannot be reduced to naïve claims of closeness to life and experience. Rather, he understands it as a rebellion against the prevailing structural principles of the literary work. This vision of the process thus allows him to place contemporary literature (from the late 1960s and early 1970s) in the phase of “literariness devoid of theoretical justifications, non-programmatic and reproductive”. When the critic notes, with his usual acuity, that one of these established writing patterns is the writers’ artistic elaboration of their own experiences, he diagnoses them with “accidental fan mentality”, the results of which are as follows:

Their creations [...]are reminiscent of gossip overheard on a Sunday on a park bench or in a neighbour’s flat. A roughly sketched outline of eternal human psychology, a moral picture observed on the nearest street, a few pages from an autobiographical notebook, a bit of remembered reality, preferably that of the occupation time, a bit of bitter reverie on loneliness and suffering, and finally a bit of the so-called lyricism: here is a recipe for contemporary prose, here is a common set of literary correctness, a model of a cliché which they fulfil and “perfect”, with the kind encouragement of publishers²¹.

Burek’s objections to the recipe for a literary autobiographical story bring about connotations with contemporary debates about “auto-fiction”²². Aleksandra Pakieła’s notable prose debut, which gave rise to further critical-literary discussions around these issues, is worth discussing in the context of these reflections on genres bordering on autobiography.

Philippe Lejeune in his *Le Pacte autobiographique* [*The autobiographical pact*], outlined the distinction between autobiographies and books which are autobiographically inspired but do not meet the criteria of the genre. His example is a book by Olivier Todd, subtitled “a novel”, whose protagonist is a man called Ross. On the back cover of the book the publisher assures the reader that “Ross is Todd”. But for a researcher of autobiography this is by no means a foregone conclusion. If, declaratively, the author and protagonist, who bear different names, are not the same person, and if the subtitle makes reference to the genre of fiction rather than to ego-documents, there is no autobiographical pact there, only a referential one²³. In other words: the literary function prevails over the anthropological one.

²⁰Burek, 49.

²¹Burek, 50.

²²See, inter alia, Agata Sikora, „Ja w pudełku” [„Me in a box”] *dwutygodnik.com* 365 (2023), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/10824-ja-w-pudelku.html>.

²³Philippe Lejeune, „Pakt autobiograficzny” [„The autobiographical pact”], in his: *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu: o autobiografii* [Variations on a certain pact: on autobiography], ed. by Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska, transl. by Wincenty Grajewski, Stanisław Jaworski, Aleksander Labuda, Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 35.

In *Oto ciało moje* Pakieła creates an almost identical scenario to the one in Todd's book. Her work too implements the word "novel" in its subtitle and here, too, the name of the protagonist (Natalia) is different from the author's (Aleksandra). Also, just like in the case of Todd's book, the publisher, critics and, indirectly, the author herself, all draw attention to the convergent identities of the writer and the narrator/protagonist. Despite all that, just like in Lejeune's example, it is hard to argue that we are dealing here with an autobiographical pact.

When years later the French literary scholar revised his reflections, he also drew attention to another consequence of this distinction:

Throughout the entire *Pact*, I have proceeded as if the label "novel" (both in genre subtitles and in critical discourse) were synonymous with fiction, as opposed to "non-fiction", "factual reference". Now, "novel" has other functions as well: it signifies literature, literary creation in opposition to the flatness of the document, to its non-existent testimonial value. These two directions of meaning are often (but not always) combined. The word "novel" is therefore not as unambiguous as the word "autobiography". The other issue is one of valuation: pejorative (novel = fabrication pure and beautiful; autobiography = flatness of an unformed experience) or positive (novel = pleasure of a story well written and well conducted; autobiography = authenticity and depth of experience).²⁴

These necessarily simplistic oppositions point to one important aspect of the reader's mindset. When the author (here: Pakieła) uses the subversive category of "novel" in the subtitle of her book, she not only attempts to disguise superficially the autobiographical nature of the experiences she describes, but also redirects critical expectations towards what Lejeune called "a well-written and well-conducted story". And it is this redirection that underlies the controversy in the reception of Pakieła's debut.

Most reviews of *Oto ciało moje* offer a two-pronged evaluation. Critics acknowledge the book's significant themes, such as eating disorders, while also pointing out shortcomings in Pakieła's narrative technique. Olga Wróbel's short review in "Gazeta Wyborcza", in which she expressed her opinion on the "literary and psychological underdevelopment"²⁵ of the novel, inspired immense controversy and a barrage of Facebook comments, despite the critic's repeated assurances that she was aware of the importance of Pakieła's topic. Still, hers was a much milder criticism of Pakieła's debut than the one by Marcin Bełza, in "Kultura Liberalna". He wrote: "[e]very creative failure has its charm; it serves as a lesson. *Oto ciało* only serves as an example of wasted paper". Bełza referred to the book's dialogues as implausible, calling them as lively as "frogs during anatomy lessons". He ironically stated that "[t]he statue of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, in Świebodzin has more life than all this pseudo-prose put together and multiplied". Above all, taking up the binary theme and style proposed by Wróbel,

²⁴Philippe Lejeune, "Pakt autobiograficzny", in his: *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu: o autobiografii* (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 184-185.

²⁵Olga Wróbel, "Z tej książki sączą się pot, krew, łzy, wymiociny i kwasy żołądkowe. Oto cena szczupłości" ["Sweat, blood, tears, vomit and stomach acids ooze from this book. This is the price of a slim body"], *Wyborcza.pl*, 28.06.2022, <https://wyborcza.pl/ksiazki/7,154165,28604284,gra-w-ideal.html>.

he denied the author's work literariness²⁶. Bełza also argued that "Pakiela's book is very bad; it is not a prose book, much less a novel, despite the shameless claims on the cover". On chapters composed as "lists" (e.g. of tips for inducing vomiting), he wrote that "they have as much in common with a literary record as a bassoon with a drum". He also took the following position on the language of the book:

Let us therefore look at the language of the text, its non-existent powers of recognition, and the similarly non-existent structure (its deliberate absence is not at all uncommon in literary works, but here the text is reminiscent of an eighth-grade girl's notebook). There is no rhythm or even a semblance of style.²⁷

Instead of referring to the quality of the formal components of Pakieła's book, the critic simply denies their existence: he writes about the lack of structure, rhythm and style (not about a disorganised structure or low-brow style), which, within Bełza's system of valuation is the harshest critical-literary judgment possible. Thus, if, in the reviewer's opinion, the book does not bear any marks of literariness (understood here simply as components of the form), then even the apparently neutral genre designation on the cover ("novel") becomes a brazen appropriation²⁸. Pakieła's anti-literariness – contrary to what happened in the reception of Wstecz's book – thus becomes the greatest argument against the value of the text.

Moreover, the critic calls *Oto ciało moje* a "menacing" book, justifying this term with a more general diagnosis of the contemporary literary field:

Nowadays [...], if one looks at the reception of so-called "literary events", the onslaught on the frontiers are the self-presentational *themes* and *biographies* of the writers, battered by fate and power, eaten up by disease and exploited by the upper classes, non-binary, preferably with a peasant pedigree, damaged by mothers, fathers and the church, women self-emancipating in pains, suffering mothers and gay men fighting against the patriarchy. [...] I have the impression that in recent years [...] rampant exhibitionism and grasping at *strong* and *loaded* themes have been passing for courage [...].²⁹

²⁶According to the critic, literariness - as opposed to the topic, which is only the starting point of a literary text - is supposed to testify to the value of a work. In a way, Bełza repeats the views of Maciej Jakubowiak, articulated a few years earlier in his text *Nie na temat* [Off topic] about contemporary Polish novels, which are a "realisation of the reader's order", a response to emerging media debates: "the topic is adopted from somewhere else and is not backed up by independent work, but rather by a tendency to pick up what is currently fashionable. This affliction can be observed more and more frequently in the most recent Polish literature and helps understand not only why certain books are published but above all why they are commented on, praised and awarded". Maciej Jakubowiak, „SCHEMATY: Nie na temat” [PATTERNS: Off topic], *dwutygodnik.com* 1 (2016), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/6358-schematy-nie-na-temat.html>.

²⁷Marcin Bełza, „To nie jest powieść. Recenzja książki „Oto ciało moje” Aleksandry Pakieły” [„This is not a novel. A review of the book „Oto ciało moje” by Aleksandra Pakieła”], *Kultura Liberalna* 29 (2022), <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2022/07/12/marcin-belza-recenzja-aleksandra-pakiela-oto-cialo-moje/>.

²⁸At this point it is worth recalling the words of Lejeune revising his autobiographical pact and his thoughts about the pejorative valuation of autobiography relative to the novel: "novel = fabrication pure and beautiful; autobiography = flatness of unformed experience". Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact (encore)" 185. The genre designation itself, according to the French scholar, is supposed to carry the corresponding reader expectations of the "literariness" of the text.

²⁹Bełza.

Despite their directness and emotionality, Bełza's remarks do point to an important trend in Polish prose of recent years³⁰. Perhaps it is the discursive expansion of therapeutic languages³¹ that has contributed to the flourishing of auto-fiction³² and the appreciation of open descriptions of the subject position. The explicit link to trauma (often – though not exclusively – illness) is what distinguishes contemporary leaning of literature towards autobiography from the transformations of the twentieth-century novel diagnosed by Burek or Jarzębski. Bełza notices these tendencies, but (although he ostensibly sets himself up as their animated critic) he plays by the rules they impose. He does not attack the fad for trading in identities and victimhood; he attacks the meagre “literariness” of some of the texts that are part of it. Similarly, when he wants to legitimise his negative attitude towards the trauma narrative, he decides to put himself in the role of a victim of another trauma (cancer). And only after devoting a few paragraphs to describing his own difficult experiences does he try to convince the readers that he has the right to criticise other people's descriptions of illness. This self-justification is somewhat reminiscent of Henryk Grynberg's position in attacking Michał Głowiński's *Czarne sezony* [*Black seasons*].

Experience vs. literariness

Głowiński's memoir, which covers the liquidation of the ghetto and the author's wartime fate, was in general warmly received by the critics, with one notable exception. In the pages of “Odra”, Grynberg (in a longer text devoted to Holocaust literature) reproached the theoretician, accusing him of technical shortcomings³³. In the eyes of the author of *Drohobycz*, *Drohobycz*, Głowiński's book was “a catalogue of wasted, ill-used chances, a missed opportunity

³⁰His intuitions align with less directly expressed opinions of Igor Kierkosz: “Suffice that a given work is a weapon for a good cause and all of a sudden criticising it seems to be morally questionable”, Igor Kierkosz, “Lubię tę robotę” [“I like this job”] *dwutygodnik.com* 4 (2023), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/10616-lubie-te-robote.html>.

³¹See, among others, Eva Illouz, “Suffering, emotional fields and emotional capital”, in: *Feelings in the era of capitalism*, transl. by Zygmunt Simbierowicz (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2010), 61-108; Katy Waldman, “The rise of therapy-speak”, *The New Yorker*, 26.03.2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-rise-of-therapy-speak>; Kinga Dunin, “Moda na depresję, czyli kultura terapii” [“Fad for depression, or the culture of therapy”], *KrytykaPolityczna.pl*, 11.03.2023, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/czytaj-dalej/kinga-dunin-czyta-jak-plakac-w-miejscach-publicznych-kultura-terapii/> It is hard to pinpoint the precise moment when this expansion started. In the US, the term “therapeutic culture” was used as early as the 1960s and ascribed to Philip Rieff (cf. Philip Rieff, *The triumph of the therapeutic: Uses of faith after Freud*, Fortieth-Anniversary edition, 2nd print [Wilmington: ISI Books, 2007]). The “therapeutization” of public discourses was recognized in Poland some time after the transformation of 1989. Most works analysing this phenomenon (or considering it to be a starting point) started appearing after the year 2000. See, inter alia, Małgorzata Jacyno, *Kultura indywidualizmu* [The culture of individualism] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007); Eliza Czerka-Fortuna, “Przejawy kultury terapeutycznej w edukacji akademickiej” [“Manifestations of therapeutic culture in higher education”], *Edukacja Dorosłych* 2 (2013), <https://www.infona.pl/resource/bwmata1.element.desklight-c8d79612-749a-44c4-9da7-835cd0c7154e>; Łukasz Andrzejewski, “Zagadka społeczeństwa terapeutycznego: historia, konteksty, praktyka” [“The mystery of the therapeutic society: history, contexts, practice”], *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* 1 (2017): 68-89; Ewa Ficek, “Totalność terapii? Dyskursu terapeutycznego filiacje i translokacje” [“The totality of therapy? Filiations and translocations of therapy discourse”], in: *Reprezentacje świata w dyskursach* [Representations], ed. by Bernadetta Ciesek-Ślizowska et al. (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2019), 253-263.

³²It was not, as argued by Rafał Piłkuła, a democratisation of literary spaces. The journalist wrote: “the ‘me-and-my-life’ literature is a hot trend in the Polish literary cauldron”. He traced the reasons for that in the growing numbers of amateur writers. Rafał Piłkuła, “Ekshibicjonizm literacki i pożytki z niego” [“Literary exhibitionism and its benefits”], *Tygodnik Przegląd* 31 (2022), <https://www.tygodnikprzegląd.pl/ekshibicjonizm-literacki-pozytki-niego/>.

³³Henryk Grynberg, “Pokolenie Szoa” [“The Shoah generation”], *Odra* 4 (2002): 37-49.

to establish a stronger, authentic contact with the reader”³⁴. Although Grynberg’s review was controversial and was rebuffed by Jacek Leociak³⁵, as Janusz Waligóra points out in his reconstruction of the dispute, an important context for it was the reviewer’s subject position. Various “imitations” of criticism (such as the authority of Głowiński-the-researcher or the weight of historical testimony inherent in the nature of Holocaust literature) did not affect Grynberg’s assessment, for he, as a “child of the Holocaust”, knew first-hand the weight of the described trauma and was able to treat *Czarne sezony* as literature without any mitigating filters and thus apply literary criteria to it.

Even if we accept that it is impossible to judge the gravity of a traumatic experience, we can still take into account its historical significance, which gives Holocaust literature its special position in literary criticism or in trauma studies. However, even here, it is important to distinguish between testimony (oral history, the written memoir of a witness to history, etc.) and a text with literary ambitions. Responding to Leociak’s polemic, Grynberg, wrote: “I treated *Czarne sezony* as literary prose, rather than as yet another witness testimony. If I was mistaken, then of course I withdraw most of the allegations”³⁶. Thus, he emphasised the primacy of the historical and anthropological function of testimony, as opposed to the literary function of literary prose, even if the latter is inspired autobiographically or historically.

Despite the unquestionably special status of Holocaust-related writing, the distinction outlined above (between literature and testimony) is sometimes also applied to other trauma narratives. This very distinction was the foundation of yet another review of Pakieła’s debut: in “artPAPIER” Adrian Witczak the fact that *Oto ciało moje* claims fictionality (and thus – literariness):

I understand that novelistic fiction provides a kind of safety buffer for the author; it creates distance and prevents the readers from identifying the author’s personal experiences. However, instead of hiding behind novelist fiction one might label the text somewhat differently, e.g. an art-therapeutic intimate journal, supporting the author’s healing process. If the author was expecting a more empathetic approach to her text, it was definitely worth opting for more authenticity. I believe that an illness described openly would not have provoked such critical reactions. Such a setting would have forced a calmer, more empathetic reading of these notes.³⁷

Witczak writes directly: there is no room for critical-literary doubt in the reading of a pathographic ego-document: it is a therapeutic space for empathy. A “de-novelisation” of Pakieła’s debut would

³⁴Janusz Waligóra, „Pamięć i tekst: wypowiedzenie Zagłady w „Czarnych sezonach” Michała Głowińskiego” [„Memory and text: pronouncing the Holocaust in Michał Głowiński’s *Czarne sezony*”], *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Historicolitteraria* 9 (2009): 164.

³⁵Leociak attacked Grynberg, among other things, for his focus on evaluation according to literary criteria: “I wonder if Grynberg really tracks the level of banality of the events described by Holocaust witnesses and victims, and considers the “non-trivial” ones to be better than the “trivial ones”? Is it even possible to use these criteria to judge autobiographical prose attempting to record the experience of the Holocaust as experienced by a child?”. Jacek Leociak, „Grynberg niebanalnie o Głowińskim” [„Grynberg non-trivially about Głowiński”], *Odra* 6 (2002): 64-65.

³⁶Henryk Grynberg, „Mój krytyk za dużo wyczytał” [„My critic read too much into it”], *Odra* 6 (2002): 67.

³⁷Adrian Witczak, „Pułapki szczerości” [„Traps of sincerity”], *artPAPIER* 14 (2022), <http://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=444&artykul=9020&kat=1>.

have affected its reception and, to some extent, would have thrown a spanner in the works of literary criticism. Her “anti-literariness” would have been irrelevant, and the shortcomings of her narrative technique would have at best illustrated the author’s inner state, and at worst – would have constituted stumbling blocks irrelevant to the main purpose of the text. To put it briefly, things would have been different if an autobiographical pact had been proposed instead of a referential pact.³⁸

The culture of autobiography

It is worth asking ourselves here: is this the case? If we accept Witczak’s diagnosis, then instead of the distinction between traumatic testimony and literary prose we will be defining the horizon of interest for literary criticism. Ostensibly, this would solve the problem: criticism is concerned with what is actually and declaratively literary, studies in trauma and maladies, empathetic reading of texts which are non-fictional externalisations of the inner state. This distinction, however, prevents the possibility of looking critically at phenomena which are more broadly present in the literary field and within the book market; of commenting on what a review of Piłkuła calls the “culture of exhibitionism”³⁹; of asking fundamental and broad questions about the state of Polish literary production and drawing conclusions from the perspective of the sociology of literature. When dealing with “authentic” texts which “tell it like it is” need to be “experienced” and “received calmly and empathetically”, the critic is faced not so much with an ethical duty, as with emotional blackmail.

This problem, moreover, is not transparent in the eyes of commentators. Voices of scepticism are increasingly frequent: Olga Wróbel, in a text entitled *O sobie* [About myself], criticised Dorota Kotas’s *Czerwony młoteczek* [The red hammer] for its egocentric narrative and for its writing which is “psychologically interesting, unpalatable reception-wise”⁴⁰. Antonina Tosiek devoted the first paragraph of her negative review of Malwina Pająk’s *Wstręt* [Disgust] to problematising the position of a reviewer confronted with an autobiographical narrative⁴¹;

³⁸The same distinction, albeit in a critical tone, was pointed out a little earlier by Mateusz Witkowski in his review of Natalia Fiedorczuk’s *Jak pokochać centra handlowe* [How to fall in love with shopping malls]: “Fiedorczuk states in the afterword that her book is something in between a novel and a reportage. And this is where the problems with evaluating her work begin. It is difficult not to treat this statement as a kind of safety net. If we apply novelistic criteria to *Jak pokochać centra handlowe*, we will probably ascertain a painful lack of composition, stylistic blandness, lack of any “operations on language”. [...] Perhaps *Jak pokochać centra handlowe*, treated as pure journalism or therapeutic prose, would not have provoked such resistance. As fictional prose (drawing on the author’s experience, as we know from her interviews), however, it must be subject to specific criteria.” - Mateusz Witkowski, “Literatura bez literatury i nagroda za temat, czyli Paszport Polityki dla Natalia Fiedorczuk” [“Literature without literature and an award for the topic, or “Polityka” Passport for Natalia Fiedorczuk”], *ksiazki.wp.pl*, 18.01.2017, <https://ksiazki.wp.pl/literatura-bez-literatury-i-nagroda-za-temat-czyli-paszport-polityki-dla-natalii-fiedorczuk-6145960874330241a>

³⁹Piłkuła.

⁴⁰Olga Wróbel, „O sobie” [„About myself”], *dwutygodnik.com* 5 (2023), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/10708-o-sobie.html>.

⁴¹“We are talking about another novel backed by the author’s declarations about the convergence of autobiography and fiction, written “70 per cent about her and for her”. And just like that, boom! At least three crayons from the literary critic’s pencil case land overboard, because judgements on experience are, after all, a filthy thing. How to save oneself? Grit one’s teeth and write something about a losing battle in the name of goodness and beauty, i.e. how the protagonist exposes a degenerate system? Or would it be better to avoid judgement because of compassion and human (female, straight from the barricades!) empathy?” - Antonina Tosiek, “Szkic do rozwinięcia” [“An essay to elaborate”], *dwutygodnik.com* 5 (2023), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/10718-szkic-do-rozwinięcia.html>.

Adam Wrocz, in his well-known *Czy bohater polskiej powieści kupił już sobie komputer?* [*Has the protagonist of the Polish novel purchased a computer yet?*] recognized in the “private novel” one of the two dominant patterns of prose writing in Poland, which requires criticism and revision⁴². Agata Sikora, on the other hand, in her essay entitled *Ja w pudełku* [*Me in a box*], consistently argued against the subjective primacy of contemporary cultural production, claiming that its main function is to prevent debate.⁴³

These voices of scepticism, however, do not make the matter any simpler: disagreement with Witczak’s diagnosis (of maintaining a definite separation between fictional and autobiographical literature) does not, after all, leave the role of the critic unchallenged either. While preserving the right to comment on semi-autobiographical genres is an important postulate, it does not invalidate the constitutive differences between therapeutic and traumatic narratives and that which is primordially literary. Faced with the expansion of therapeutic languages and cultural phenomena based on the category of subjective experience, critics should once again ask themselves about the scope of their competence.

A broader historical and literary perspective provides an interesting context for these considerations. In his book *Gry z autobiografią* [*Games with autobiography*], Artur Hellich meticulously reconstructs the historical conditions of a specifically Polish aversion to non-fiction narratives focused on individual experience. Partitions, wars, discussions about the shape of new forms of statehood, and the censorship restrictions in People’s Republic of Poland were all factors that effectively turned writers away from introspective ambitions towards participating (more or less directly) in social discussions. The autobiographical breakthrough came only after 1989, when:

on the one hand, restrictions to freedom of speech imposed by the authorities came to an end, and on the other, Poland adopted a liberal-capitalist system that contributed to the popularisation of the Anglo-Saxon culture of individualism. From then on, publishing autobiographies in print became massively popular. Confessions started to be published by writers and literary scholars, as well as politicians, scholars of various disciplines and celebrities. Autobiographies, often written by ghostwriters, flooded the publishing market, but in many cases they also became an important and inspiring voice in public debate. Today, still current is the cry of the English poet of the Lakes, Robert Southey (expressed in 1807), when he complained that he lived in a time when even “booksellers, lecturers, pickpockets and poets become autobiographers”⁴⁴.

The researcher, pointing to a discursive shift which enabled the appreciation of the individual perspective, rightly linked it to the socio-economic context. However, while autobiography (understood in the strict genre sense) was in Poland an unwanted genre for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because of political conditions, its

⁴²“Thus, this private novel, which could still be called intimate and impressionistic, deprives the Polish novel today of any chance for a further career, for a place in contemporary discourse, among important areas such as science, technology and politics” -. Adam Wrocz, „Czy bohater polskiej powieści kupił już sobie komputer?”, *dwutygodnik.com* 6 (2023), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/10791-czy-bohater-polskiej-powieści-kupił%20już%20sobie-komputer.html>.

⁴³Sikora.

⁴⁴Hellich, 65.

particular popularity after 1989 can also be explained by the ideological need produced by liberal democracy.⁴⁵

The issue becomes more complicated, of course, when we are focusing on the broader phenomenon of autobiography: the above-quoted diagnoses of Burk, Czermińska or Jarzębski prove that autobiographies were doing just fine in Polish prose of the 20th century. However, the autobiographical breakthrough recognised by Hellich can only reinforce these tendencies (to establish autobiography as a matrix for other forms of writing). The anti-literariness of contemporary literature should be considered more broadly: acknowledging the influence of both autobiography and, more generally, non-fictional genres – a problem which has already been addressed in literary criticism in recent years. For example, Maciej Jakubowiak, in his article *Nie na temat* [Off topic], made the following claim on the expansion of reportage mechanisms beyond non-fiction:

It is the fad for reportage, dominating literary circulation in Poland in recent years, that makes the “what” more important than the “how”. The supremacy of the reportage convention, which depends on a narrowly defined literary realism, means that little attention is paid to issues of style. The expectations of the reading public are thus reduced to, at most, technical proficiency, i.e. such mastery of language which allows the subject of the literary presentation to reveal itself, or, to put it more simply, makes it “easy to read”⁴⁶.

Let me narrow down this idea and take it further: the desire for non-fiction is joined in the “reader’s order” by a strong appreciation of the uniqueness of individual experience. This ties in with the development of a therapeutic culture, and the cultural primacy of identity perspectives. Kinga Dunin, among others, drew attention to this in literary criticism. Writing about Emilia Dłużewska’s *Jak płakać w miejscach publicznych* [How to cry in public spaces] she thus diagnosed broader discursive tendencies: “[n]ew identity narratives are emerging, such as confessional literature and confessional journalism, institutions and professions, patterns of behaviour, ways of experiencing emotions”⁴⁷.

Critics have noted these transformations in literary production and systems of prestige, including reception, prizes, and scholarships. This suggests the need to examine post-1989 literary trends that oppose autobiographical attitudes. This does not, of course, mean eliminating personal experiences from literature but rather, not treating their expression as an end in itself. Autobiography in texts under analysis can be understood functionally, as a literary mechanism, similar to other formal or stylistic procedures⁴⁸. It thus becomes

⁴⁵Cf. the reconstruction of the relationship between expanding globalisation and the growing “appetite for authenticity” - Olga Szmidt, *Autentyczność: stan krytyczny: problem autentyczności w kulturze XXI wieku* [Authenticity: a critical stat.: The problem of authenticity in 21st century culture] (Krakow: Universitas, 2019), 246-248.

⁴⁶Jakubowiak.

⁴⁷Dunin.

⁴⁸This way of understanding the “authentic” in literature of the 1960s is argued for convincingly by Joanna Orska in *Liryczne narracje* [Lyrical Narratives], see Joanna Orska, *Liryczne narracje: nowe tendencje w poezji 1989-2006* [Lyrical narratives: new tendencies in poetry 1989-2007] (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 37-50.

a particular task of criticism to track those artistic gestures that can be understood as opposition to the dictates of the “autobiographical turn”, i.e., those whose aims remain oriented towards a structural (e.g. sociological, aesthetic, political) rather than individual (autobiographical) commentary.

On the formal level such opposition is linked to “literariness”, understood not as a high style or textual ornamentation, but as a conscious use of formal strategies to articulate specific (though not necessarily explicit) views. It is not, however, a matter of simple oppositions: although “anti-literariness” is supposed to link literature to life, unmediated experience and traumatic narrative, “literariness” (revealed through awareness of one’s technical skills and strategies) is in this case oriented not towards pan-textuality, but towards a communicative purpose. Investigating this reverse of “authenticity” is a separate task, which goes beyond the scope of a single article, but it seems particularly important in view of ongoing critical discussions. Among the aesthetic tools involved in problematising the relationship of the storytelling entity to the structures in which it situates itself are humour⁴⁹ or quirkiness. Authors writing in opposition to the “autobiographical turn” (even when they refer to personal experiences in their works) include many writers from several generations, for example Kacper Bartczak, Adam Kaczanowski, Dorota Maślowska or Natalia Suszczyńska. A thorough interpretative examination of their strategies against the background of the “culture of autobiography” can lead not only to interesting readings, but also to the mapping of important trends in contemporary Polish literature.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

⁴⁹I wrote about humour in the context of de-individuating mental disorders, based on the analysis of Tomasz Bąk’s poetry and Olga Hund’s prose - Zuzanna Sala, “Cierpiący na depresję doskonale odnajdują się na bezrobociu”. Humor w narracjach psychiatrycznych Tomasza Bąka i Olgi Hund” [“People suffering from depression enjoy their unemployment”. Humour in the psychiatric narratives of Tomasz Bąk and Olga Hund”], *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 3 (8.11.2022): 3311–337, <https://doi.org/10.19195/prt.2022.3.13>.

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KEYWORDS

literariness

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Aleksandra Wstecz

ABSTRACT:

The article discusses the relationship between the way the categories of “anti-literariness” and “literariness” operate in contemporary literary criticism and the “culture of autobiography” after the breakthrough of 1989. Based on two recent critical discussions around the books *Kwiaty rozłączki* by Aleksandra Wstecz (2020) and *Oto ciało moje* by Aleksandra Pakieła (2022), the author looks at how the expansion of therapeutic languages and the primacy of stories about individual traumatic experience are remodelling the conditions of literary criticism.

anty-literariness

Aleksandra Pakieła

CONFESSION

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Zuzanna Sala (1994) – literary critic, assistant in the Department of Contemporary Criticism at the Faculty of Polish Studies of Jagiellonian University. She has published, among others, in “Czas Kultury”, “Forum Poetyki”, “Litteraria Copernicana”, “Praktyka Teoretyczna”, “Wielogłos” and in multi-author monographs.

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