THE PROBLEM OF *AUTOTEMATYZM* IN POLISH LITERARY CRITICISM, OR HOW TO IMMOBILIZE A PERPETU-UM MOBILE OF NOTHINGNESS

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1 Introduction

Literary language, like any kind of language, has the ability to refer to itself, or in other words, to be a metalanguage. When analyzing such forms of literary reflexivity, Polish literary critics normally use the term *autotematyzm* or related expressions such as *technika autotematyczna* (‘autothematic technique’) or *utwory autotematyczne* (‘autothematic works’). Notwithstanding the terminological unanimity among Polish scholars, similar expressions hardly ever appear in other languages.\(^1\) One of the reasons for this might be that the term was invented by a Polish scholar, namely the influential literary critic Artur Sandauer (1913-1989). At the same time, the Polish theoretical and critical debate on literary reflexivity seems to a certain extent to deviate from similar discussions in other traditions, particularly in the English-speaking world. Consequently, the hypothesis can be raised that the concept of *autotematyzm* and its numerous (re)definitions lie at the basis of these divergences. The present article will outline the problematic literary critical history of the concept against the background of the international debate on literary reflexivity in order to tackle the question of how the use of alternative critical terms may result in different interpretations of the same phenomenon.

2 Sandauer and *autotematyzm*

In order to fully grasp the evolution of the concept of *autotematyzm* in Polish literary criticism, one should take Sandauer’s understanding of it as a starting
point. First, it should be noted that Sandauer’s notion of *autotematyzm* is the result of a long scholarly process. In ‘Konstruktywny nihilizm’ ('Constructive Nihilism'; 1969 [1947]), his first paper dealing with this problem, Sandauer provisionally uses *samotematyczność* (‘self-thematicity’) instead of *autotematyzm* to refer to literary works in which the creative process itself is thematized:

Treścią dzieła jest jego własna geneza, samo ma służyć sobie za historię i komentarz, zamknięte w koło doskonałe i samowystarczalne, perpetuum mobile nicości. Powstaje nowy rodzaj literatury – samotematycznej. (42)

(The content of the work is its own genesis, it has to serve itself as history and commentary, confined within a perfect and self-sufficient circle, a perpetuum mobile of nothingness. A new kind of literature comes into being – a self-thematic one.)

It should be clear that Sandauer indicates the impossibility of this project, as such commentary on the genesis of the work is itself part of the work and thus requires additional commentary, which ultimately results in a vicious circle. The author’s disdain for such literary forms, only suggested here by the expression “a perpetuum mobile of nothingness,” is made explicit in ‘O ewolucji sztuki narracyjnej w XX wieku’ ('On the Evolution of Narrative Art in the Twentieth Century'; 1981a [1956]), his second paper on this issue.

In this paper, *autotematyzm* (note the terminological change) is denounced for its ‘inconsistency’ (*niekonsekwencja*), since the autothematic novel undermines the illusion of reality (e.g. as the author participates in the story), and at the same time reinforces it (e.g. as the author presents himself as a reliable witness). Although the autothematic technique is merely considered a more systematic use of nineteenth-century romantic irony and thus restricted to modern literature since the end of the nineteenth century, Sandauer defines his understanding of *autotematyzm* more precisely than in his previous paper. More specifically, it is related to any literary technique aimed at the description of the writing process itself. Rather than complaining about the impossibility of a purely autothematic work, Sandauer thus concentrates more on concrete literary forms merely aspiring to such purity.
In yet another text on *autotematyzm*, ‘Samobójstwo Mitrydatesa’ (‘Mithridates’ Suicide’, 1981b [1967]), Sandauer admits for the first time to the creative power of the concept. *Autotematyzm* is interpreted here as a twentieth-century answer to the contradictory aesthetics of nineteenth-century illusory realism, which presented a fictitious story while pretending that it really happened. In the twentieth century this illusoriness was exposed by three different kinds of poetics: a negative, a creative, and – indeed – an autothematic one. Sandauer’s description of this autothematic poetics is based on the classification of the arts which he developed in his ‘Mała estetyka’ (‘A Small Aesthetics”; 1981c [1970]). According to him, all artistic disciplines can be divided into heterothematic and autothematic ones. Heterothematic arts (such as mimetic painting) refer to an external referent, whereas autothematic arts (such as architecture) refer to themselves as a work of art. This division, however, has been subject to certain shifts:


(When using the term “autotematyzm” in this study, we signal the occurrence of elements of consumer art and architecture, of music and dance in the plastic arts or – in particular – in literature. In our century, in those – hitherto heterothematic – disciplines a tendency can be observed, not only to refer to something external, but also to be an autonomous reality. In the plastic arts this tendency has a fixed name – i.e. abstract art; in literature an equally general name has hitherto been lacking. The author of the present study proposes “autotematyzm”.)

In other words, in hitherto exclusively heterothematic arts, there is only a tendency towards reflexivity, and not a full application of *autotematyzm*. However, as Sandauer puts it: “The fact that the goal is unachievable does not mean that one cannot pursue it like a mathematical limit” (*To, że cel jest...*.)
It should be clear that this relativist approach to *autotematyzm* provides a better basis for describing different autothematic techniques used in literary texts. More specifically, Sandauer draws a distinction between words referring to their own material form (*samosłowo*), and words referring to their own meaning (*samotreść*). The technique of *samosłowo* is rather typical of poetry, which has always tried to preserve the natural connection between the material form of a word and its meaning (e.g. in the *onomatopoeia*). Examples of *samotreść* are, according to Sandauer, of a more recent date. Such texts reflect either directly or indirectly on their own meaning or, more specifically, on their own process of coming into being/meaning. In twentieth-century literature, this tendency culminated in the novels of authors such as Thomas Mann and Michel Butor. Surprisingly, Sandauer overlooks similar literary devices in classical novels such as Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quijote* and Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. At the same time, his initial notion of *autotematyzm* seems to have changed, as he also takes indirect (non-thematic) references to the textual process into consideration. As a result, these inconsistencies in Sandauer’s scholarly production form a fruitful basis for critical reactions.

3 Other critics on *autotematyzm*

In a concise overview of the evolution of the use of *autotematyzm* in Polish literary criticism, Ewa Szary-Matywiecka (1992) stresses that most critics receive Sandauer’s analysis unfavourably, as he links *autotematyzm* to a decadent, *fin-de-siècle* cultivation of indefiniteness, emptiness, or of the already mentioned nothingness. According to them, he does not consider the “positive dimension of the existence of those negative contents” (*pozytywny wymiar zaistnienia tych negatywnych treści*; 55). This critical stance seems to spring from an incomplete reading of Sandauer’s scholarly production, since in ‘Samobójstwo Mitrydatesa’ the creative power of *autotematyzm* is discussed extensively (cf. above). It should be added, however, that some of this criticism was uttered before the publication of this last paper. This notwithstanding, several scholars have criticized his
views more profoundly. Whereas Sandauer stresses the regressive orientation of autotematyzm, towards the restoration of certain literary conventions, some of these scholars believe in its progressive orientation, towards the reorganization of all existing conventions. In their opinion, autotematyzm fulfills a critical function with regard to the so-called “objective” representation of reality in which nineteenth-century realists strongly believed. In this sense, autotematyzm can be considered in the larger context of the shift towards a subjective understanding of epistemological processes, which is typical of most of twentieth-century scientific and artistic activities.

Together with this contextualization of literary reflexivity, the expansion of its terminological apparatus should be addressed. Stefan Żółkiewski (1961), for example, employs the term proza “warsztatowa” (“workshop prose”) instead of autotematyzm. According to him, such prosaic forms appear as soon as existing literary codes and conventions are no longer sufficient to express new contents. At those critical moments a new kind of literature emerges, which offers “a reflection of the work on itself, a conscious analysis of the specificities, the possibilities and restrictions of its conventional means” (refleksja [dzieła] nad nim samym, świadoma analiza specyficzności, możliwości i ograniczeń jego konwencjonalnych środków; 57). Because of its critical stance, this proza “warsztatowa” plays a constructive role in the development of new novelistic modes. In a similar way, Andrzej Werner (1965) considers autotematyzm “an explicitly expressed and with the web of the novel interwoven reflection on its own creative process and on the created literary fiction” (wyrażona expressis verbis i wpłacona w tkankę powieściową refleksja nad własnym procesem twórczym i nad stworzoną fikcją literacką; 344). According to him, “the autothematic technique is used to correct the cognitive apparatus of the literary work” (technika autotematyczna jest narzędziem korygującym aparat poznawczy utworu literackiego; 344). In accordance with Żółkiewski’s definition, autotematyzm is praised here for its critical (“correcting”) function with regard to the expressive and cognitive possibilities of existing literary conventions. According to Werner, the aim of autotematyzm is not an escape from reality into “nothingness,” but precisely to provide a better understanding of it. In contrast with Żółkiewski’s opinion, he believes that only twentieth-
century literature has developed such self-correcting (self-reflexive) fictional forms.

Similarly, Michał Glowiński (1968) discerns an increasing reflexivity in twentieth-century literature, which culminated in the French *nouveau roman*. As a starting point, he uses the formulation of the “novel as a methodology of the novel” (*powieść jako metodologia powieści*). First, novels emerged which contained “a confession about the creation of the novel and the psychological mechanism of the writing process” (*wyznanie na temat powstawania powieści i mechanizmu psychologicznego jej pisania*, 92). Examples of this “genetic-psychological” kind of literary self-reflection are André Gide’s *Les Faux Monnayeurs* and Karol Irzykowski’s *Pałuba*, this latter novel being the paramount example of Polish *autokmatyzm*. Later, the *nouveau roman* perfected existing techniques by reflecting on all dimensions of the literary work. As Glowiński considers the novel a fixed social convention which determines both writer and reader, “the theoretical reflection involves a critical and analytical relation to everything by which this convention is accompanied, while its consequence is that the novel thinks about itself, judges, and questions itself” (*refleksja teoretyczna jest [...] sprawą krytycznego i analitycznego stosunku do wszystkiego, co przynosi ze sobą ową umowę, jej konsekwencją zaś jest to, że [...] powieść myśli o sobie samej, sama się sądzi, sama siebie kwestionuje*, 94). In other words, Glowiński, similarly to Zółkiewski and Werner, stresses the critical function of such novels with regard to their own conventions.

At the same time, Glowiński adds two important ideas to the debate on literary reflexivity. First, the concept of a *metajęzyk* (*metalanguage*) is introduced. The idea of a metalinguistic level in a literary text, on which several aspects of the literary code used are discussed, no longer gives priority to explicit metalinguistic commentary. On the contrary, it stresses the possibility of “a theoretical reflection, which is not formulated in a conceptual way, but is implicitly included within the novelistic utterance itself” (*refleksja teoretyczna, nie formułowana pojęciowo, ale zawarta implicit w samym powieściowym wypowiadaniu się*, 98). Consequently, the scope of the discussion is opened up to every literary text since every literary text may contain such an implicit metalinguistic layer.
The second idea concerns the reader’s contribution to literary reflexivity: according to Głowiński, only a contemporary reader, who is familiar with the altered literary consciousness, is able to discern the methodological layer of a literary text.

A subsequent broadening of the scope of the debate is provided by Danuta Danek (1972) in her analysis of explicit “statements in the work about the work” (wypowiedzi w dziele o dziele). According to Danek, such statements are not typical of twentieth-century literature since they are rooted in rhetoric and epic traditions. Consequently, they can be considered a “certain narrative universalum” (pewne uniwersalum narracyjne; 156). In this way, Danek not only challenges the “typical twentieth-century consciousness of a multitude of cultures, conventions and historical forms” (właściwa XX wiekowi świadomość wielości kultur, konwencji, form historycznych; 158), but also the mimetic conception of literature, according to which such inherent statements are considered to be “less perfect” (mniej doskonały; 155). On the contrary, reference is also made to a certain “autotelic novelistic line” (“autoteliczny” ciąg powieściowy; 149), starting from Cervantes’ Don Quijote, through Sterne’s Tristram Shandy and both Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews, and culminating in Denis Diderot’s Jacques le fataliste. This type of novel is characterized by a frequent use of “internal metastatements in the narrow sense” (wewnętrzne metawypowiedzi w sensie ściśłym; 147), in order to explore the limitations of the existing conventions of the novel. What should be noted here is that both Głowiński and Danek stress the universal character of reflexive forms in literature on the one hand, while on the other hand they suggest the existence of certain novels (the nouveau roman, the autotelic novel) in which this reflexivity is fully realized.

A synthesis of these diverging perspectives was developed by Aleksander Labuda (1970). In his opinion, a fully autothematic novel is characterized by “the presence of a ‘metacodal’ layer which is based on a consequently exploited narrative device” (obecność warstwy metakodowej na zasadzie konsekwentnie eksploatowanego chwytu powieściopisarskiego; 107-108). This “metacodal” layer consists of all metalinguistic and metaliterary statements which are either explicitly or implicitly made. It should be noted that Labuda still addresses
Sandauer’s notion of autotematyzm, though he is no longer interested in explicit thematizations of the creative process. As a consequence, he posits a distinction between two kinds of autotematyzm. On the one hand, autotematyzm is considered a thematic subgenre of the novel that deals with its own artistic genesis in any possible way. In a narrower sense, on the other hand, autotematyzm could be understood as a kind of novel in which a consequently employed “metacodal” layer appears. In the latter case, the alternative notion of metapowieść (‘metanovel’; 110) may be used.

Labuda’s analysis clearly illustrates the schizophrenia which dominates the discussion on literary reflexivity in Poland. Notwithstanding the numerous redefinitions and reformulations evoked by Sandauer’s writings, the term autotematyzm itself has hardly been questioned. Consequently, autotematyzm obtained a central position in Polish literary terminology, whereas its meaning was never fixed. On the one hand, some critics continued to defend the idea of some kind of subgenre and even of a literary movement (an -ism). This was most successfully done by Szary-Matywiecka (1979), who situated this type of novel in the period between Irzykowski’s Pałuba (1903) and Witkacy’s Jedyne wyjście (1931-1933). On the other hand, however, under the influence of new novelistic trends in the 1970s and 1980s, autotematyzm was associated to an increasing extent with other literary techniques and concepts, such as “textual heterogeneity” or zywieczności (Nycz 1984),2 “fiction in fiction” (Bakuła 1988), “self-conscious fiction” (Bakuła 1988) and “intertextuality” (Szary-Matywiecka 1992).3 Eventually, literary critics themselves became aware of the term’s exhaustion. At the end of the 1980s, Erazm Kuźma (1987) considered it to be merely a literary rage and “a rather mechanically, accidentally applied literary device” (świat literacki stosowany dość mechanicznie, przypadkowo; 114). Stanisław Eile (1987), for his part, stressed the various meanings of autotematyzm and remarked that “the concept of the ‘autothematic novel’ had made a stunning career in Poland, which surpassed the modest role ascribed to this subgenre in West European studies” (pojęcie ‘powieści autotematycznej’ zrobilo [w Polsce] zawrotną karierę, wykraczając poza skromną rolę przypiswaną tej odmianie w badaniach zachodnioeuropejskich; 197). But is this really the case?
4 From autotematyzm to metafiction

As has been mentioned before, the concept of the “autothematic novel” is indeed hardly known in West European and American studies. Critics such as Eile, however, seem to overlook the increasing attention on all kinds of reflexivity in the humanities (cf. Bartlett & Suber 1987). In the literary sphere, this interest reached its climax in the 1970s and 1980s in the criticism of postmodern American fiction. New concepts emerged, of which the notion of “metafiction” is perhaps the most persistent. At first, metafiction was characterized as a new, postmodern kind of fiction which is self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential, or, most commonly, self-conscious.4 Similarly to autotematyzm, these designations stress the inherent reflexiveness of the text itself. Soon, however, scholars who were familiar with postmodernist literary theory started to attack the idea of the self-consciousness of a literary text. According to Mark Currie, for instance, “[i]t is not enough that metafiction knows that it is fiction; it must also know that it is metafiction if its self-knowledge is adequate, and so on in an infinite logical regress. Can it then be meaningful to say that metafiction is conscious of itself?” (1995: 1). This problem is similar to the awareness in Polish criticism of the tautological character of the notion of autotematyzm. Poststructuralist scholars, however, try to overcome this aporia by stressing that “metafiction is less a property of the primary text than a function of reading” (Currie 1995: 5), and that from this readerly perspective it could be considered a “tendency inherent in all novels” (Waugh 1984: 5) since all novels, either overtly or covertly, reflect on their own status as a literary artifact. In Poland, this idea was already suggested by Głowiński, but other Polish critics never fully adopted it.

If metafiction is a function of reading, which can apply to any narrative text, why then should certain literary texts be highlighted, in order to set up some kind of subgenre, as many critics of autotematyzm did? In order to counter similar postmodernist claims to metafiction, Currie defines this concept in a non-essentialist way as a “borderline discourse […] between fiction and criticism, […] which takes that border as its subject” (1995: 2). Metafiction dramatizes this boundary either implicitly, by articulating the differences
between real-seeming artifice and real life, or explicitly, by embodying the world of criticism within the world of fiction. In both cases, however, the production and reception of fiction are dialectically related in order to stimulate the external reader to take part in the production of the text (cf. Umberto Eco’s idea of the *opus apertum*). As a consequence, the critical function of a reflexive novel is not, as some propagators of *autotematyzm* seem to think, an immanent feature of the text itself, but something that stems from the dialectics of fiction and criticism. Literary texts may contain various reflexive devices, but only when they are activated by a self-conscious reader does their critical potential start to function. To put it another way, this immanent textual self-consciousness needs to be complemented by the critical self-consciousness of the reader. It should be clear that if this notion had been fully adopted by literary critics in Poland, the Polish debate on literary reflexivity would not have ended in the already mentioned literary critical aporia.

Of course, one could object that, especially in the post-communist era, there must have been attempts by Polish scholars to overcome this aporia. There is, indeed, no doubt that poststructuralist insights have been adopted by many Polish literary critics (cf. Nycz 2000 [1995]). Moreover, some of those critics started to employ the notion of *metafikcja* in their analyses of new, “postmodernist” novelistic forms in Polish literature (cf. Czapliński 1997: 109-164). In most critical accounts, however, metafiction is merely treated as just another kind of literary *autotematyzm*, instead of being adopted as a new (poststructuralist) way of understanding all kinds of literary reflexivity. This can be observed in a critical sketch by Bogusław Bakuła (2001) on the “increased self-reflexion” (*wzmoczona autorefleksja*, 55) of recent Polish fiction. After having associated this evolution with metafiction, the critic complicates the situation by reintroducing the concept of *autotematyzm* as a rather contemptuous critical category:

Powieść staje się “pralka autotematyczna”, która przez szybkę w obudowie demonstruje proces mieszania, prania, odziedziania różnych składników literackości. W sumie jednak są to utwory o niczym. (57)
(The novel becomes an “autothematic washing machine”, which demonstrates through the window in the casing the process of mixing, washing and centrifuging the various components of literariness. In the end, however, these are works about nothing.)

What is illustrated here is that autotematyzm is still devoid of any particular content and has started to function as a literary critical “passe-partout”. An extreme example of this may be found in a paper by Tatiana Czerska (1996), in which the concept of “autothematic reflexion” (refleksja autotematyczna, 156) is applied to metaliterary utterances in certain non-literary texts (e.g. interviews with writers) which discuss other, strictly literary texts. As a result, autotematyzm is reduced to mere poetical commentary, regardless of whether it functions self-referentially.

5 Concluding remarks

In my opinion, the terminological dominance of autotematyzm, a term which clearly designates the concern for an overt thematization of the creative process, to a certain extent has weakened critical self-consciousness in Poland. By activating the now discussed poststructuralist insights, it should be possible to reassess Polish autothematic works which up to now have been analyzed from a rather structuralist point of view. Indeed, a metafictional rereading of allegedly autothematic fictions could disclose, on the one hand, to what extent these works merely thematize aspects of the text’s production, and, on the other hand, to what extent they evoke a genuine “borderline discourse” which urges the reader on to the subjective invention of the literary artifact. This reassessment most likely will prove that some of these canonical autothematic works reveal a large amount of critical self-consciousness, which some other works and most of their critical assessments rather lack. I am suggesting that the elimination of the concept of autotematyzm might revitalize both contemporary Polish fiction and criticism. In conclusion, it should thus be clear that the notion of autotematyzm is hardly tenable within the context of postmodern literature and criticism. It would be better to differentiate between the inherent reflexivity of certain literary devices (e.g. intrusive authorial
commentary) and metafiction as a new kind of poststructuralist literary and critical discourse. Only this operation may immobilize the “perpetuum mobile of nothingness” within which the exhausted concept of autotematyzm seems to be confined.

Notes
1 As an exception, two articles in German (Leuschner 1985 and Schmeling 1978) could be mentioned.
2 The concept of sylwiczność (or sylwy współczesne, ‘contemporary sylwy’) refers to a certain kind of post-war prose in Poland, which in a similar way to the old-Polish silva rerum contains the most heterogeneous texts.
3 The association with intertextuality was only made by Szary-Matwieck with reference to new fictional forms in post-war Poland (cf. sylwy współczesne); as a consequence, it did not threaten her own understanding of autotematyzm (cf. Szary-Matwiecka 1979).
4 Some important voices in this debate are Hutcheon 1984 [1980], McCaffery 1982, and Waugh 1984.

References
Czerka, T. 1996. ‘Refleksja autotematyczna w książce mówionej (na przykładzie Pól wizji czyjica).