

# An autofictional house of mirrors in the work of Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski

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Autofiction, meaning...?

In several decades since the term “autofiction” was coined by Serge Doubrovsky, this category has seen many different conceptualizations and striking definitions, also in Polish literary studies<sup>1</sup>. The concept of the French writer and researcher was developed and argued against by, among others, Philippe Lejeune, Vincent Colonna<sup>2</sup>, or Philippe Gasparini. The still unresolved debates on the interpretation of the term have rendered it incredibly opaque, which is why I need to clarify how I define the concept for the purposes of the following analysis.

Building on Jerzy Madejski’s discussion about the difficulties of defining autobiography, one can point to two basic “concepts of description”. The first would be a modality-based understanding of autobiography, one which does not delineate a rigid genre-dependent framework, and the other one, which is genre-based. The key differences between the two can be reduced to the following issue:

The former allows us to follow the various manifestations of autobiography in texts that are not autobiographies (because it is impossible to define this genre). The latter, whose authority is de-

<sup>1</sup> One of the best-known definitions is that of Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska, from the 1990s: “Autofiction’ is nothing else but a novelized autobiography, which uses the name of the author, who engages in psychoanalytic activities”. Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska, *Między autobiografią a literaturą* [Between autobiography and literature] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1993), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Who also discusses the works of Witold Gombrowicz in his 2003 book: Vincent Colonna, *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires* (Paris: Éditions Tristram, 2003).

rived from the canon of autobiographical works, points to various texts which can be considered autobiographical nowadays, when using traditional forms of description of a literary work<sup>3</sup>.

Although Madejski does not use the term “autofiction” in the cited text, I believe that the division of theoretical concepts into modality- and genre-based ones is also justified in the case of works that can be included in this category. After all, as Jerzy Lis states, “[...] autofiction can be both a form and a category, a type of discourse, often even a convenient explanation for the difficulties in properly drawing the boundaries between autobiography and fiction”<sup>4</sup>.

Sometimes researchers advocate an understanding of autofiction close to the autobiographical novel without clearly separating the two concepts<sup>5</sup>. However, this view is rejected by the creator of the term. Years after the publication of his famous *Fils*, Serge Doubrovsky wrote:

[...] autofiction is not an autobiographical novel. An autobiographical novel is one in which the author tells stories that may have partly happened to him, but under a different name. [...] What is important to me is to establish oneself as one of the characters in the text; this is in line with the order of autobiography. The author cannot stay outside and tell his story from that perspective. They are in their text through the presence of their own name<sup>6</sup>.

According to theorists such as Doubrovsky, Regina Lubas Bartoszyńska, and more recently - Anna Turczyn<sup>7</sup>, a constitutive feature of works labeled ‘autofiction’ is that their subject uses them to perform “psychoanalytic activities” (the term is introduced by the author of *Między autobiografią a literaturą* [*Between autobiography and literature*]). However, I do not believe that this is a necessary exponent of the genre, unless, of course, we understand the very act of writing about oneself as an act of self-analysis. Taking this necessary correction into account, I concur with the genre-based perspective on autofiction. This is because it is difficult to accept extreme modality-based concepts that refer to the universal mechanism of fictionalization of the self, which operates in almost every literary text. They further dilute the meaning of the term, which was created in opposition to autobiography. Research literature on this manner of writing is considerable, although it must be said that definitions of its subject matter vary.

Thus, I understand autofiction as a strongly fictionalized prose literary work dealing with the fate of an individual, in which, based on a pact with the reader, the triple identity of

<sup>3</sup> Jerzy Madejski, *Deformacje biografii* [Deformities of biography] (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2004), 13–14.

<sup>4</sup> Jerzy Lis, *Obrzeża autobiografii. O współczesnym piarstwie autofikcyjnym we Francji* [Borders of autobiography. On contemporary autofictional writing in France] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2006), 88.

<sup>5</sup> This is what, among others, Joanna Jeziorska-Haładaj does. She writes: “I adopt a narrower understanding of autofiction, taking it to be a narrative based on one’s biographical facts, which are modified or fictionalized. In this sense, it is indeed close to the autobiographical novel, as Doubrovsky’s critics would have it”. Joanna Jeziorska-Haładaj, *Tekstowe wykładniki fikcji. Na przykładzie reportażu i powieści autobiograficznej* [Textual markers of fiction. On the example of reportage and autobiographical novel] (Warszawa: Fundacja Akademia Humanistyczna, IBL PAN, 2013), 67–68.

<sup>6</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, „Fikcja wydarzeń ściśle rzeczywistych” [“The fictionality of strictly real events”], in conversation with Anna Turczyn, *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2005): 210.

<sup>7</sup> See Anna Turczyn, „Autofikcja, czyli autobiografia psychopolifoniczna” [„Autofiction, or a psychopolifonic autobiography”], *Teksty Drugie* 1-2 (2007): 204–211.

author-narrator-protagonist is preserved. Typically, this contract refers to onomastic issues and first-person narration (like in an autobiography), but this does not seem a prerequisite if other signals indicating this unity are strong enough.

Since the 1990s one has been able to observe in Polish literature an expansion of texts combining fiction with self-referentiality. In her article *Fikcja czy dokument? Problemy genologiczne w polskiej prozie po 1989 roku* [*Fiction or documentary? Issues of genre in Polish prose after 1989*], Iwona Pięta writes about “a new aesthetic quality, combined with a specific kind of expressivity contained in the selection and skillful use of seemingly inconsistent features,” which writers such as Izabela Filipiak, Olga Tokarczuk, Paweł Huelle and Andrzej Stasiuk achieved by combining intimacy with literary fiction<sup>8</sup>. In my text I would like to draw attention to the work of an author who, while not fully recognized, has brought to life one of the most distinctive and consistent autofictional projects in Polish literature. He thus became part of this autofictional boom, even though he belonged to an earlier generation of writers than the names mentioned above. Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski belongs to the generation of, for example, Ryszard Kapuściński, Marek Hłasko, Jerzy Kosinski or Tadeusz Konwicki. The latter two in particular, just like the author of *Rzeczy nienasycone* [*Insatiable things*], mix elements of fiction and autobiography in their works. Thus, they may constitute the background against which the distinctiveness of Czcibor-Piotrowski’s literary path becomes apparent. The rise of autofiction, in which Czcibor-Piotrowski played a role at the turn of the 21st century, did not occur in isolation; rather, it stemmed from the intensification of literary trends that had been developing for decades .

The poet and translator, born in 1931, debuted with the novel *Prośba o Annę* [*Asking for Anna*] in 1962 after having published his first books of poetry. Following unfavourable reception of the book, he abandoned narrative forms. After several decades, as he was approaching his seventieth birthday, he returned to writing prose, announcing a trilogy about his childhood during World War II (*Rzeczy nienasycone* - published in 1999, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 2010; *Cud w Esfahanie* [*The miracle in Esfahan*] - 2001; *Nigdy dość. Mirakle* [*Never enough. Miracles*] - 2011). The series does not include *Straszne dni* [*Terrible days*], published in 2008, which were created in parallel with the third installment of the cycle and provide a direct commentary on the writing process. Thus, although formally they do not belong to the cycle, they show strong ties with it, which is evidenced by the presence of near-identical fragments in *Nigdy dość* and *Straszne dni*. All of the aforementioned works form a rich “autobiographical space,” further supplemented by the author’s final book of poetry, *Autoportrety* [*Self-portraits*], published in 2011, and the unpublished *Rzecz o moich swowolnych rodzicach. Centurie miniatur* [*About my frivolous parents. A centuria of miniatures*] (dated circa 2013), which can be found in the writer’s archive at the National Library. Taken together, these five extensive prose texts can be seen as a coherent autofictional project with a dynamics of its own.

However, the coherence of a literary project does not necessarily entail the stability of the “self” that emerges from it. The autofictional subject in Czcibor-Piotrowski’s work is fluid, constantly shifting and self-correcting. Just when the reader feels they have grasped his es-

<sup>8</sup> Iwona Pięta, „Fikcja czy dokument? – problemy genologiczne w polskiej prozie po 1989 roku” [„Fiction or documentary? – genre-related issues in Polish prose after 1989”, in: *Polska proza i poezja po 1989 roku wobec tradycji* [Polish prose and poetry after 1989 vis-à-vis tradition], ed. by Aleksander Głowczewski, Maciej Wróblewski (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2007), 67.

sence, he fractures into multiple coexisting versions of himself (the issue here is not just that the protagonist narrating the series about puberty now is a boy - Drzejek, now a girl - Uta, which shifts happen naturally). Because of this, the unstable autofictional subject also opens up other connections, more external to the matter of a single work. Therefore, it is worth expanding the research reflection to include new contexts. Introducing the issues of seriality, archive, and paratext will allow us to gain a broader perspective and highlight the complexity of literary communication in the case of a genre as peculiar as autofiction.

The overarching procedure, adopted in this article to uncover the above-mentioned aspect, will be paratextual analysis. The concept of paratext, however, will be introduced in more detail towards the end of the following considerations. First, theoretical underpinnings of the seriality of autofiction and its significance for the construction of the autofictional self will be introduced, followed by information on Czcibor-Piotrowski which can be found in the National Library. It should be noted that although in the reading experience the aforementioned elements are revealed in the reversed order: first the paratext, then other works which are part of the series, finally - the archives. Yet, reversing that order can help establish the boundaries of the investigated paratext and prepare the ground for analysis proper.

## Seriality

Writing about serial autofictional narratives, Ricarda Menn and Melissa Schuh emphasize that the strategies for constructing the subject stand in opposition to the perception of the subject in terms of a fixed self, with strictly delimited boundaries and closed structure, which are characteristic of traditional autobiographical projects<sup>9</sup>. The multiplied “self,” which combines fictional and self-referential dimensions, leads to the strengthening of the narrative’s auto-creative effect while emphasizing the aesthetic qualities of such “life-writing.” Through serial autofiction writers experiment with ways of expressing themselves and building their subjectivity, which is negotiated with each successive work. It is the autofictional self that provides structure to the series. This is why it is possible to speak of serial autofiction as a separate subcategory of a kind of writing that valorizes the sense of self as something unstable, and accidental, and points to the fact that the subject is constituted not by memorizing and recollecting things and facts<sup>10</sup>, but is subject to processes of fictionalization, a creative work of imagination and self-creation<sup>11</sup>.

Marcin Wołk’s concept of “autobiographical narrative sequences” also seems to be operationally useful. The literary scholar defines those as “collections of fictional and non-fictional texts of one author, related through autobiographical intention (and, consequently, often having a common or similar narrator-protagonist, linked by mutual references, characterized by the

<sup>9</sup> Ricarda Menn, Melissa Schuh, „The Autofictional in Serial, Literary Works”, in: *The Autofictional. Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, ed. by Alexandra Effe, Hannie Lawlor (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2022), 102–103.

<sup>10</sup> Since studies on the workings of memory and their influence on the creation of memoirs are not central to this article, I do not pursue this thread here. Works on the relationship between individual and collective memory demonstrate a great impact of cultural (and literary) schemata on the structuring of memory (e.g. Jan and Aleida Assmanns’ concept of cultural memory).

<sup>11</sup> Menn, Schuh, 115–116.

identity, continuity or relatedness of the diegesis and recurrence of motifs), collections which do not possess formal characteristics of a cycle<sup>12</sup>. Unlike a cycle, a sequence is not a concept from genre studies; it transcends genre and typology, which is why it includes both prose and poetic works (this is why Czcibor-Piotrowski's work *Autoportrety* belongs in the sequence<sup>13</sup>). For an autobiographically oriented writing, a cycle is less autonomous than in the case of collections of purely fictional texts. Wołk explains this in terms of the "totality" of autobiography, which is realized in the intertextual space and creates "quasi-cyclic"<sup>14</sup> relations between different works of the writer. The researcher does not believe that the source of coherence in an autobiographical cycle proper are structural factors, but references to the real persona of the author (who is outside the text) and to their biography. Importantly, the autobiographical sequence understood in this way "maps the process of a person's creative struggle with the world, the institutions of literature and themselves"<sup>15</sup>. More on these struggles will be said later. It is worth noting that while Wołk does not mention the concept of autofiction, he does emphasize that in the case of autobiographical sequences, the self is created in the space between fictional and autobiographical texts.

In Czcibor-Piotrowski's work, the relatively stable subject of the trilogy is set in motion by successive elements of the sequence which transcend the cycle and reveal new manifestations of the "self." This autofictional project was not a closed work, fitting the established boundaries of the trilogy. It was open to corrections and transformations of the author's prose model, the sources of which can be seen, among other things, in the particular way in which autofiction operates in literary communication as a 'double pact' genre. Of course, one can never access the entire history of the author-reader relationship, but seriality allows one to observe some turning points: how reception affects the writer's attitude to their own work and their response to that reception. The act of inscribing oneself in autofiction is not innocent, nor is it inconsequential for the writer's self, as can be gleaned from a diachronically ordered reading of Czcibor-Piotrowski's authorial messages.

They are contained in the author's peritexts and epitexts<sup>16</sup>, but their scope cannot be limited only to the paratext, which was officially introduced into literary communication in the course of publication. That communication begins earlier, when constructing an authorial peritext (such as preface or afterword). Moreover, it should be emphasized that confining the paratext to the archive does not prevent the existence of actual communication (after all, manuscripts also have their readers), nor does it deprive it of features of a public paratext, given that it is created with a view to print publication. This is proven even by the relatively small Czcibor-Piotrowski's archive at the National Library.

<sup>12</sup>Marcin Wołk, „Autobiografizm i cykliczność” [„Autobiographism and cyclicity”], in: *Cykl i powieść* [The cycle and the novel], ed. by Krystyna Jakowska, Dariusz Kulesza, Katarzyna Sokołowska (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2004), 19.

<sup>13</sup>While this might lead to interesting conclusions, I do not include *Autoportrety* in this analysis because I am focusing here on the issue of autofiction as a genre of prose.

<sup>14</sup>Wołk, 24–25.

<sup>15</sup>Wołk, 31–32.

<sup>16</sup>Henceforth, whenever types of paratext are mentioned, I am using Gérard Genette's terminology, developed in his classic work *Seuils: Gérard Genette, Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*, transl. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

## The archive

The intertextual space can also be interpretively expanded by examining manuscripts. The writer's efforts and dilemmas are rarely discernible in the printed text of the work (unless they express them explicitly, e.g., in metatextual remarks) but they become discernible in that which is "in-between": between specific texts, between the pre-text and text, between para-text and text. Following the genetic criticism framework, I would like to incorporate Czcibor-Piotrowski's notebooks and unpublished works into his autobiographical sequence. This decision has several important implications. As rightly noted by Olga Dawidowicz-Chymkowska:

The research object constructed in the first phase of a genetic critic's work can be viewed in one of two ways: as a plane of reference for the published text, which creates new interpretative possibilities, or as a testimony to the process of textual creation. [...] In the former case, the work's notebook constitutes a kind of intertextual space for the finished work, whose use in interpretation is legitimate from a historical-literary point of view. [...] The work, expanded by reference to the notebooks, becomes an open work of sorts, in which the shape of the text chosen for publication includes a range of other possible forms, and many versions of the work create an endless network of connections and mutual references<sup>17</sup>.

Moreover, contact with manuscripts reveals material traces of the creative process: the idiosyncrasies of handwriting, the reconstructable trajectory of deletions and corrections, the choice of writing material, etc. They are indications of the writer's physical existence, which is made present in this manner. Observing the dynamic process of writing equips the autofictional house of mirrors with yet another destabilizing mirror, and the autobiographical space obtains another dimension: the image of the subject actively working with the literary matter, modifying its forms. Since, due to the nature of autofiction, these operations are largely performed on the decipherable image of the self, changes and shifts within it can be observed more closely.

Unfortunately, the incomplete nature of Czcibor-Piotrowski's archive at the National Library does not allow the construction of a reasonably comprehensive, coherent narrative about his creative process. Below I list the elements of the collection that are the most interesting from the point of view of this article's focus, and which can aid the reading of Czcibor-Piotrowski's serial autofiction.

1. Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski's sketches and notes for the novel *Nigdy dość*, Rps 17692 III - this item includes 57 pages of manuscript notes and sketches for the third part of the series. These are short workshop notes written on various materials. For example, the writer used envelopes (or fragments thereof), advertising correspondence, flyers, etc. The whole thing is hardly legible and does not seem to be organized in any way.

2. *Nigdy dość. Mirakle*, Rps 17695 III - this is a complete typescript with numerous handwritten corrections by the author, generally minor ones, mostly concerning obvious typing errors or stylistic changes. The title page features a correction of the date from 2009 to 2011, which means that Czcibor-Piotrowski began typing the text in 2009, and then kept introducing corrections over the following

<sup>17</sup>Olga Dawidowicz-Chymkowska, *Przez kreślenie do kreacji. Analiza procesu twórczego zapisanego w brulionach dzieł literackich* [From sketching to creation. Analysing the creative process recorded in notebooks to works of literature] (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2007), 9–10.

two years. The typescript belongs to the final phase of creating the text. However, there are no links attesting to the stages between notes from the earlier corpus of manuscripts and this notebook.

3. *Rzecz o moich swowolnych rodzicach. Centuria miniatur*, Rps 17697 III - computer printout with handwritten corrections by the author, dated roughly 2013. It contains a few minor changes applied in blue pen. The whole thing has the features of a final draft.

Given such a modest dossier, two main lines of research are possible - a micro-scale analysis of fragments based on workshop notes, or a macro-scale analysis of the perceived overall autofictional prose model and its transformations. I will focus on the latter, especially on the instability of the autofictional self. This involves treating manuscripts/typescripts as full-fledged links in the history of creativity, which are entitled to a similar status as texts published in print. Comparing published books with archival collections can shed light on otherwise hidden creative tensions and conflicts.

## Paratext

At this point, the reflection must be expanded for the third time, to make room for the already mentioned paratext. Researchers of autofiction emphasize its important role in the programming of reception. It is in the paratext that the reader can find signals of the pact, as well as biographical data allowing the identification of the narrator-protagonist as one who shares, to some extent, the fate of the author who exists outside the text. These similarities facilitate the reading of the work within the autobiographical register. Such likeness refers to the author's biographical identity, following Philippe Gasparini's terminology<sup>18</sup>:

Gasparini also distinguishes the author's biographical identity defined by such elements as appearance, profession, origin, social environment, personal fate (*trajectoire personnelle*), views, tastes, lifestyle. The formation of hypotheses about biographical identity depends on the knowledge, availability and reliability of information. [...] Gasparini believes that the analysis of these aspects of identity (which requires going beyond the text and sometimes beyond the paratext), hitherto neglected in modern research or, let us add, associated with literary studies prior to the anti-positivist breakthrough, is necessary to describe more fully the overlapping roles of author and narrator.

Thus, the paratext guides interpretation and provides instructions on how a work should be read (fiction or autobiography?). In the case of autofiction, however, we are often faced with contradictory signals, with the assertion of an "impossible" pact – simultaneously novelistic and autobiographical. The analysis of the paratext can bring promising conclusions, especially if performed within the framework of the two interpretative approaches mentioned above – the one related to seriality, and the one incorporating pre-texts and unpublished works of Czcibor-Piotrowski. However, I am only interested in authorial paratext, as it relates to the creative process and often testifies to the writer's literary self-awareness. In this context, we can talk about instructive authorial messages which control the reading of the text. These should be considered

<sup>18</sup>Jeziorska-Haładaj, 107–108.

from several perspectives, taking into account their various characteristics, for example, distance from the text (spatial and temporal), readership range, the ability to update earlier paratexts. Each of these exerts a different influence on the potential effectiveness of such a message.

Thus, for example, the author's self-commentary printed on the cover is closest to the text, it has a wide reach (the readers of a given issue), and is highly fossilised. This type of paratext can be updated by means of an authorial epithet: this happens when the author corrects earlier clues in interviews, thus demonstrating a change in the attitude to their work. Also, the peritexts accompanying the writer's subsequent works (or their new editions) can introduce meaningful updates. These are examples of actualized messages. Sometimes, however, in the writer's archive we come across potential messages - those that did not make it into literary circulation: an abandoned afterword, a draft of a preface that did not ultimately appear in a specific edition, etc. Then one could speak of, for lack of a better term, a pre-text to a paratext, an example of which is the afterword to *Nigdy dość. Mirakle* (Rps 17695 III), which was only partially published in the book. Significantly, paratextual operations can reveal interferences in communication or its breakdown.

The reading pact sometimes changes over time precisely because of the updating function, which is revealed by the peritexts of individual works or their subsequent editions, and by authorial statements which provide a commentary on the work. This is a crucial element of serial autofiction and affects the lability of the autofictional self, which can never establish itself and present itself in all its glory, even if a reader were to familiarize themselves with all available works, archives, paratexts. The new pact retroactively affects the earlier one. Let us take a brief look at how the author's messages changed in Czcibor-Piotrowski's prose, which signified attempts to reformulate the model of his autofiction and efforts to change its perception.

The cover of the first edition of *Rzeczy nienasycone* bears the following Czcibor-Piotrowski's commentary on the genesis of the book:

After many years, the temptation of prose took over me, and this story began to emerge slowly from "Notatki z pamięci" ["Notes from memory"], printed in the London magazine "My" ["We"]. I swam against the current of time into a barely remembered past. And suddenly what happened nearly sixty years ago came back to me. I was finding myself and loved ones, my people and strangers, recalling the wonders and epiphanies, the fears and hopes of childhood. I took this journey on a flying carpet and a dragon, experiencing wonderful vertigo<sup>19</sup>.

Analyzing this statement, Jeziorska-Haładaj on the one hand emphasizes the presence of the motifs of return to the past and the working of memory, which imply the credibility of events presented in the book and on the other – points to references to the fairy tale convention<sup>20</sup>. Thus, a coherent paratextual framework is never constituted, and the reader is left with a "double" reading of the text.

<sup>19</sup>Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski, *Rzeczy nienasycone* [Insatiable things] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 1999), 4th page of the cover.

<sup>20</sup>Jeziorska-Haładaj, 129.



In his 2001 interview with Grzegorz Leszczyński<sup>21</sup>, Czcibor-Piotrowski raised questions about the fictionality/authenticity of the characters and plots described in his book, which had been published two years earlier. He listed both characters whose prototypes existed in reality, and those who were invented (for example, father Grigorij). These comments entitle us to read the first part of the series both as a credible and, to use the author's own words, "probable" autobiography: "How brilliantly memory can reproduce things that seem impossible to remember, especially for a child!"<sup>22</sup>. His comments on the genre-related nature of the classification of *Rzeczy nienasycone* are particularly interesting: "There is a great deal of fiction in the novel"<sup>23</sup>. This tautological formula paradoxically highlights that which is the opposite of fiction.

In that same 2001 *Cud w Esfahanie* was published. Similarly to the earlier book, the self-commentary on the last page of the cover briefly outlined the genesis of the work, again is referencing fairy tale props: "The flying carpet carries me, and invariably I am accompanied by all my loved ones wherever I go, and the trail is long: Pahlevi, Tehran, Esfahan, and then a very long journey all the way to Edinburgh...."<sup>24</sup>. Thus, a quasi-genre formula came into being. The series was labelled a "fantastic fairy tale", which the writer entered "against his will" (the imperative of memory), as well as "non-fabricated fabrication". The latter is a definition of autofiction in a nutshell. Czcibor-Piotrowski thus continued to insist on the dual status of his series, which seems to be his constant disposition to the reader at this stage of his work.

In the following years Czcibor-Piotrowski was writing the third and final part of the series (originally planned under the title *Jakiż to chłopiec?* [*What boy is this?*], but in the end published as *Nigdy dość. Mirakle*) and on a piece of autofiction, which, while not a component of the cycle, remains closely connected to it by providing a commentary on the process of creating *Nigdy dość*. The text in question is *Straszne dni*, which fundamentally changed the subject of the narrative: childhood memories were substituted by the writer's old age, his daily struggles with his work and illness. Prefacing the text proper, *Zamiast wstępu* [*Instead of an introduction*] contains a slightly altered set of instructions than the ones we have witnessed so far. On the one hand, the writer described the piece as "a notebook, notes from the eye of the storm of beautiful terrible days of old age" and "loose pages from everyday life"<sup>25</sup>, which are indicative of authenticity. On the other hand, at the end of this peculiar introduction he made a volte-face (after all!), addressing the following words to the reader: "An important note: everything here is a fabrication. Any similarity to actual persons and events is coincidental." This conventional phrase points to the author engaging in a game with the reader, who should not believe any declarations of (un)truthfulness. Explicitly expressed directions to treat the work as entirely fictional are undermined by numerous references to real-life people from outside the text (characters from the literary world), to events confirmed by the author's biography, as well as the metatextual nature of the narrative:

<sup>21</sup>Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski, „Moje heretyckie spojrzenie” [“My heretical view”], in conversation with Grzegorz Leszczyński, *Guliwer. Czasopismo o książce dla dziecka* [Gulliver. A journal on children's literature] 3 (2001): 26–30.

<sup>22</sup>Czcibor-Piotrowski, „Moje heretyckie spojrzenie”, 26.

<sup>23</sup>Czcibor-Piotrowski, „Moje heretyckie spojrzenie”, 27.

<sup>24</sup>Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski, *Cud w Esfahanie* [The miracle in Esfahan] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2001), 4th page of the cover.

<sup>25</sup>Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski, *Straszne dni* [Terrible days] (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza „Agawa”, 2008), 4.

[...] and I was overwhelmed with anxiety, and I reached for the typescripts of “Straszne dni” and “Boy [sic!]” and I was reading through the chapters I had already written, which was twenty-eight at that time in “Dni” and half as many in “Chłopiec”, and so in the end I was only one or two chapters away in both cases and those would no longer change anything, but then shouldn’t I be writing, writing and writing again, but I barely read a dozen or so pages, I grasped that I wouldn’t be able to change anything, because no matter what I write there’s always the implied ‘bummer!’ at the back of my mind, a fear that I won’t free myself from the “oh-shit” complex [...] <sup>26</sup>.

Moreover, the allographic epitext indeed penetrated the literary tissue of *Straszne dni*, as it is quoted in the course of the narrative, for example, as an excerpt from a short review of *Cud w Esfahanie* by Izabela Filipiak<sup>27</sup>, published in the magazine “Twój Styl” in 2002<sup>28</sup>. This further supports the possibility of reading metatextual themes in *Straszne dni* as a sort of paratext to the trilogy about the author’s childhood in exile<sup>29</sup>.

Also, the typescript of *Nigdy dość. Mirakle* in the National Library contains a firm declaration of fictionality, which, however, is missing from the published version of the text. In a fragment of the unpublished afterword, which in this form also constitutes a public paratext, Czcibor-Piotrowski proclaims:

One more necessary clarification: “Nigdy dość...” - like the other volumes of this trilogy - is a para-autobiography, so the narrator cannot be identified with me, it’s not me, it’s someone else, just as the *dramatis personae* here are someone else. Will you kindly accept that this is simply fiction, make-believe, literature, if the latter term means anything at all.

The categorical, almost official tone of this statement is striking. Czcibor-Piotrowski adopts here the persona of the Author, by the power invested in him by the institution of Literature. However, this instruction, too, is bracketed by another element of the paratext - a motto from the *Confessions* by Augustine, the patron saint of European confessional writing. This motto was also preserved in the publication, speaking to the power of memory.

After the release of *Nigdy dość. Mirakle* in his interview with Dorota Wodecka<sup>30</sup>, the author addressed the issue of how his work relates to autobiographical “truth”. Czcibor-Piotrowski questioned the validity of this query, emphasising that it did not matter whether his mother and Bruno Schulz knew each other only in his poem or in reality, and talking about the role of personal myth in the creation of the self: “My childhood mythologized itself in every word, spoken or written. Now it is just a literary, made-up fiction. So is my mother, so is my life” <sup>31</sup>.

<sup>26</sup>Czcibor-Piotrowski, *Straszne dni*, 223.

<sup>27</sup>Czcibor-Piotrowski, *Straszne dni*, 223.

<sup>28</sup>Izabela Filipiak, „Erotyzm magiczny” [“Magical eroticism”], *Twój Styl* 5 (2002): 139.

<sup>29</sup>I would like to thank Professor Monika Brzóstowicz-Klajn for this suggestion.

<sup>30</sup>Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski, „Skłonność do skoków na łeb” [“A proclivity for taking a header”], in conversation with Dorota Wodecka, *Duży Format* 34 (2011): 12–16.

<sup>31</sup>Czcibor-Piotrowski, „Skłonność do skoków na łeb”, 12.

From the analysis of the messages in the peritext and the epitext, which communicate how to read his works, one can conclude that the writer is uniquely aware of the inner workings of autofiction (although he does not use the term) in literary communication and the conditioning of the reception of a prose which is entangled in the antinomies of “fiction-nonfiction.” Agnieszka Czyżak aptly notes that:

Autofiction is also a kind of game with the reader and their tendency to perceive texts in the non-fiction mode. Indeed, contemporary practices of reception focus more often on the search for a story’s existential embedding and the manners in which its framing is determined by historical realities and community relations rather than on contemplating its aesthetic dimension. The search for the story’s “authenticity” typically involves finding traces of the singular “truth”, which can be dispersed at different levels of the work<sup>32</sup>.

### Beyond the cycle – *Straszne dni* and *Rzecz o moich swowolnych rodzicach*. *Centuria miniatur*

Autofiction is a hybrid genre, combining fiction and self-referentiality; it juxtaposes verifiable events from the writer’s life with those which were invented and sometimes even bear the signs of literary fantasy. It proposes two pacts with the reader: a novelistic and an autobiographical one. It thus poses a challenge in contemporary culture and its emphasis on the values of authenticity and sincerity, since this axiological stance “inevitably leads to an autobiographical reading of fictional texts (which contain the hallmarks of fictionality)<sup>33</sup>.” Common reading practices, contemporary reading tendencies seem to strive to build a reasonably coherent portrait of the writer, even against clear signals of fictionalization, both in the structure of the text itself and in the accompanying paratexts. The culture of authenticity overtly resists autofiction.

Autofictional writing is loaded with a particular affective charge produced from the game of alternating self-discovery and camouflage. Objections, prohibitions and instructions which the author of autofictional texts directs at the imperfect reader, who is liable to make the mistake of a naively biographical reading, are signs of such tensions. In terms of Czcibor-Piotrowski’s work one can speak of an autobiographical trap into which the writer’s self falls and from which it tries to free itself with dogmatic pronouncements of pan-fictionality. Autofiction, as a genre bordering literature and life, co-creates the social image of the empirical author, with which the author may or may not want to identify. In this sense, it is a corrective to traditional autobiographical attitudes, which often seem to be unambiguous in literary communication. Paradoxically, by dispensing with the illusion of a “self” directly accessible through the act of reading, autofiction can be seen as a more sincere type of expression than autobiography. Czcibor-Piotrowski makes references to terms such as “literature,” “fiction,” “fictionalization,” not only out of concern for the autonomy of the literary work but also because he cares about the distinctiveness of the writer’s “self” from the empirical “self” and the

<sup>32</sup>Agnieszka Czyżak, „Autofikcja” [„Autofiction”], *Autobiografia. Literatura. Kultura*. [Autobiography. Literature. Culture] *Media 2* (2020): 95.

<sup>33</sup>Czyżak, 96.

integrity of the latter. In his later prose, the empirical “self” persistently refuses to be identified with the narrative “self”. This refusal to treat texts about oneself as an opportunity for literature to present a coherent social image is characteristic of autofiction authors.

In one of the final passages of *Straszne dni* Dwidka, the writer’s wife, comments on the consequences of the model of prose he adopted:

It seems to me that from the outset you’re making a significant mistake of creating the impression that what you write is entirely autobiographical... Yes, I know what you want to say... Pseudo-autobiography... But you are only teasing with your make-believe-authenticity... One needs to be direct: I made it all up, it’s not me, it’s someone else... you’re playing, simpering, shaking your booty, while they are writing into your resume whatever they please: narcissism, hermaphroditism, homoeroticism, transvesticism, transsexuality... And this can take its toll... Already in private conversations friends and acquaintances are standing up for you: now that you are not Jewish, now that you are not gay... Importantly: you cannot comment on your own case yourself, because what is there to comment on and deny if everything is fabrication... Your other mistake is adopting the first-person narrative... If you had described all of this in the third person, no one could claim: you said that about yourself... The sin of literal reception<sup>34</sup>.

The above-articulated postulates were fully implemented in the unpublished *Rzecz o moich swobodnych rodzicach. Canturia miniatur*. It is a mixture of an original novel about family, an erotic novel and the writer’s diary. Its central part concerns Parents - a happy couple of doctors experimenting with medical application of sexual practices in the years immediately preceding World War II. Just as the disregard for moral norms and erotic boldness of the protagonists’ actions shocked other characters in the text, detailed descriptions of these actions can still surprise the reader today - especially once they have adopted an autofictional mode of reading, which is unavoidable if one knows the writer’s previous works. Indeed, this provocative effect is reinforced by the relation of closeness. The obvious fact that blood ties between the writer and the literary protagonist are unprovable only intensifies the impression of the paradoxical nature of autofiction. Despite the reliance on third-person narration - also, quite unusually, in a diary, which constitutes a quarter of the work - *Rzecz o...* can be considered autofiction in the genre sense. Such perspective is influenced not only by its placement in the autobiographical narrative sequence but, above all, by numerous facts that indicate the identity of the subject “he” with the empirical author. In addition, the possessive pronoun “my” used in the title can be interpreted (in connection with the third-person narrative) as a paradoxical sign of authorial self-referentiality. Such an unconventional combination of the possessive pronoun in the first person with the third-person narrative forces a reading on the borderline between the two pacts (novelistic and autobiographical). Also, *Kartki z “Dziennika”* [*Pages from the “Diary”*] bear traces of advanced fictionalization (for example, each of the notes has a title). They contain many metatextual inquiries, which concern not only the writing of *Rzecz o...*, but also the capacity of the diary format. Recalling the titles of Czcibor-Piotrowski’s actual poems, his date of birth (November 30th) and other biographical facts reinforces the impression of authenticity, although the name Andrzej is never mentioned.

<sup>34</sup>Czcibor-Piotrowski, *Straszne dni*, 233.

*Rzecz o moich swowolnych rodzicach* is self-conscious autofiction, skillfully manipulating the tensions between the authentic and the fictional, between make-believe and truth – one which does not allow an unwelcome invasion of the auto-fictional self into the social image of the empirical author. It seems that towards the end of his life the author, who had fallen into the trap of autobiographical readings of his works, found his escape hatch. Ironically, this closing argument in Czcibor-Piotrowski's game with the reader never saw the light of day and remains a potential message.

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Auto-fiction reveals what a complicated process writing about oneself can be. From the outset it is entangled in literary communication, which does not begin with the publication of a given text. The conditions and possibilities for its creation operate as a set of dispositions that a writer must take into account when bringing a work to life. While attempting to program reception, the author can also direct their own instructions to the readers, and they, in turn, can also influence the shape of the dialog. Their reactions to the issue as sensitive as the author's self-image can move the work to new directions. Traces of hesitations, dilemmas and conflicts can be seen not only in the official circulation, but also (if not predominantly) in archival collections - even those which are as modest in size as the Czcibor-Piotrowski archive. Without them, the paratext accompanying the analyzed work would be incomplete, and we would not know about *Rzecz o moich swowolnych rodzicach*, which crowns the writer's autofictional project, while turning it inside out. The change in the poetics in *Straszne dni* might have seemed to be only a temporary departure from the accepted model. A reading of the author's final major unpublished work *Nigdy dość. Mirakle* on the other hand, proves that it was a deliberate, conscious step towards his complete transformation.

The autofictional self, along with the reading of individual texts, paratexts and pre-texts, is unstable by its very nature, and subject to the ever-new forces - successive acts of agitation, stirring, questioning. As a result, we have less confidence in the reliability of the described facts, but in return we gain access to the truth of the subject, who is fully aware of his troublesome entanglement in the text, and does not hide it from the reader; on the contrary, he exposes the struggle with his own condition as an individual who has taken the risk of writing about himself. If one were to try to briefly name this characteristic of auto-fiction, one could use the oxymoronic formula of "hidden sincerity" - hidden also in the archives.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

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# KEYWORDS

## PARATEXT

**autofiction**

*subject*

**ABSTRACT:**

The article offers a reflection on autofiction as a paradoxical genre. After introducing the definitional problems, the author analyzes the literary project of Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski, focusing on three possible expansions of the interpretation of autofictional texts: the category of seriality, the notebooks and unpublished works found in the archive, and paratext. He also describes the subject of autofiction as a “self” whose main characteristic is instability, in contrast to the subjectivity constructed in traditional autobiography. This is rooted, among other things, in the way autofiction operates in literary communication.

*Andrzej CzciBOR-Piotrowski*

archive

SERIALITY

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