
SELF-REFERENTIALITY IN NARRATIVE LITERARY FICTION: A STRATEGY OF AUTOPOIESIS OR AUTODESTRUCTION?

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Narrative literary fiction, during its long-lasting development, has established and employed various self-referential techniques and strategies and even our non-expert, reader experience reveals that self-referentiality can take on multiple forms and cause various effects. Some of its forms are conventionally connected with a certain genre, period or trend, others are grounded in a writer's unique idiolect, some are just random. The study offers a general overview of the basic types of self-referentiality, a) structural (essential) self-referentiality, b) direct (iconic) self-referentiality, c) indirect (indexical) self-referentiality, and connects these types with particular narrative techniques in concrete fictional narratives. Moreover, the taxonomy of the ways in which self-referentiality both enforce and also weaken narrativity, a general quality of narratives influencing their consistency and coherence in the process of the reader's conceptualization of the narratives, is introduced in the second half of the study together with examples illustrating the findings. Self-referentiality in fictional narratives can thus function as an important means of narrative auto-poiesis as well as its auto-destruction.

Key Words: narrative; autopoiesis; self-referentiality; narrativity; fictional world

Various examples of the ways in which narratives refer to themselves can be detected in fictional literature. These ways can be described and analyzed and also classified according to their essence and purpose. Some of these self-referential techniques essentially influence the very consistence of the narratives which carry them. When we try to grasp the general self-referentiality of fictional narratives in a theoretical way, it seems that the individual reader's experience has to be combined with general literary genological and developmental patterns that will help us to view it as an aesthetic, as well as historical, phenomenon. Therefore, let us touch upon several examples of

self-referentiality in literary fictional narratives in relation to their particular techniques and strategies, their historical and artistic contexts, and also to their purpose, function and effects that they cause.

These contexts enable us to grasp self-referentiality in narrative literary fiction as a phenomenon which can be essential for the establishment, structure, form, and development of general narratives; thus an autopoietic⁽¹⁾ tool *par excellence*, on one side of the spectrum, but also a phenomenon subverting narrativity, and therefore a powerful tool of auto-distracti-on of narrative literary fiction, on the other.

Now, what exactly can be understood by the term self-referentiality in connection to literary fictional narratives? However simple the answer might look, I am afraid that although touching upon a relatively well and thoroughly described phenomenon, we are actually entering an area where we need to tread carefully. Self-referentiality in the literary narrative context can be (and has been) investigated from various points of view, using various means for various purposes and the results of this investigation seem to be too complex to provide us with simple answers. Despite this fact, let us start with one of the most common definitions of self-referential narrative, which seems to be agreed on by many theoreticians and which provides us with a decent starting point:

“Instead of narrating a story, a self-referential narrative narrates that it narrates and how or why the characters in the narrative have found their way into the narrative” (Nöth 2007: 173).

I am afraid that this does not provide a thorough enough definition. Although it covers a vast area of self-referentiality in the realm of fictional

1 The term autopoiesis was originally developed in the field of cell biology in order to define the self-maintaining chemistry of living cells. Generally speaking, autopoiesis describes the ability of systems to maintain and reproduce themselves by creating their own parts and components necessary for their functioning. Since its development, the term has been adopted by various disciplines. In a slightly metaphorical way, autopoiesis, which can be understood as an opposition to the processes of autodestruction, helps us to describe the ability of narratives and the techniques that they employ in order to keep their narrativity – their essential quality.

narrative this definition has to be reconsidered, widened and refined with regards to additional contexts: technological, historical, semantic, artistic, functional, narrative, and fictional. The aim of the study is not to execute an exhaustive analysis of self-referentiality in all these contexts, however, it seeks to contribute to our knowledge of its literary narrative forms. Therefore, in order to break down the complex notion of self-referentiality in narrative fiction let us first divide the cases of self-referentiality in fictional literary narratives into three general clusters: a) structural (essential) self-referentiality, b) direct (iconic) self-referentiality, c) indirect (indexical) self-referentiality.

Structural self-referentiality of narratives represents an essential quality of narratives that provides the foundation for their ability to refer to themselves as to specific narrative-shaped structures. It is firmly connected with the amount of specific narrative energy that enables these structures to be formed, to function and to be conceptualized and understood as narratives.⁽²⁾

Direct self-referentiality of narratives is a non-essential feature/quality of narratives that enables narrative structures to refer to themselves from a meta-narrative position. This self-referentiality is bound to narrative structures that directly (visibly, iconically) refer to the narrated narrative as to an object of narration. This kind of self-referentiality represents the commonly shared view of self-referentiality in the realm of fictional narratives.

Indirect self-referentiality is a non-essential quality of narratives that is connected to a specific set of narrative techniques which, when used, indirectly (indexically) refer to the structure of the narrative, usually by alternating, violating or deviating from conventionally set and practiced narrative forms and content.

2 Clearly, this most common type of self-referentiality, widely practised in various forms by various writers, overlaps with other classical terms generally used by theoreticians in order to point out the practice in which authors (through their narrators) openly refer to the very act of their narration, such as widely used metalepsis and self-reflexive narration. Nevertheless, in order to follow the above suggested model of three possible kinds of self-referentiality operating in fictional literary narratives, I am going to stick to my own system based on the term of self-referentiality and the terminology surrounding it.

It can be seen that all three types of self-referentiality are essentially connected with the quality of narrativity. Whereas the first one is primarily connected with general narrativity (i.e. not only with fictional but also with factual narrativity) and forms fictional narratives as immanent structures, the latter are more firmly connected with artistic conventions of fictional narratives as a means of specific aesthetic communication.

For the purpose of this study, let us leave aside the first type of self-referentiality, that is, the structural, for two reasons – first of all, this view seems to be outside the mainstream of self-referentiality inquiry's interest and belongs more to the general narrative theoretical context. Second, the notion of narrative energy and self-reference seems to be too complex to theoretically grasp clearly and convincingly.

Having left structural self-referentiality aside, let us now draw our attention right to direct self-referentiality. Narrative theory in its crucial stage, which can be referred to as classical (narratological, structuralist), developed a system of categories that are considered essential for a detailed and systemic analysis of narratives. Among other concepts Gérard Genette, the founder of systemic narratology, in his *Figures* introduces the category of *voice* (Genette 1983: 212–262). This category enables Genette to differentiate between possible originators of particular statements. In this respect, one of the most famous narratological distinctions delivered by Genette differentiates between extra- and intra-diegetic narrators on the one hand and between homo- and hetero-diegetic on the other. With regards to fictional narratives it has to be emphasized that all these types of narrators and their combinations can participate in self-referentiality without any limits. The voice can belong to any subject or object of the presented world, it can also be a narrator, close or distant, and can take any narrative form. Similarly, a narrative audience can also take almost any thinkable form. It can be a character or object present in the fictional world, the narrators themselves, the readers (more or less hypothetical) or simply no-one.

In addition, it seems to be obvious that all these narrators and audiences and their combinations, the majority of whom are not commonly involved in self-referential narrative, when they actually are involved in it, produce

self-referentiality with various strengths and various effects. A good example of this is the narrator who directly or indirectly addresses the readers and who represents a common technique of self-referential narration.

In the history of fictional narratives these narrators have been used for various purposes: framing a narrative by explaining the circumstances of its origin (as is common in Gothic Novels⁽³⁾ and in the famous preface to *The Name of the Rose* [1980]⁽⁴⁾), enhancing the reality effect of the narrative based on the direct communication of the narrator with the reader, which supports the authentication function of something witnessed being communicated (*The Divine Comedy* [1420]: the narrator-Dante shares his fear addressing the readers after he encounters the Out of the Heavens⁽⁵⁾),

3 A telling example of such practice can be seen in the founding text of the genre. The preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is purely a description of a “found manuscript” and begins as follows: “The following work was found in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England. It was printed at Naples, in the black letter, in the year 1529. How much sooner it was written does not appear. The principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest ages of Christianity; but the language and conduct have nothing that savours of barbarism. The style is the purest Italian” (Walpole 1982: 3).

4 Umberto Eco begins the Preface to his master-piece by situating the way that he obtained the manuscript for the *Name of the Rose* in a historical world context and its unlucky political situation: “On August 16, 1968, I was handed a book written by a certain Abbé Vallet, *Le Manuscrit de Dom Adson de Melk*, traduit en français d’après l’édition de Dom J. Mabillon (Aux Presses de l’Abbaye de la Source, Paris, 1842). Supplemented by historical information that was actually quite scant, the book claimed to reproduce faithfully a fourteenth-century manuscript that, in its turn, had been found in the monastery of Melk by the great eighteenth-century man of learning, to whom we owe so much information about the history of the Benedictine order. The scholarly discovery (I mean mine, the third in chronological order) entertained me while I was in Prague, waiting for a dear friend. Six days later Soviet troops invaded that unhappy city. I managed, not without adventure, to reach the Austrian border at Linz, and from there I journeyed to Vienna, where I met my beloved, and together we sailed up the Danube” (Eco 1985: 1). As can be seen, Eco emphasizes the informational function by using scholarly discourse which enhances the authentication potential.

5 More than a thousand at the gates I saw
Out of the Heavens rained down, who angrily
Were saying, “Who is this that without death

Goes through the kingdom of the people dead?”
And my sagacious Master made a sign
Of wishing secretly to speak with them.

A little then they quelled their great disdain,
And said: “Come thou alone, and he begone
Who has so boldly entered these dominions.

but this technique can be also used for the purpose of self-referential narrative when the narrator informs the reader about the process of its origin, development, about its structure, fabrication, purpose and aim. Telling examples of such narration can be taken from four famous novels which document the beginning of modern fictional narratives as well as their contemporary stages.

The first one is provided by the main character of Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767). In the first chapter the narrator, Tristram Shandy, not only provides us with details of his birth and even of his own conception, but he repeatedly turns to the readers in order to explain his thoughts and also his narrative and aesthetic strategies. One telling example of many:

“Writers of my stamp have one principle in common with painters.—Where an exact copying makes our pictures less striking, we choose the less evil; deeming it even more pardonable to trespass against truth, than beauty.—This is to be understood *cum grano salis*; but be it as it will,—as the parallel is made more for the sake of letting the apostrophe cool, than any thing else,—’tis not very material whether upon any other score the reader approves of it or not” (Sterne 1960: 77).

In cases like this not only does the narrator construct specific interaction with the reader, but he also invites the reader into the very structure of the narration.

At the beginning of another famous novel, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* (1605 and 1615) by Miguel de Cervantes, the readers, in the preface, encounter a voice that can be associated with the author and

Let him return alone by his mad road;
Try, if he can; for thou shalt here remain,
Who hast escorted him through such dark regions.”

Think, Reader, if I was discomfited
At utterance of the accursed words;
For never to return here I believed (Alighieri: 26–27).

which explains to the readers the circumstances of the novel's creation. The voice, calling himself the father/stepfather of Don Quixote, explicitly assures the readers of the author's narrative and aesthetic strategy of the protagonist's creation and therefore of the fabrication of the narrated story:

"Sometimes when a father has an ugly, loutish son, the love he bears him so blindfolds his eyes that he does not see his defects, or, rather, takes them for gifts and charms of mind and body, and talks of them to his friends as wit and grace. I, however- for though I pass for the father, I am but the stepfather to "Don Quixote"- have no desire to go with the current of custom, or to implore thee, dearest reader, almost with tears in my eyes, as others do, to pardon or excuse the defects thou wilt perceive in this child of mine" (Cervantes 1952: xi).

Milan Kundera goes even further in his canonical book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) where the narrator (authorial) describes the creation of his main two characters without addressing any particular addressee but definitely considering the readers his target audience and invites the audience to the bare bones of the narrated story.

"Tomas and Tereza are not born of a mother's womb; they are born of a stimulating phrase or two [...]. Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach", whereas Tomas represents an embodiment of the German adage principle of "einmal is keinmal" (Kundera 1987: 39).

In this particular case the narrator shows the audience his power to create the fictional world and his strengths to shape and govern it illimitably. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that in the course of the novel these at-the-beginning ruthlessly vivisected characters-constructs, thanks to strong authentication strategies employed, come across as completely realistic counterparts of possible human beings.

Similarly, Italo Calvino in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979) uncovers the process of writing to the reader in the form of a fictive dialogue

that the author has with the reader, emphasizing several dimensions of the artificiality of the novel. Whereas in the initial part of the quotation the narrator (presumably a fictional counterpart of the author) refers to the act of reading (using a famous metaphor, employed by aesthetic illusionists, that of the readers fading away from the actual world whilst immersing themselves into the fictional), in the second part of the quotation the narrator thematizes the authorship of the novel:

“You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. [...] So here you are now, ready to attack the first lines of the first page. You prepare to recognize the unmistakable tone of the author. No. You don’t recognize it at all. But now that you think about it, who ever said this author had an unmistakable tone? On the contrary, he is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And in these very changes you recognize him as himself. Here, however, he seems to have absolutely no connection with all the rest he has written, at least as far as you can recall. Are you disappointed?” (Calvino 1993: 1–9).

The special kind of self-referentiality which is present in various levels of Calvino’s novel is in accord with the strong post-modernist qualities that the novel displays – to the extent that various types of self-referentiality (narration, emplotment, theme) here become an omnipresent tool of the build of the novel. This self-referentiality is thematized to the point that it can be considered the main tool-theme of this specific work of post-modernist art.

At this juncture, let us move towards the last type of self-referentiality in fictional narratives: indirect self-reference represents a complex set of strategies which usually do not uncover, analyse or thematize the process of narration or the narrative in a specific direct meta-way. Instead, they somehow deviate from conventionally set forms of narration, behave as specific self-referential signs whose main function is to draw the readers’ attention to the build of the narration as if the build itself where at the very

heart of their interest (defamiliarization, aesthetic function). This effect can be understood as a result of various narrative techniques used at various levels of narratives and their theoretical grasp – of which some can be described as follows.

Ontological techniques are firmly bound to the fictional worlds presented – the authors play with the ontology of fictional worlds, their status and their reference and thus indirectly emphasize the artistic essence of the narrative text. They usually complicate the process of their conceptualization, disturb the reader's possible immersion into them, revealing their own artificiality. Let us now exemplify some of the possibilities of these techniques.

- Logically impossible fictional worlds include incompatible contradictions. Regarding this kind of a fictional world I am borrowing an example from Lubomír Doležel, who in this respect refers to the specific world of Bruno Schulz's *Sanatorium under the Sign of Hourglass* (1937) in which people die one day and appear alive again the next day.
- Multiplication of worlds, common for example in post-modernist literary production, usually works the way that narratives function as gates to other narratives. In other words, fictional worlds include gates to other worlds; Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is a telling example of such a strategy.
- Multiplication of *fabula* or forking *fabula* brings out narratives in which the linear unfolding of the story bifurcates to reveal the mutually incompatible forks stemming from a similar vantage point, as can be seen, for example, in J. J. Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941).
- Mixed ontology is a technique based on mixing purely fictional worlds with historical worlds (historical counterparts of the actual world) in the way that this mixture is thematized to the extent that it becomes the central semantic element. The main portion of text using this technique belongs to the cluster of counterfactual narratives, however, they also exist in other forms: Phillip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), Robert Harris' *Fatherland* (1992),

Jorge Louis Borges' Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote (1939), Milan Kundera's *Immortality* (1988), etc.

- Blurry semantics somehow destroys a unified semantics of fictional worlds and is usually based on some shifts in the semantic build of the world. A good example of this technique can be witnessed in Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926) in which the semantics follows the spiral pattern that K makes whilst wandering around the castle: they both seemingly move in circles, however, the circle is never completed – the initial and the final point of the circle are never identical, they are spiral because the world changes in the meantime.

Segmental techniques are essentially connected with particular segments of narratives. This view follows structuralist narratology and some of the categories of narrative that it has developed since the 1960s and these categories are not only connected with its classical differentiation between *fabula* and *sjuzet* and their sub-categories but also with the very definition of narrative and its constituents.

- Unreliable narrators, uncertain, pluralized narrators shake the convention to the extent that their primary functions, the construction function and the authentication function, are substantially weakened. This weakness can contribute to the final semantic inconsistency of the fictional world presented.
- Deviant, incomplete, uncertain characters essentially complicate the way that reader's conceptualization them, which is traditionally based on our assumption of a semantically and mentally unified source of narrative actions. Thus, deviant characters essentially contribute to the overall semantic inconsistency of the narrative.
- Spatial, temporal and casual digressions and fragmentations influence the very structure of the presented world and can lead to a complete disintegration of its unified design.

Artistic or aesthetic techniques in general use specific means in order to attract the reader's attention. They enhance the aesthetic/poetic fun-

ction to such an extent that it dominates the functional system of the work and therefore turns the artwork into a specific, aesthetic sign which attracts the reader's attention to the sign's own structure. Nevertheless, this presumption, according to some approaches, applicable to all literary artworks, can be enhanced beyond the level of a common convention and can serve as a self-referential tool. A telling example of such a technique is intertextuality.

Now let us try to think about the set of fictional narratives as of a system. If we employ semiotic and communicative views, according to which fictional narratives represent means of specific (aesthetic) communication, we can not only see a hierarchized structure but also a highly sufficient structure. Fictional narratives as a special type of narrative are firmly bound to their subject, authors and readers. Together with these subjects they constitute a dynamic and self-hierarchized system which serves as a base for the creation of new narratives. This system substantially contributes to educating new subjects, cultivating their humanity, and, last but not least, also founds a discipline (narrative theory) which enables an analysis and description of the system and places it among other disciplines and systems.

So, it seems that in this respect fictional narratives co-embody a dynamic, self-creating and self-developing system of an autopoietic essence. However, as much as I am convinced of the fact that the self-referential qualities of fictional literary narratives contribute to the autopoietic essence of the system of all narratives, the same qualities can be viewed as sources of specific by-product effects. And I believe that it is, in particular, the indirect (indexical) self-referential techniques that can be, thanks to their deviant essence, also viewed as auto-destructive, undermining the essential quality of fictional narratives – their narrativity. When any of the techniques are employed to a degree, fictional narratives can easily become unstable and fragmented – sometimes only slightly but sometimes to the extent that their narrativity collapses and the readers actually stop perceiving them as narratives and place them outside the general narrative system. If this is the case, then it seems that the (self-referential) narratives which have crossed the threshold of narrativity actually serve

as a contour demarcating the border of the general narrative system. And therefore, this destructive self-referentiality of fictional narratives can be viewed as an important tool for both demarcating and also mapping out the autopoietic activity of the whole narrative system.

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