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# *Read Thyself: Cultural Self-reflection and the Relevance of Literary “Self”-labels*

*Florian Lippert and Marcel Schmid*

## Abstract

In recent political philosophy and sociology, self-reflexivity has been described as an indispensable condition for secularized democratic societies. In epistemology, it has been discussed as a key characteristic of human thinking. In this introduction, we discuss how literature connects both traditions by illustrating, demonstrating, and performing self-reflection in numerous forms. We provide an overview of the most important research on literary “self”-labels since the 1960s, from discourse-criticism and deconstruction to narratology and systems theory, and we outline a conceptual and terminological framework for contemporary analyses. In contrast to clichéd ideas of postmodern “playfulness,” literary self-reflexivity has a crucial critical potential, as Michel Foucault suggests in his early texts: It can subvert hegemonic “allocritical” discourses and deconstruct dominant narratives and metaphors of exclusion. Providing a kaleidoscopic panorama of different forms, functions and genres of literary self-reflection, and presenting a variety of specific approaches tailored to analyze them, this volume demonstrates how the realms of aesthetic self-reference, cultural self-reflection, and human self-understanding interconnect, and which epistemological, social, and political consequences can be drawn from their analyses.

## Keywords

self-reflection – self-reference – literature – politics – society – democracy – philosophy – Bauman – Foucault – discourse

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The only thing we understand is ourselves, and about ourselves we only understand our current thoughts, and even these only as long as we are having them, as long as they are fluent.

HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL<sup>1</sup>

He lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances. He had an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a verb in the past tense.

JAMES JOYCE<sup>2</sup>



## 1 Cultural Self-Reflection and Contemporary Crises

Under the heading “Culture as self-consciousness of modern society,” Zygmunt Bauman, in the introduction of his 1999 reprint of *Culture as Praxis*, describes contemporary Western life as being under the spell of constant self-reflection. Since the loss of all metaphysical certainties that came with enlightenment, Bauman argues, divine *order* had been replaced by manmade *culture*, based upon the humanist ideal that men could reflect upon their own realities, take their lives in their own hands, and make their own rules. The latter two aspects, however, point at a fundamental ambivalence which, in Bauman’s view, characterizes culture-based modern life: it does not simply entail absolute freedom, but rather “[f]reedom of self-determination” or “self-determined determination,” since it involves both self-empowerment and the urge to secure this empowerment with man-made rules (Bauman 1999, pp. xii–xiii). In this perspective, culture thus encompasses both freedom *and* constraint, “creativity” as well as “normative regulation” (xiv), novelty as much as tradition. The permanent confrontation between both principles, together with man’s growing insight into the temporality of all man-made systems of social order, their imperfection and transitoriness, characterize culture as a phenomenon

1 “Wir verstehen nur uns selbst, und an uns selbst nur das Gegenwärtige, und auch den gegenwärtigen Gedanken nur solange als wir ihn denken, als er flüchtig ist” (Hofmannsthal 1959 (journal entry from 29 December 1890), p. 89).

2 Joyce 2006, p. 90.

of constant change, a process of inherent *self-reflection*, *self-questioning*, and *self-correction*. This would also include modern democracy, the choice of “a society which knows, ought to know, that it has no guaranteed signification, that it lives upon chaos, that it itself is the chaos which needs to give itself a form, never fixed once for all” – or, drawing on Cornelius Castoriadis’ formula: “a regime of reflexivity and autolimitation” (xx).

Looking at the crises that characterize today’s democratic Western societies – the 2008 financial meltdown rooted in neoliberal deregulation, the peak of the European refugee crisis in 2015, the recent nationalist and populist turns in many Western countries – we can ask in what regards they might be aptly described as being rooted in *disbalances* in the ever-fragile tension between freedom and normativity, and, in consequence, *ruptures* in the process of self-reflection in man-made culture. The reasons for such ruptures are manifold; at the level of abstraction we chose here, two crucial main complexes are the fear of *self-weakening* through change, and the inability or unwillingness to achieve the *self-distance* necessary for reflection.

As to the first complex: in many, if not all of its notions, self-reflection indeed implies an element of potential *self-weakening* through change. While the reflection on any given object does not change that object, the reflection on the reflecting self might well lead to changes *of* that self – may they concern, for instance, moral values, cultural identities, or ideologies. While the original position is thereby necessarily weakened, the new one, resulting from self-reflection, can obviously be evaluated in many different ways, e.g. as progress, enhancement, or innovation, but also as regress and loss. The fear of the latter result can thus lead to the rejection of the idea of change altogether – the *procedural* weakness that is constitutive and necessary for the process of self-reflection is mistaken for the *potential* weakness (regress, loss) that might or might not be its outcome. A good illustration for such a fear-induced change of levels is Hofmannsthal’s aphorism we quoted above: in this self-reflexive journal entry in the context of the author’s thoughts on authorship, self-reflection appears as a “vicious spiral” that indeed seems to continuously diminish and weaken the “self.”

*Self-distance*, in turn, is exemplified in our second quotation above, Joyce’s quasi-biographical account of James Duffy’s “doubtful” self-observation: the “autobiographical habit” of using “a subject in the third person and a verb in the past tense” for expressing one’s experiences is easily deciphered as the author’s very own professional habit, and, again, demonstrated in the very text we are reading (“He lived [...]”). Connecting this example back to Bauman’s notion of cultural self-consciousness, we can state that self-reflection requires *distance* from the “self,” which in turn might lead to “doubtful side-glances” or,

in more general terms, to questioning one's own cultural practices and values by acknowledging their relativity in comparison to others. Again, anxiousness regarding this potential effect can be the cause for rejecting the process altogether, leading to disbalance, conflict, stagnation, and ultimately ruptures in the constitutive process of cultural self-reflection. Concerning the question of intercultural comparison, contemporary mass media play a particularly complex role; while their unprecedented variety and reach could provide more means for this than ever before, opposite effects can arise through processes of framing, selection, and sensationalism – leading to an “administration of fear” which, according to Paul Virilio, provides a whole “world” of outer global threats (Virilio & Richard 2012, p. 14) and raises the desire for inner, e.g. national, consolidation.

If we thus follow Bauman's view that constant cultural self-reflection is indeed necessary for a working secularized society – since people are aware that the rules they live by are manmade and changeable, and since the balance between freedom and constraint is never a permanent one – we can confirm that the fear of self-weakening and the lack of self-distance are some of the key risks of this process.

These observations also tie in with the long tradition of self-reflection as a *philosophical* and *epistemological* concept. While self-reflexivity in Bauman's and Castoriadis' *social* and *political* sense is considered a specifically modern trait of culture-based society, the general idea of self-reflection as a principle that is constitutive for the “self” has of course a much longer history in the realms of human thinking. In fact, when it comes to the histories of philosophy and epistemology, it is fair to say that self-reflection is just as old as the “self” itself. A plethora of concepts have defined the *human* self based upon its ability to reflect on matters of its own existence. In Western history, the most prominent epistemological example for this line of thinking is the epistemological career of the Delphic maxim “*gnothi seauton*” (“know thyself”) throughout different ages, systems, and philosophical subdisciplines, as most recently described in detail by Rachana Kamtekar, Christopher Shields, Johannes Brachtendorf, and other contributors to Ursula Renz' edited volume *Self-Knowledge: A History* (2017). The uncircumventable principle that “self-reference on the part of the subject holding a belief *p* is a necessary requirement for *p* to qualify as an instance of self-knowledge” (Renz 2017, p. 5) can be found in both Plato and Aristotle, in Augustine and medieval Mysticism, in Descartes and Kant. From the nineteenth century onwards, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Husserl lay the foundations for a vast amount of modern epistemologies of the self-reflecting self. The much-quoted “crisis of the self,” prominent in many modernist discourses around the turn of the twentieth

century, is then closely connected to a radicalization of the principles we discussed above: both the threat of self-weakening and the problematization of self-distance is prominent not only in Nietzsche’s and Bergson’s vitalism and Ernst Mach’s “Psychophysics,” but also in Freud’s Psychoanalysis – and sparks a variety of cultural, in particular literary reactions, from the above-quoted Hofmannsthal’s famous Lord Chandos and Hermann Bahr’s “Unsaveable Self” to the disintegrated selves in Rilke’s *Malte Laurids Brigge*, Richard Beer-Hofmann’s *The Death of George*, or Musil’s *Törless*. Throughout the twentieth century, the crisis of the “*gnothi seauton*” worked as an incentive for a wave of reconstructions of the self, evolving, as Claudia Jünke (2001) put it, from the “dialectics” of “self-weakening and self-assertion.” These reached from Nietzsche’s “delirious” self-reflections to the “techniques of the self” described by Nietzsche-admirer Michel Foucault, who confronted the tradition based on “*gnothi seauton*” – including its compulsion for self-reflection, its ideal of internal temperance and its ultimately unkept promises of bliss, purity, wisdom, and integrity – with his own reinterpretation of the Socratic “*epimeleia eautou*” (“*souci de soi*,” “care for yourself”).

Our initial literary examples quoted above serve as first general reminders of the ways in which literature can not only discuss and negotiate, but also demonstrate processes of self-reflection and the complexes of self-weakening and self-distancing that come with it. As Huber, Middeke and Zapf (2005, p. 10) put it in more general terms: Self-reflection in literature becomes significant “in its exemplary staging and modelling of self-reflexive aspects of our *Lebenswelt* itself and of the ways we understand it.” These two fundamental functions of literature – discussion and demonstration of self-reflection and its consequences – serve as the common ground for the contributions collected in this volume. Before we further specify its approach, we will summarize past main lines of research on the connection between “self” and literature.

## 2 Literary “Self”-Labels—a Brief Retrospective

In the younger history of literary studies, the terms “self-reflection,” “self-reference,” and other “self”-labels have been used in a variety of contexts and subdisciplines. In comparison to sociology and philosophy, these uses were frequently framed by debates and fundamental doubts about the relevance of such labels in the literary context. Looking back at the different strands of discussion, what can generally be discerned as the most controversial aspect in comparison to the philosophical tradition was that the term “self” was often not used to denominate subjects or cultures, but rather referred to different

levels of *language* and *text*, which in turn raised new basic questions (and re-raised some old ones) about the very definition of literature.

The first strand of literature-related “self”-labels can be broadly subsumed under the heading of discourse-critical and deconstructivist approaches, which were developed since the 1960s and predominantly aimed at exposing the self-referentiality of *language* in general. Jacques Derrida, with his paradigmatic concept of *différance*, proposed that linguistic signs did not refer to reality, but to other signs, thereby leading to an endless self-referential game of signifiers in which meaning was always postponed (Derrida 1967). Foucault described societal “discourses” as all-encompassing, self-maintaining sets of rules and mechanisms of selection and exclusion that would ultimately aim at reproducing their own underlying power relations (Foucault 1966; 1969). An important basis for the general description and critique of discursivity were Foucault’s early works on literature, in which two main lines of aesthetic responses to such discursive closure can be identified. Firstly, forms of what could be called literary “self-integration” (cf. Lippert 2013, pp. 114–118) that lay bare the non-identity of signs and objects and demonstrate how language can establish a reality of its own account, as exemplified in Foucault’s famous analysis of the *Quijote*, one of the arch-examples of scholarship on the topic. Secondly, more radical forms of “self-implication” (cf. Klawitter 2003, pp. 213–304), in which this non-identity would culminate in a language that seemed entirely detached from external meaning – signs that ultimately appeared to show that they do not show anything at all, as for instance in avant-garde works by Maurice Blanchot and Raymond Roussel (Foucault 1963, Foucault & Blanchot 1990). Such apparent opacity was, however, by no means a dead end in Foucault’s view. On the contrary, by opposing all discursive regulations and regimes, literary self-implication would enable the reader to imagine and strive for a language of freedom, *outside* of any discursive boundaries. Thus, instead of closing itself off from reality, literature according to Foucault should ultimately aim at “*converting* reflexive language. It must be directed not toward any inner confirmation – not toward a kind of central, unshakable certitude – but toward an outer bound where it must continually contest itself” (Foucault & Blanchot 1990, pp. 21–22; emphasis added).

In our context, this continuous process of “contesting” appears as a literary basis for self-questioning and self-distancing, which, in turn, are elementary for cultural self-reflection as described by Bauman. Foucault’s original ideas, controversial as they were, thus showed a strong connection between literary texts referring to their own linguistic structure on the one hand, and the subject that should develop a critical consciousness of society’s discursive structures on the other hand. By opposing standardized patterns of plot, expression,

and logic, texts should provoke a thinking of the “outside” (1990, p. 8) of discursive boundaries.

The second dominant strand of “self”-labels in literary contexts developed in several fields of philology, most notably in narratology, since the 1970s. Harking back to sporadic earlier philological descriptions of literary self-reference (cf. Neumann & Nünning 2014 for an overview), as well as to some of Derrida’s, Foucault’s, and other poststructuralists’ ideas, a growing number of scholars particularly focused on aspects of “metafictionality,” thus fictional texts’ references of to their own status as fiction. Again, many of these approaches were accompanied by critical comments on their respective conceptions of self-reflection. Robert Alter’s study on the “novel as a self-conscious genre” (1975), for instance, left some critics “bemused” with the author’s conviction that a novel could not only be “aware of itself as a mere structure of words,” but actually also search for new forms of expression “*beyond* words” (Parker 1977, p. 455; emphasis added). In a similar direction, Robert Scholes’ neoplatonic descriptions of metafictional works which would provide “reflections” on their own “forms” and “ideas” (Scholes 1979 pp. 100–102) were criticized for their lack of “solid theoretical background” (Hauptman 1980, p. 341). Despite such discussions, the 1980s saw a further expansion and specification of “self”-labels related to literary texts: Linda Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980) departed from the premise that “a work is apt to produce within itself a dramatized mirror of its own narrative or linguistic principles” (Hutcheon 1980, p. 18). Moreover, Patricia Waugh’s *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) provided one of the most-quoted definitions of metafiction as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact” (ibid., p. 2) and offered a “redefinition” of Alter’s concept of literary “self-consciousness” and “self-reflexiveness” (ibid., p. 23) in the specific postmodern context; while modernists had aimed to expose that meaning was ultimately to be constructed by the reader, thus the human “self,” postmodernism in Waugh’s stance showed that even this “self” was only linguistically constructed, leaving the *text* as the only point of (self-)reference (ibid., pp. 23–28). The most elaborate and detailed set of analytical parameters for metafictional techniques to date was delivered by Werner Wolf in his standard work on anti-illusionist narration (1993): besides the narrow definition of explicit narrative “self-consciousness,” Wolf established a broader one that included all “autoreferential” elements of a narrative text which would make the *reader* become aware of phenomena connected to narrativity as art, its inventedness, constructedness, and fictionality (Wolf 1993, p. 228). This reception-focused approach led to a high variety of subcategories and binary classifications, such as explicit vs. implicit, discourse-based



vs. *histoire*-based, or critical vs. non-critical metafiction (ibid., pp. 220–265). Parallel to the focus on metafictionality, *metanarrativity* was introduced as a second major narratological research area in contributions by Monika Fludernik (2003) and Ansgar Nünning (2004), who again departed from different forms of textual self-referentiality and self-reflexivity as the basic common denominators of both areas (cf. Neumann & Nünning, par. 2).

Finally, a third research strand related to literature in which yet another variety of “self”-labels was established (cf. Lippert 2009 for an overview) was based upon sociological and general systems theory (e.g. Schwanitz 1990; De Berg 1995; Plumpe & Werber 1995; Homann 1999)<sup>3</sup> and neocybernetics (Tabbi 2002; Livingston 2006; Clarke 2008), and aimed at bringing together literature and systemic “autopoiesis” at different levels of interpretation and abstraction. Where discourse-criticism and deconstruction had predominantly departed from the self-referentiality of literary *language*, and philology from self-reflexive *fiction* and *narrative*, many approaches in this third strand focused on literature’s roles regarding the basic self-referentiality, which, according to Niklas Luhmann, characterized both *consciousness* and *social systems*. Originally, the term “autopoiesis” (literally “self-creation”) had been introduced by Chilean neurobiologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela for the description of biological self-maintenance and self-reproduction of living systems as well as of the self-enclosed, reality-constructing character of sensual perception. Luhmann not only connected to the latter idea and expanded it towards an all-encompassing constructivist conception of consciousness, but also further broadened the term’s scope by describing *social* systems as “autopoietic.” In regards to consciousness, Luhmann’s conviction that human thinking was basically caught within its own self-constructed psychic systematicity and unable to communicate its contents directly to the outer world, inspired numerous approaches which focused on literary texts as self-referential *illustrations* of this barrier between thinking and communicating (e.g. Schwanitz 1990, 1990a, 1996; Roberts 1999; Homann 1999; Livingston 2006; Schmid 2016) or as a means to *overcome* or at least *relativize* the barrier by providing particularly productive ways of “coupling” consciousness and communication (Luhmann 1995; Jahraus & Schmidt 1999; cf. Lippert 2009). In regards to social systematicity, Luhmann’s descriptions of modern Western societies as clusters of ever-expanding and ever-diversifying subsystems (such as politics, economy, or art) that would operate according to different codes and reproduce

3 For a general overview regarding the manifold connections of literature and systems theory until and including the 1990s, see Jahraus & Schmidt 1999. See also the bibliography by De Berg (1995).

themselves independently, inspired empirical literary studies to explore the history of literature as a social subsystem with specific actors, rules, and principles of “self-organization” (Schmidt 1989, 1991; cf. Jäger 1994) and in its relations to other (sub)systems (Plumpe 1995; Plumpe & Werber 1995). Furthermore, it enabled a variety of historical communication analyses of literary works (De Berg & Prangel 1993). Concerning the text-focused approaches, matters of continuous debate and frequent criticism included the mixing up of textual and cognitive phenomena of self-reference without providing a consistent basis for comparison or connection (Jahraus 1999; cf. Ort 1995), while historical models were frequently accused of neglecting the actual literary text by following Luhmann’s hyperformalist concepts of historical systemicity (cf. Jäger 1994).

These (literally) systemic debates can be considered as exemplary for the short but diversified history of “self”-labels in literary contexts. What our brief overview, selective and cursory as it may be, clearly shows is a controversial core issue that can be discerned in all three discussion strands: the question how social reality, the reader, and the literary text – or, in the terms mentioned above, Bauman’s “cultural self-consciousness,” Renz’ “self-knowing” subject, and the many “textual selves” assumed by literary scholars – are to be interconnected. Can literary self-reflection indeed enable or enhance self-reflection on the side of the reading subject? What cultural effects can such processes have on societies in constant demand of self-questioning and self-transformation? Does literature, besides increasing tendencies to target-group focused entertainment and worldwide bestsellers apt for Hollywood adaptation, still have the potential to critically subvert society’s status quo, rather than just adhering to neoliberal logic? If it had, how would, of all literary features, *self-reference*, which is often regarded as the epitome of mere postmodern playfulness<sup>4</sup> and aestheticist escapism, play a productive role?

Our search for answers to these questions lead us back to the beginning. In our view, Foucault’s original groundbreaking analyses, conducted a decade before the rise of philological and narratological scholarship on literary self-reference, are more important and more timely than ever today. Not only does the analytical field spanning between the poles of Foucauldian “self-integration” and “self-implication” still provide a profound framework for the interpretation of texts. Even more important is the social, cultural, and epistemological relevance attributed to forms of literary self-reflection in Foucault’s original approach, the fundamentally *critical* perspective he opened up on

4 This limited understanding of postmodernism is, of course, highly problematic itself. For a discussion in the context of self-reflexivity, see e.g. the contributions, especially the introduction, in Ziegler 1993.

possibilities to free language from power relations, which echoes in many of today's critical approaches towards linguistic hegemony and discursive regimes. If we assume that our everyday discourses, the "metaphors we live by" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) are still – and possibly more than ever – intrinsically driven by political and ideological regimes of which we are only partially aware; that "hate speech" is not just a matter of "old" contents in "new" medial forms, but actually a specific *type of speech*, a discourse based on ideologies of exclusion; that a propaganda of "alternative facts" aims at feeding specific ideological target groups that bear a striking resemblance to what Foucault described as hermetic "discourse societies;" that the discriminatory "politics of unreason" (Rensmann, 2017) are closely interlinked with the "jargons" which Adorno had identified as main forces of mass manipulation; and that the big social and political crises of our times, which we named above, are both closely intertwined with and negotiated through "cultural narratives" (Catalá-Carrasco, De la Fuente & Valdivia, 2017), then Foucault's search for discourse-critical counterstrategies, deconstructive narratives, and forms of linguistic resistance in literature has never been as vital as today. In contrast to avant-gardist experimentalism and *nouveau roman*, which were the primary examples in Foucault's analyses of the 1960s, today's "post-postmodernist" (McLaughlin, 2004) aesthetics of "New Sincerity" and "Metamodernism" (Vermeulen & Van den Akker, 2010) can provide new forms of criticism through self-reflection in more direct, socially and politically specified ways. If criticism is not merely consisting in an elevation above the other, but productively embedded in *social* and *cultural* constellations, it may take the form of *self-reflection* in Bauman's sense: thinking critically about the contexts and practices in which oneself partakes, rather than merely blaming others for their mistakes. It is in this sense that *literary* self-reflection can provide much more than just "games" of distraction – on the contrary, it provides examples for productive self-questioning and necessary self-distance in what Wittgenstein described as the all-encompassing "language game" of human communication.

### 3 History, Genres, Forms and Functions: a Rough Conceptual Framework

The first step to explore more differentiated perspectives on the interconnection between criticism and literary self-reflection is to acknowledge that self-reflexivity is *not* an invention of literary postmodernism. Rather, it has been present both as a topic as well as a technique since the beginnings of literary production. Many experts in the field have acknowledged this fact (e.g.

Waugh 1984, p. 5; Wolf 2004; Neumann & Nünning 2014, par. 9; Mann 2015, p. 13; Schmid 2016, p. 9), and some have provided important detailed analyses on specific aspects of self-reflexivity in older literary works besides the much-quoted “classics,” Cervantes’ *Quijote* and Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (e.g. Booth 1952 for “the self-conscious narrator in comic fiction before *Tristram Shandy*,” Wolf 1993 for anti-illusionist effects in English texts since the eighteenth century; Scheffel 1997 for narrative self-reflection in German and Austrian texts since the eighteenth century). Still, as Nünning and Neumann have recently pointed out, the most important general desiderata in the field “include differentiated investigations of the forms, functions, and diachronic development of metafiction and metanarration” as principle outcomes of self-reflexivity:

One relatively unexplored issue is the development of metafiction and metanarration across different periods of literary history in different literary *genres*. [...] Moreover, there are hardly any studies concerning *functions* that may be fulfilled by certain *forms* of self-reflexive narration in different historical epochs (Neumann & Nünning 2014, par. 18; emphasis added).

Our volume sets out to provide case studies on these underdeveloped historical questions of *genres*, *forms*, and *functions* of literary self-reflection, reaching from the *Quijote* to present-day literary autobiographies. Its contributions particularly focus on ways in which literature, since the dawn of modernity, has both discussed and demonstrated sociopolitically, epistemologically, or aesthetically relevant forms of self-reflection, and how it continues to do so today.

In the light of past criticism on the notion of literary self-reflection in general, and the idea of “textual selves” in particular (as exemplified in the last section), we deem it necessary to establish a rough framework for using the term “self-reflection” in a productive, meaningful way, however, without cutting off the diachronic diversity of genre-relations, forms, and functions from which we depart. For this framework, the following principles are crucial:

(a) *Literary self-reflection as a general ahistorical phenomenon vs. its many historically determined functions.* A first conceptual differentiation concerns the very notion of function itself: as Martin Mann (2015, especially pp. 14–17) has convincingly laid out, self-reflexivity is to be considered as a *phenomenon* that can be found (in our terminology: that has been discussed *and* demonstrated) in literary texts of any given epoch, thus as *general* and *ahistorical*. Its *functions*, however, can *change* and *vary* for every particular historical case.

(b) *Self-reflexivity as a characteristic of specific texts.* The differentiation between an ahistorical phenomenon and historical functions leads to a second

important question which concerns the principle nature – or “naturalness” – of self-reflexivity in the literary field. In a very insightful critical contribution on what they conceived as an “inflationary and generalizing” use of literary “self”-labels, Eva Geulen and Peter Geimer recently asked whether there are actual parameters according to which one could state with absolute certainty that a work does *not* have self-reflexive characteristics (Geulen & Geimer 2015, 525–526), given the fact that “in the last years and decades, there has hardly been a more popular term in the humanities than self-reflexivity” (“Kaum ein Begriff erfreut sich in den vergangenen Jahren und Jahrzehnten einer so anhaltenden Konjunktur in den Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften wie derjenige der Selbst-reflexivität,” Geulen & Geimer 2015, p. 521). Strategic exaggeration and rhetorical poignancy aside, the question of the specificity or “naturalness” of literary self-reflection which they address is clearly highly relevant for the scope of this volume. The most elaborate answer we are aware of was provided by Michael Scheffel under the heading “Is literature *per definitionem* self-reflexive?” (“Ist Dichtung *per definitionem* selbstreflexiv?” Scheffel 1997, p. 11): through detailed analyses of Mukařovský’s aesthetics, Eco’s semiotics, and Jakobson’s linguistics, Scheffel came to a differentiated perspective on approaches which are often considered advocates of literature’s all-encompassing self-reflexivity, and concluded that such a perspective would entail highly problematic assumptions of “literary quality” in contrast to other “types” of language and speech. Following his line of argument, and generalizing it for the sake of this volume’s broad framework, which should enable different nuanced analyses, our stance is that self-reflexivity is certainly not a characteristic of all literary texts. However, it can be found in *many* texts throughout the ages of literary history, and across a high variety of cultures, genres, and oeuvres.

(c) “*Reflection*” as a *pragmatic metaphor*. A third frame concerns the crucial term “reflection.” As Geulen and Geimer noted, “it is actually all but certain that texts and other artifacts are actually able to reflect on themselves” (“keineswegs ausgemacht ist, dass Texte oder andere Artefakte sich überhaupt selbst reflektieren können,” Geulen & Geimer 2015, p. 521). This point of critique echoes much of the skepticism surrounding the notion of “textual selves,” which we discussed above. Our stance is: when we speak of “self-reflection” in connection with literary texts, this can refer to the *discussion or negotiation* of philosophical, cultural, or other forms of self-reflection in a text, and/or to the *demonstration* of these, as outlined and exemplified above. Regarding the aspect of demonstration, it is vital to stress that the use of the term does not imply any kind of “personification” or mystification of the text; a text, being a thing, cannot “reflect” on itself as a human being or a society can (here, we particularly disagree with some “autopoiesis”-related approaches in Systems Theory and

Neocybernetics; for a critical discussion, see Lippert 2009, pp. 126–131). Rather, when speaking of “literary self-reflection,” we use a *pragmatic metaphor* for the literary *discussion, negotiation, and/or demonstration* of these processes. The most elaborate specification of the term’s “productive fuzziness” was provided, as mentioned above, by Wolf, who established “self-reflection” as a concept of *reception aesthetics*, and thus referred to it as an act that was ultimately to be performed by the *reader* (Wolf 1993, p. 228). In this reader-oriented sense, texts can very well “reflect on themselves” (or: on “the self”), as they can “reflect on,” negotiate, and demonstrate many other things. Contributions in this volume will provide a number of further specifications, demonstrating the continuous fruitfulness of the term *despite*, or rather precisely *because of*, its relative openness.

(d) *Reference as reference*. Finally, the latter decision also implies that the term “self-reference” denotes no more and no less than a specific case of the semiotic operation of reference; in principle, texts can refer to themselves as they can refer to many other things. The general semiotic notion of linguistic referentiality has of course been subject to many debates, e.g. in the postmodern controversies we briefly touched upon, in which an alleged “omnipresence” of self-referentiality was sometimes used as a knock-out argument to “prove” that language could not refer to anything else but itself. In contrast to such over-simplistic views, contributions in this volume will demonstrate that more realist, nuanced, and specified conceptions of self-referentiality are not only possible without throwing out the baby with the bath water, but, above all, that they are of high relevance for a better understanding of the respective texts. In the many discourses on literary “self”-labels, usually no clear differentiation has been made between “self-reference” and “self-reflection;”<sup>5</sup> for the purpose of this volume, we depart from the semiotic standard notion of “reference” as a sign-related operation, whereas “reflection” denominates the cultural and epistemological processes outlined above, and their demonstration in literary texts. Overlaps are possible, of course: for instance, by referring to itself, a text

5 Recently, Lippert (2018) has suggested a content-based and quality-based transmedial differentiation between *self-reference* as a form of static, inflexible closure of cultural discourse (in the context of fear of self-weakening and refusal of self-distance, as outlined above), and *self-reflection* as an umbrella term for progressive cultural reactions which aim at breaking the self-referential loops in which those discourses are caught. While this new qualitative, media-overarching redefinition of the terms might also be fruitful for future research in the light of reception aesthetics, for this volume we have decided to rather choose the framework oriented on literature, form, and function, as described above. For a general framework regarding metareferences across media, see Wolf (2009).

can very well *signal* or *prepare*, or serve as a *platform* for self-reflection; further examples will be given in the contexts of different genres and forms.

#### 4 Contributions in This Volume

The essays collected in this volume discuss different forms and functions of self-reflexivity and self-referentiality throughout different epochs of literary history, covering a variety of genres: novels, poems, autobiographies, and dramas, as well as poetological, philosophical, and political essays. As became apparent in our overview on literary self-labels, self-referentiality and self-reflexivity are not only transgressing boundaries of history, genre and discipline, but also borders in the literal sense. While most contributions will focus on German-language literature, we have further included fresh views on canonical Spanish (Cervantes, Miguel de Unamuno) and French (Stéphane Mallarmé) texts, as well as an essay on contemporary English-language works from Britain, the United States, South Africa, and Canada, and one on British author's Jasper Fforde's bestselling *Thursday Next* series, which also sheds light on the growing relevance of self-referential forms in popular culture.

*Initial Reflections:* Preceding the chronologically ordered contributions, Oliver Jahraus, in a meditation on the genealogies of some of our core concepts, illustrates and exemplifies their elementary roles at different aesthetic and cognitive levels. Departing from the etymological roots of the terms and particularly picking up on the difference between “external” and “internal” reference, Jahraus provides further arguments for focusing on the particular “effects” of self-reference and self-reflection.

*Seventeenth century:* In “Hope Unraveled in *Don Quixote*,” Konstantin Mierau reprises some of the crucial metafictional aspects in Cervantes’ baroque classic and discusses their aesthetic and philosophical receptions in Miguel de Unamuno’s *Vida de Don Quixote y Sancho según Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra* (1914) and in Ernst Bloch’s *Geist der Utopie* (1918) and *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1938–1947). By critically analyzing these authors’ references to Cervantes, Mierau extrapolates a particular function of the “Knight of the Sad Countenance” as an actual “icon of hope,” which is achieved through the empowerment of the novel’s self-aware reader.

One of the most complex philological and philosophical texts in *eighteenth century* German literature, Johann Georg Hamann’s *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* (1759), is then illuminated by Andrea Krauss, who focuses on an *inter-textual* form of self-reference. As an experimental *modus operandi*, Hamann’s “exploration of the self” is discussed in the light of the concept of *parrhesia*

(speaking the truth), as reprised in Foucault’s reading of the Socratic *epimeleia heautou*. Kristina Mendicino’s contribution “Written Out of Time,” in turn, is a close reading of a specific poeticized conception of *historiographic* self-reflection; Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock’s work includes a re-narration of the distant and recent past as well as an aesthetic speculation on an uncertain future.

Examples from the *nineteenth century* start off with Marcel Schmid’s analysis of Heinrich von Kleist’s both self-referential and self-reflexive classic *Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden* (1805–1806). Specifying the aforementioned dualism of discussion and demonstration, Schmid explains how Kleist’s text *performs* the constructive process it aims to describe. Evelyn Dueck, in her reading of Mallarmé’s *Sonnet en -x* (1899), explores early symbolist interconnections between self-referentiality and the rhetorical concept of *allegory* that later gained much attention in the wake of postmodern literary theory. Finally, Barbara Naumann’s contribution “Aber ich notire mich, für mich” discusses the impact of “masked” self-reflection on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. While Nietzsche, in his skepticism towards the philosophical tradition, never uses the actual term, reflexivity is in fact key to his radical literary and philosophical self-conception: “As narrator of his own self, he addresses the narrative to himself.”

With Jason Kavett’s contribution “A Secret Echo Outside of Time,” the volume proceeds to the *twentieth century* to consider self-reference and *timelessness* in relation to the work of Paul Celan. Departing from Celan’s “poetics of temporal experience,” Kavett focuses on poems of the *Niemandrose* (1963) period and the correspondence with Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, in which the motive of the “Herbstzeitlose” (autumn crocus, literally “autumn timeless”) appears as a self-referential manifestation of temporal experience. As a crucial point of reference, the first ever English translation of Paul Celan’s letter to Gisèle Celan-Lestrange from 30 September 1962 is included in the present volume (translated by Jason Kavett). In “Oskar Pastior: The Medium of Poetry,” Jörg Kreienbrock analyzes a *poetological* form of self-reflection in Pastior’s lecture series at the University of Frankfurt in 1993/94.

As a *contemporary* example of self-referential forms in *popular culture*, Jasper Fforde’s *Thursday Next Series* (2001–2012) is discussed in Vera Alexander’s contribution “Books without Borders.” With its plethora of pop cultural and intermedial references and its tongue-in-cheek allusions to the publishing business, Fforde’s work showcases a fundamental function of aesthetic self-reflection: joy. Anne Rügemeier’s study on self-reflexivity in contemporary English “Auto/biographies” then explores conceptions of the “autobiographical I” and the narrative construction of individual selfhood in works by Hanif



Kureishi, Nancy K. Miller, Rudy Wiebe, J.M. Coetzee, and the cartoonist Alison Bechdel. Finally, Antonius Weixler focuses on the deconstruction of authorial authority in contemporary German-language texts. In his essay “Only Half of What I am Saying is True,” Weixler analyzes Jan Brandt’s *Tod in Turin* (2015) and the collectively written autobiography (2016) of the Austrian rock band *Ja, Panik* as specific examples of auto-fiction in which forms of self-distancing serve as contemporary means to demonstrate authenticity.

Providing a kaleidoscopic panorama of different forms, functions and genres from different times, and presenting a variety of specific approaches tailored to analyze them, this volume thus contributes to what we discerned as the biggest challenge for scholarship on literary self-reflection and self-reference: to demonstrate how the realms of aesthetic self-reference, cultural self-reflection, and human self-understanding interconnect, and which epistemological, social, and political consequences can be drawn from their analyses. In this sense, we hope to show that Foucault’s idea of continuous self-contestation in literature is more relevant than ever, and, ultimately, to contest Hofmannsthal’s rather sinister vision: self-reflection does not lead into a dead end, but, on the contrary, opens up philosophical and critical horizons beyond classical academic questions of perspectivity, narratology, or mediality. Instead of losing themselves in opacity and obstructing our view, the texts in question become transparent, showing us what is behind and beyond them.

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