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Literary confession: Autobiography

The status of autobiography as a work of literature is strongly connected to the notion of literature itself (see Chapter I, on literary terms). Should the definition of a literary work include fictionality, autobiography would have to be banned from the realm of literature automatically, since it claims to be telling the truth. On the other hand, the question who (and how) should check if a book presented to the audience as a work of fiction is free from factual ingredients, cannot be avoided. It entails one more vital problem, namely how much truthfulness, if any, is allowed and what is the appropriate measurement for its amount. Traditionally, St. Augustine's *Confessions* are considered the first ever autobiographical work, written towards the end of the fourth century. Another controversy is given with the question of whether or not it is legitimate to accept as facts the contents of a book *regarded as* an autobiography if there is not enough biographical material available from other sources. The danger of a vicious circle seems clear.

Probably most literary texts, as products of a concrete person at a certain concrete stage of his or her life, display – directly or indirectly – elements of the author's own experience (upbringing, friendships, loves, disappointments, beliefs, dreams); the possibility and sensibility of tracking them back seems at least debatable. At the same time, probably most declared autobiographies are partly fictional, since it seems impossible to deliver a completely truthful report about the past. No matter how hard and honest the attempt may be, it is bound to entail (intentional or unconscious) modifications, additions and omissions¹, which are actually tantamount to fiction. In Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory* (1976:63), autobiography is defined as 'an account of a person's life by him- or herself'. Additionally, the following information is attached: 'The term appears to have been first used by Southey in 1809. In Dr Johnson's opinion no man was better qualified to write his life than himself, but this is debatable. Memory may be unreliable. Few can recall clear details of their early life and most are therefore dependent on other people's impressions, of necessity equally unreliable. Moreover, everyone tends to remember what he or she wants to remember. Disagreeable facts are sometimes glossed over or repressed, truth may be distorted for the sake of convenience or harmony and the occlusions of time may obscure as much as they

¹ Intentional omissions are not contradictory to the honesty of the enterprise, on the contrary: decency and honour may stop the author from revealing facts that could hurt other people (like low motives of noble actions, lacking feelings where they were assumed or cheating). In order to verify this thesis, if any doubts, it is enough to sit down and write a small piece about the own life: it will not be completely truthful.

reveal'. These reservations against the plausibility of a self-presentation by the author of an autobiographical work shake on the borders of autobiography as a genre. As already stated by Bates (1937: 9), it is not possible for the author to be completely accurate in his or her descriptions of their own life, therefore, 'there is, in fact, no dividing line between autobiography and fiction' which confirms the controversies outlined above once again.

In the epoch of romanticism, a high degree of subjectivity was a typical characteristic of literatures; that is why hermeneutics as a method of interpretation aimed, in the first place, at revealing the author's personal motives in his work (see Chapter on Hermeneutics). According to Dilthey, autobiography² was the best possible explication of life, a hermeneutic situation in which understanding (a central category of humanities) took place (1989:32). According to the scholar (who was a philosopher at the same time), autobiography as a self-evidence of the writer poses a proposition to understand the historical character of life and as such it is worth serious research. It should be considered as the expression of the individual's spiritual condition as well as depiction of the epoch and the writer's contemporary personalities. It is Important to note that autobiography as self-biography is not proposed as an accepted reliable historical source.

In the social-historical approach to autobiography, the emphasis is put on the interaction between individual and society. Here, a total identity between the writer as a real person and the narrator is taken for granted. It is assumed that the form of expression corresponds with the form of the life, in the same way in which life has primacy over its literary shape (c.f. Mahrholz 1919: 9). He claims a connection between the history of the middle classes and the history of autobiography. In this concept, three layers of the middle class are discerned, to which corresponding attributives are ascribed; they are reflected in the autobiographic writing.³ However, all three middle class layers display individuality as a typical characteristic, which is a drive for autobiographical writing; this is why the representatives of the middle classes seem particularly inclined to producing autobiographies. Following this middle-class-oriented concept by Mahrholz, in a distanced critical way though,⁴ Sloterdijk proposes looking at autobiography in the light of the whole class structure as well as the relations of production within a given society. He sees the individuality as a trigger of the

² In Dilthey's time called *Selbstbiografie* (self-biography) in Germany).

³ For example, the medium middle class of the Enlightenment is, in his view, characterized by idealism, criticism enthusiasm and hawkishness.

⁴ In Sloterdijk's view, it is wrong to refer to middle-class only, when linking autobiographical writing with social strata – as Mahrholz does.

autobiographic as historical record, i.e. changing in time under prevailing circumstances (1978: 24-25). In Sloterdijk's view, the autobiographical self as well as its autobiographical activity should be seen in the social-historical context, as a social-historically individualized self; in other words: as a product of both society and history. What both approaches have in common is the view of autobiography against the social background of the writer, whose consciousness is a product of the interplay of social factors.

In the 1950s, researchers into autobiography (e.g. Gusdorf 1956, Shumaker 1954, Pascal 1959) started seeing it in the first place as a work of literature. Emphasis is put on the autobiographic process, the essence of which is the interpretation and styling of the past from the viewpoint of the present. Once qualified as retrospective styling, autobiography cannot be defined in terms of its truthfulness any longer. In consequence, the research moves from the life depicted in the text towards the writing techniques and modes of expression. The autobiographer is not credited with the ability to reconstruct the past in an imitative way; s/he has to interpret it towards a plausible story, in which the author is seeking him/herself in a methodologically founded intellectual manner (Winter 1985:40)

Since the autobiographical element has entered literary works for good, Lubas-Bartoszyńska recommends a cautious use of the term autobiography in order to avoid absurdity. As an example of the latter she points to the cases of understanding the Bible as God's autobiography (1993 : 35), which cannot be taken seriously.

Reading a literary text through facts from the life of the author as a real person is called biographism; sometimes the scholars devote their research to finding out the parallels between the world depicted in a literary work and the real experience of the writer. As a result of such an approach, the prototypes of characters, events, landscapes, etc. are described – which blurs the borders between reality and fiction, the real world and creation, and finally between autobiography and fictional work.

Eakin observes that “the pervasive initiative has been to establish autobiography as an imaginary art, with special emphasis on its fiction”, which started in 1970s (1992:29). This confirms the presence of a share of fiction in the text pretending to testify the truth and justifies its subscription to literature in a narrow sense.⁵

Wulf Segenbrecht (1998) points to the expectations of the reader as a vital factor in research into autobiography. The reader expects the author to be identical with the first-person-

⁵ Literature as a collection of the works of fiction and opposed to documentary reports.

narrator, even if actually the writer has styled, modified or possibly distorted their own history; the mere label of an autobiography as such justifies this attitude on the side of the reader, who attentively follows the autobiographer's procedures of self-depiction with a critical eye. The reader passes judgments about the writers' attempts to render the truth as well as to fictionalize a story. The author makes use of narrative devices, like presentation or justification.

The French scholar Phillippe Lejeune is called "the pope of autobiography" because of the immense impact of his theory on research into autobiographical works. His short definition claims that autobiography is a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (Lejeune 1973:4). He introduced the notion of "autobiographical pact", referring to a silent agreement between the writer and the reader, to be explained below. According to Lejeune, the foregoing definition "brings into play elements belonging to four different categories"; he means the form of language, the subject treated, the situation of the author and the position of the narrator (*ibid.*). As to the form of language, it has to be narrative in prose. Regarding the subject, it is supposed to be the writer's individual life, a story of his personality. Concerning the author's situation: his or her name is indicated and identical with the narrator's name. As far as the narrator's position is concerned, the narrator is identical with the principal character and the narrative is carried out from a retrospective point of view (*ibid.*). This means, in other words: extravagant, experimental linguistic forms are excluded, a sequence of chronologically ordered events is expected; the real author refrains from being a mediating story teller and instead looks back at the past events from a distance. Lejeune assumes the identity between author, narrator and protagonist. The proper name on the book cover stands for the genuine existence of the author, who links the text with the extra-textual reality. The identity can be confirmed in the text itself (the protagonist uses the writer's name) and/or in the paratext (preface, footnote, afterword). The protagonist's fictional name is, in Lejeune's opinion, reason enough to question the autobiographic character of the text and qualify it rather as an autobiographical novel (a novel with recognisable biographic elements).

The abovementioned autobiographical pact is "signed" between the writer and the reader. When s/he gives the protagonist his or her name (and possibly makes an additional statement), the writer declares to be telling the true version of her own life story. The reader accepts the declaration and approaches the text with trust and belief to be offered such a story.

Nonetheless, Lejeune claims that the reader will still be tempted, like a “tracker dog”, to seek possible breeches of the pact; the other way around, s/he would also look for autobiographical elements in a novel declared as purely fictional.

The concept of autobiography presented by Paul de Man poses the opposition to Lejeune’s theory, both in terms of the contrary contents and direct critical comments on the French scholar’s propositions. By referring to Genette’s observation on a metaphor created by Proust in his famous work⁶, de Man questions the core of Lejeune’s definition: the proper intention of the autobiographer to report their life. Furthermore, the scholar negates the evidence-value of the proper name on the cover and in the text and denies the mere possibility of identity between the writer and the protagonist. In his analyses of Wordsworth’s *Essays upon Epitaphs*, he proves an intended application of recurring topoi, which – in his opinion – speaks for the aesthetic effect as the priority of the description. Once he rejects the possibility of a genuine self-presentation and stresses the predominance of the aesthetic dimension, de Man questions Lejeune’s requirement for an autobiography to be written in prose. Since the authenticity of the story is excluded, the linguistic form loses its importance because (1) in the case of a literary work the form is the only factor of interest and (2) the ‘truthful’ aspect of the work of literature is of no interest for the researcher. As a representative of the deconstructionist approach to literature (see Chapter on Deconstruction) de Man does not believe in the representative function of the language⁷ at all. This means that it is futile to look for any truth behind the wording, since the language always allows for multiple interpretations. This attitude is tantamount to banning autobiography from the realm of literature; the latter should be perceived in a formalist⁸ way.

In Poland, an interesting concept of autobiography was presented by Małgorzata Czermińska (2000), who discerns three autobiographical strategies: (1) testimony, (2) confession, and (3) challenge.⁹ The essence of testimony is recalling, recollecting and recording of memories in a

⁶ Genette points to the fact that Proust obviously manipulated the biographic material in order to obtain the artistic effect of metaphor, which meant that artism took priority and the truth was treated instrumental.

⁷ In de Man’s original wording: specular language. If language had a representative power, it could mirror reality, i.e. depict it as it is. Once the representative power of language is rejected, a binding connection between a description (in language) and a real setting is illusive.

⁸ The Russian formalists (Skhlovsky, Tynianov, Propp, Jakobson) proposed to focus on the literariness (i.e. what makes it a work of literature) when approaching a literary work. In their view, a work of literature poses a sum of literary devices and is characterized by a dynamic use of language – different from its daily use. Their purpose was to find out the properties of poetic language as such (poetic language not limited to poetry as a genre but belonging to literature in general)

⁹ In the Polish original: świadectwo, wyznanie, wyzwanie.

possibly objective, faithful way, with the aim to share them with the addressee (reader). Confession means a genuine attempt of an individual, to be honest with him/herself; although the addressee is another person (reader), the writer is focused on him/herself and trying to get to know him/herself better through confrontation with the memories. Challenge consists in the writer's ambivalent attitude to the reader; the latter is needed as the audience for a play but is considered, at the same time, as a kind of enemy not worthy of knowing the firsthand truth. The presentation of the material allows for doubts, uncertainty and irritation. Kasperski differentiates between autobiography and autobiographism; the former labels the genre discussed here, whereas the latter covers the total of an author's utterances about his or her life

Interestingly, the genre autobiography does not require, in the scholar's opinion, the application of the first person Singular (which poses a radical criterion of autobiography according to other researchers, e.g. Lejeune). The autobiographer's point of view is located outside the life to be reported and inside the culture and literary conventions; the writer transforms the facts of life into the narrative, "encodes" them linguistically and stylistically and compositionally and adjusts them to the whole text (cf. Kasperski :14). This means a justified location of autobiography as a genre in the realm of literature; autobiography connects authenticity with fiction and literariness. Autobiographism, on the other hand, is to be understood as the outcome of an author's tendency or readiness to relate (or comment on) their own life. Kasperski admittedly refers to Goodwin's notions of self, life and writing and connects them in one concept of autobiographism (*ibid.*).

Nowadays, autobiographies of VIPs are fashionable and profitable; we are not talking about them here at all. The subject of our consideration here is solely the autobiography presented by an established writer and the question of its status among recognized works of literature. The theoretical positions presented above refer to such autobiographies only, although aesthetic or literary values of lay people's writings, autobiographies included, cannot be definitely excluded.

The genres which border on autobiography, the literary status of which is not unambiguous, are memoirs, diary and the abovementioned autobiographical novel. As regards the memoirs in comparison to autobiography, the former rely on the writer's memory only and his or her direct experience, whilst the latter is focused on the accompanying facts as well and imply some additional sources of knowledge (for example, other people's memory, reports etc.).

Besides, memoirs do not employ a literary character as a narrator; the subject is directly speaking for him/herself. Moreover, the chronology and consistence of events, which are typical for autobiography and one of its major characteristics, are not pivotal in the case of memoirs, which often pose a sequence of quite loose recollections. A diary, on the contrary, includes records made by the author day by day, which should not be taken too strictly, since gaps are frequently encountered, too; the notes render the writer's immediate thoughts, observations, impressions, so there is no time distance to the described events, which, once again, cannot be exaggerated, as slight delays in writing occur as well. Finally, an autobiographical novel is a work of fiction with autobiographical elements. There is no ultimate way, though, to prove the genuineness of any autobiographical form as a whole.

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