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Peculiarities of Latvian Women's Autobiographical Writing in the 1990s. 1990. gadu latviešu rakstniecību autobiogrāfiskās literatūras raksturojums

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The article investigates a few important traditions of autobiographical writing at the end of the 20th century, taking as an example the writings of such Latvian authors as Aina Liepa, Agate Nesale and others. In the introductory part of the article the findings of Jerome Bruner, Robert Folkenflik, Sidney Smith, Philippe Legen and others have been summed up, turning attention to definitions of the genre of autobiography in the context of the most recent theories of literary criticism – poststructuralism, feminism, postcolonialism.

Keywords: autobiography, writing, feminine, modality, testimony.

The autobiographical mode of writing has been a dominant form in the last decades of the 20th century. Critics like James Olney and Robert Folkenflik regard it as a general trend in postmodern times where, according to Jean-François Lyotard, the great narratives have experienced a crisis of legitimacy and have been ousted by small narratives. James Olney in *Metaphors of Self: the Meaning of Autobiography* (1972) writes that the autobiographical tradition has taken the place of history. Robert Folkenflik in his introduction to *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation* (1993) regards autobiography as a key notion of contemporary culture and provides a historical survey of its institutionalization in the Western literary tradition from the 18th century onward. In the 1970s, autobiographical writing witnessed an unprecedented amount of theoretical attention from diverse theoretical positions – poststructuralist, psychoanalytical, postcolonial, feminist, etc.¹ This involved a broad array of issues, referentiality, textuality, the remembering and the writing subject, inscribed in the autobiographical text, the testimonial mode of relation to the recalled events, etc.

The problem of autobiography as a genre is the first major issue which is raised and discussed in recent investigations. The basic aspect of the generic problem concerns the relations between autobiography, history, and fiction. In the 1970s, Philip Lejeune, Louis Rens, and John Sturrock located autobiography at an intersection of history and fiction, defending its place in the literary canon.² More recent critics, like Jerome Bruner, have revised the traditional distinction of autobiography and fiction. Bruner considers autobiography as an extension of fiction. He argues that the shape of the individual life in autobiography emerges from the imagination rather than from experience, and in the process of writing the author of an autobiography forges his/her possible selves.³ Hence, autobiography should be considered not as a genre, but as a mode of writing which spans a spectrum from 'documentary' texts, based on letters, diaries, to autobiographical fiction and poetry.⁴ Moreover, it is often quite

impossible to establish clear-cut boundaries between autobiography, autobiographical fiction, and biography. Philip Lejeune has defined autobiography in terms of an 'autobiographical pact' between author and reader. There are a number of conditions which the author has to observe so that the reader can treat the text as autobiographical and distinguish it from a fictional text. Of the four categories introduced by Lejeune the most compelling one is the identification of an author-narrator and the principal character.⁵ Yet, feminist critics of women's autobiographies have noted a recurrent tendency to establish a distance between female autobiographical authors and their protagonists, generally achieved by the 3rd person narrative.⁶

These critics, proceeding from poststructuralist and psychoanalytical positions, have tried to define the internal tension of autobiographical writing by analyzing 'autobiography' as a compound of 3 components: auto (Gr. *autos* – self) – bio (bios – life) – graphy (graphes – writing, from *graphein* – to write). They regard autobiography as an inherently impossible project, problematizing each component separately and dealing with the pressures and contradictions they inflict upon one another. Hence, writing mediates the space between 'self' and 'life' and makes it impossible to recapture the self and set up a plausible life-script, marked by closure. The term 'autobiographical act' is used to express the idea of life construction within autobiography. Elizabeth W. Bruss defines the autobiographical act as "an interpretation of life that invests the past and the 'self' with coherence and meaning that may not have been evident before the act of writing itself".⁷

Regarded as an intentional act, the construction of one's own life-story is determined by a specific *stance of the narrator in relation to his/her recalled and related experience*, which determines the narrative *modality* of autobiographical writing as its crucial element. The analysis of autobiographical modality is highly problematic. It cannot be fully captured and analyzed by formal means, as it indicates an intentionality that cannot be reduced to formal or grammatical markers. At the same time, formal markers such as person, point of view, frame, etc., are very important, and their analysis is very helpful. The recurrent use of the 3rd person narration in women's autobiographies is notable also in Latvian women's autobiographical writing, e.g. Anita Liepa's *Exhumation*, Vizma Belševica's *Bille Trilogy*.

Latvian women's autobiographical writing of the 1990s reveals diverse autobiographical acts. Produced by women authors of the generation which experienced World War II as the central event of 20th century European history, these texts provide historical evidence of a very complicated period in contemporary Latvian history. This entails the pre-Soviet decade of the 1930s (coincident with their childhood), the beginning of World War II, and Soviet-German-Soviet occupation of Latvia at the beginning of 1940s, as well as the end of the 50 years long Soviet occupation at the end of 1980s and the reconstruction of Latvian statehood at the beginning of 1990s. At the same time these texts function as autobiographical accounts of the girls' childhood, interrupted by the war, which further determines their life, either under the occupational regime or in exile. Thus, Agate Nesaule in *A Woman in Amber* (1997) relates to the painful experience of a small girl who together with her family is driven out of her homeland, forced into exile, subjected to the horror of refugee camps in Germany and the difficulties of getting political asylum in the U.S. A similar experience is related in Margita Gūtmane's *Vēstules mātei* (*Letters to Mother*,

1998), a book which emphasizes the hardships of living in exile and returning to one's homeland, only to find it foreign as well. Anita Liepa in her autobiographical novels *Ekshumācija* (*Exhumation*, 1990), *Kumeļa gadi* (*The Colt Years*, 1993), *Vējgāze* (*Windstorm*, 1996) relates her life under Soviet occupation. Vizma Belševica in her autobiographical trilogy about *Bille* (1995, 1996, 1999) narrates episodes from her childhood in the 1930s and the early 1940s.

The modality of these texts is determined by the fact that these authors feel compelled to produce historical evidence for that history which became also a part of their lives. Moreover, their memories fit into the 'great project' of rewriting history that Central and Eastern Europe faced during the so-called 'transition period' of the 1990s. Notwithstanding this common point of departure, each individual author takes a different stance towards her recalled life and writes it either as a story of testimony (Anita Liepa), or a story of healing (Agate Nesaule), or a melancholy story (Margita Gūtmane, Vizma Belševica).

Anita Liepa's *Exhumation* is a paradigmatic instance of the autobiographical tradition of the 1990s. Defined by the author as a documentary novel, it reveals the range of autobiographical writing mentioned above: from documentary literature to fiction. This is marked by the author's playing around with the heroine's name. On the one hand, the author disguises the relation of the heroine to her autobiographical self by giving her a fictitious name – Nameda Lapa. Thus she maintains a distance between the genuine biographical space and the literary space, foregrounding the latter so that the story of the Sondors family gains symbolical status. On the other hand, the enclosed photographs reveal the disguised relation: on the photos Nameda Lapa appears as Anita Liepa, reminding us that the novel presents a documentary record of her family history.

The novel spans the life-stories of three generations of the Sondors family, with the focus on the second generation – two sons, Aleksandrs and Anatolijs, who became officers and took part in World War I. After that Aleksandrs remained in Soviet Russia, was arrested in 1937 and executed during Stalin's campaign of ideological cleansing, whereas Anatolijs returned to Latvia and, after a successful military career, became the commander of Daugavpils fortress, a major place of dislocation of the Latvian infantry and cavalry corps, close to the Latvian border with Russia. Shortly after the Soviet occupation, Anatolijs Sondors and other Latvian army officers were brought to Litene military camp where most of them were shot and others were secretly deported to the Far East. Mass deportations of civilians and the massacre of Latvian army officers are two major manifestations of the violence of the Soviet regime against the Latvian nation. It was revealed in the period of *glasnost* and legally promoted by decrees of the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR in 1989 concerning the rehabilitation of the politically repressed and deported citizens, as well as by the criminal case of the killing of officers in Litene, instigated by the Office of Public Prosecution of the Latvian SSR in October, 1988. On December 2, 1989, the reburial of the murdered officers took place in the Brethren Cemetery in Riga. The title of Liepa's novel *Exhumation* actually refers to the reburial of the officers as an act of restoring their honour and status. Her novel, completed in 1988 and published in 1990, was a highly topical book in the context of these events, which is testified by its wide public resonance. However, its political significance cannot be dismissed as

the product of *glasnost* alone, as the published version of the novel was in fact the fifth one. The writer states in her postscript to the novel that the material for it had been gathered for 45 years. Thus, the history of writing the novel goes back to the mid-1940s; it symbolically embraces the whole period of Soviet occupation and sets up the author as a dissident, situating the text within the tradition of dissident memory evidence and resisting the enforced amnesia of the regime. The author as a dissident is embodied in the heroine, the author's disguised *alter ego*.

Sondor's foster daughter Nameda is the representative of the third generation of the family. Her lot is to live under the Soviet regime in its everyday manifestations. She is made to withdraw from her studies at the department of journalism because of too straightforward ideas; later on she is continually persecuted by the authorities in her teacher's career. She has to give up several positions because she belongs to a family of politically repressed people. Her most daring action is a trip to Siberia in 1953 in search of her foster-father Anatolijs Sondors. Unluckily, the trip coincides with the rebellion of political prisoners in Norilsk which Nameda describes in her diary. Because of these notes Nameda is accused of collecting anti-Soviet information and collaborating with foreign intelligence services, arrested and sent to labor camps in Arhangelsk and the Perm region. However, Nameda's imprisonment and the time spent in these camps (the autobiographical part of the text) is presented in a much shorter account than the fictionalized version of Anatolijs Sondors' experiences in Litene and in the Far East. Instead of self-dramatizing the author prefers the imaginary dramatization of her foster-father's experience, inscribing it into the masculine heroic plot, while organizing her own experience around the dissident figure whose greatest 'betrayal', from the standpoint of the Soviet regime, is to keep alive memories of previous times, thus providing a link with the past. Hence the symbolic significance of Nameda's search for her father, the denial of oblivion, the resistance to the official image of Latvian officers as criminals and enemies. The masculine heroic plot employs the search for her father as a powerful life-script for the daughter. Nameda's Antigone-like opposition is motivated and becomes functional first and foremost within the masculine heroic plot, with the father as the central figure. The limited functionality of the autobiographical heroine provides yet another account of the distance between her and the author, created by the 3rd person narrative. By refusing a straightforward identification with the heroine, the author situates herself as an actant on a higher level of the structural organization of the novel: the heroine's message (the author's story about Nameda's opposition to the regime) is appropriated as part of the author's message, encoding memory as a form of resistance. Anita Liepa has said in an interview that the writing of the novel was motivated by an urge to testify to the historical truth: "I became a witness for the defense of my heroes, I wanted them to be rehabilitated. Now there are others who write about those events. I began writing when no one else dared."⁸

Another important formal marker is codification of the autobiographical writing within a certain genre specified by the author. Thus Anita Liepa subtitles her *Exhumation* a documentary novel, *Colt Years* a memory novel; Vizma Belševica calls her *Bille Trilogy* a memory story; Agate Nesaule refers to her *A Woman in Amber* as a story. Consequently, the life-stories are organized according to the compositional, structural, etc. logic of the respective genre. This provides the author with additional

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options: she can dramatize certain memories, play around and interpret them, provide emphases and additional nuances etc. The author's manipulation of memory – omissions, silences, interruptions, additions – are 'legitimized' by the conventions and restrictions of the genre. Agate Nesaule introduces her memory story in the following way: "I know that memory as such is unreliable: it selects, changes, deforms. Others would relate the same events in a different way, while I can tell only what I remember. I cannot promise historical precision; I can tell just what I recall. I will have to imagine and guess, even invent something, so that the story becomes more fluent and plausible." (Translation and italics mine – S.M.)⁹ Jerome Bruner extends this argument even further, arguing that the shape of life as it is experienced is as much dependent upon the narrative skills of the autobiographer as is the story s/he tells about it.¹⁰

Agate Nesaule's *A Woman in Amber* foregrounds the connection of the generic framing, emplotment and thematic focus of the story. The author, a Latvian émigré to the USA, has encoded her life-story within the psychoanalytical discourse. It is alluded to in the subtitle, *Healing the Trauma of War and Exile*, as well as in the author's preface which directly brings out the features of a psychoanalytical case-study. The heroine's narrative is organized as a recollection of her discussions with her psychoanalyst Ingeborg Casey (clinical talks) and her lover John (bed talks). The narrative proceeds along with the verbalization of traumatic memories of the heroine's war experiences, charged with agonizing affects – shame, anger, and a sense of guilt. The result is defined in the preface: "My story proves that healing is possible."¹¹ The heroine's narrative reveals the drama of her psychic constitution against a background of war and exile. War is presented as a painful experience in Agate's life when she and her family are driven out of their homeland and into exile, passing through the horror of refugee camps in Germany and the endless difficulties of getting political asylum in the USA. Violence, hunger and humiliation experienced in the camps are the trauma that is projected onto Agate's life, turning her into a victim in her relations with others and life in general. The victim's position is particularly obvious in her hasty marriage with Joe. Trapped in this marriage for years, Agate breaks free from the mysterious power of her violent American husband after she has discovered in Joe the features of the Russian soldiers who she saw raping women in the refugee camp. Only then does she realize that her marriage had been based on this violent scenario which she witnessed as a young girl. This episode is described like a therapeutic insight: as a result of specific factors (Joe's attempt at raping her) the heroine is able to reconstruct the traumatic collision and to gain an insight into the history of accepting the role of a victim, thus finding the way to transcend it. After ending the unhappy marriage, Agate is reconciled with her mother (in the dream of the deceased mother who turns out to be alive). The recovered maternal bond leads Agate to a close and happy relationship with John, testifying to her capability of forming an intimate loving relationship. Finally she is healed from the traumas of the past.

Taking into account the tripartite structure of autobiography, discussed above, it should be noted that the 3 components – authos, bios, graphe – coexist in an intricate dynamics. Bruner suggests that we consider an autobiographical text as a discourse of witness (mimesis), discourse of interpretation (diegesis, explicating the means by which the discourse of witness has been organized, framed and emplotted within the

narrative structure), and the autobiographer's stance or diatactics (negotiability, performativity, that is, how the autobiographer, by taking a certain posture to the world, self, fate, etc., communicates his/her organized experience). The discourse of witness in Nesaule's *A Woman in Amber* would comprise Agate's recalled episodes of her life, the discourse of interpretations determine the way these episodes are selected and organized (e.g. broken chronology of events, representing lengthy periods of life by few episodes, etc.). The principles of selection and organization are, in their turn, determined by the author's diatactics, her wish to tell precisely *a story of healing*, with conventional happy ending.

Thus, autobiographical modality should not be reduced to the focused intentionality of a self-present authorial voice that wants to tell his/her life-story for more or less obvious reasons. It is permeated with pressures and contradictions, which are triggered off by the act of writing which, within the poststructuralist tradition, undermines any illusion of self-presence in the text. At this point the poststructuralist and feminist positions diverge: the poststructuralist critics would reveal these pressures and locate the textual patterns and configurations that emerge in the process, only to be rewritten anew in the next reading. For feminists it would be impossible to abandon the attempt of a political reading of women's voices in the text. Feminist critics of autobiographies, like Donna Stanton, Bella Brodzki and Sidonie Smith, make a point of interpreting women's autobiographical acts as entering into writing as the other partner of a discourse in search of a voice and a transformative script.¹²

They treat 'graphe' as a voice-gaining process, in the sense that through writing women can gain the speaking position which otherwise is denied to them, according to the patriarchal definition of woman as deficient (of subjecthood, voice, speaking position, etc.).

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- ² A special edition of 'New Literary History', issue 9, autumn 1977, was dedicated to autobiography.
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- ⁶ See Smith S. *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*. – Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987; *Revealing Lives:*

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⁷ Smith S. A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, p. 46.

⁸ Interview with Anita Liepa, cited by Biruta Gudriķe //Jaunākā latviešu literatūra 1998. - Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC, 1999, p. 99.

⁹ Nesaule A. Sieviete dzintarā. - Rīga: Jumava, 1997, 7. lpp.

¹⁰ Bruner J. The Autobiographical Process, p. 41.

¹¹ Nesaule A. Sieviete dzintarā, 8. lpp.

¹² Watson J. Toward an Anti-Metaphysics of Autobiography //The Culture of Autobiography. Folkenflik ed., p. 71.

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā aplūkotas dažas būtiskākās autobiogrāfiskās tradīcijas iezīmes 20. gadsimta nogalē latviešu rakstnieču - Vizmas Belševicas, Margītas Gūtmanes, Anītas Liepas, Agātes Nesaules un citu daiļradē. Raksta ievaddaļā rezumēti izplatītākie atzinumi autobiogrāfiskās tradīcijas izpētē Džeroma Brunera, Roberta Folkenflikā, Sidonijas Smitas, Filipa Ležēna un citos pētījumos, pievēršot uzmanību autobiogrāfiskā žanra definējumam un īpatnību apskatam jaunāko literatūrteorijas virzienu - poststrukturālisma, feminisma, postkoloniālisma kontekstā.

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