

# EMERGENT AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

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**Rezumat:** *Interesul pentru discursul autoreferențial a provocat o creștere a popularității genului biografic și a formelor pe care le poate lua confesiunea auctorială, procesul extinzându-se din secolul al XX-lea spre al XXI-lea.*

*Prezentul articol examinează formele noi ale genului biografic, unele inedite, altele evoluat din formele consacrate, pentru a nuanța ideea că dezvoltarea umanității oferă noi posibilități de manifestare a eului creator, celui profund subiectiv, biografic. Unele aspecte, experiențe ale indivizilor, odată interzise sau marginalizate, devin subiecte ale prozei autoreferențiale, foarte solicitate de cititor.*

**Key words:** *autobiographical narratives, life writing, narratives of exile, testimonio, prison narratives, autoethnography.*

Modern cultural ambience and readers' priorities are strongly influenced by the growing interest in personal, autobiographical writings. It has become evident the modernist impersonality of the narration, with its exiled author, has been replaced by another type of narrative style in which the authorial voice is identified with the name from the title page, being omnipresent. This type of stories is traditionally named *life stories* or *autobiographical narratives*, still they can be found under a large variety of labels: testimonies, memoirs, reminiscences, confessions, autobiographies, etc. It happens so because their identity has not been clearly fixed yet, though the critics have depicted some general characteristics: they focus on the author's inner life; they address an unreal or invented audience that may never materialize. Consequently, the explosive growth of the autobiographical narratives triggered the increasingly persistent study of a

primarily confusing variety of subjects or approaches now linked in a worldwide, trans-historical field.

The conceptual and institutional territory of the autobiographical narratives continues to expand causing difficulties in terms of distinguishing, connecting, or containing its mix of elements. In order to understand what this type of writings consists of, to become aware of the threads which join and separate numerous examples of such writings, and how a sharper focus could clarify particular areas of very privately owned lives and texts one has to pay particular attention to: a form, a subject, a method, a style, a person, a community, a way of life, a particular time. Undeniably, this kind of narrative is personal, a sort of particular and private version of an individual history, being itself frequently contradictory and full of unexpected turns. Moreover, each of these writings has its own, distinctive voice that is capable to offer the curious reader the very clear opportunity to identify and understand how and why a certain life or life experience took the turns it did.

Autobiographic narratives managed to become a dominant form in the West in the twentieth century and new forms are still being developed in the twenty first century. As the number of autobiographical forms has increased, the domain of autobiography studies has begun to divide according to particular modes of self-narrating.

The number of these modes varies from one scholar to another, but we would like to draw attention to S. Smith and J. Watson's effort to give the reader some sense of the diversity of the genres of life narrative, providing in their book *Reading Autobiography* the short descriptions of sixty modes of life writing, from both historical and contemporary points of view.

Scanning this list of sixty autobiographical narratives, it becomes evident that an impressive number of modern forms have emerged, being based on some classic ones: memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, etc. Among the most remarkable emerging forms we would like to call attention to the most productive ones, through which writers have shaped autobiographical meaning as they have negotiated their cultural locations.

We would like to start with *immigrant* and *narratives of exile* which gave the possibility to their authors to explore the terms of their cultural identities and their diasporic adherences. Some critics include both of them

into the category of *Ethnic life narratives* (Smith and Watson 2010: 269), considering that immigrant narratives should be read through a transethnic schema of descent and consent, paying attention to the generational differences in the mediations of memory. Narratives of exile, on the other hand, launch the problem of negotiating cultural spaces of the in-between. People in exile share their experiences of negotiation between linguistic, ideological, and social traditions.

Another group of narratives, *autoethnographies*, evolved from *ethnographies*, the foundational texts of anthropology and folklore studies. The new form focuses on the formerly colonized people who recount their own stories, both individual and collective, of coming to awareness of their oppression. In the 1980s, James Clifford, Michael M. F. K. Fischer challenged the discourse of this type of writing, suggesting varied modes of participant examination. The concept of *autoethnography* is related to such terms as *auto-anthropology*, defined by Marilyn Strathern as “anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it” and “self ethnographic texts” as defined by David Hayano.

*Testimonios*, another popular form, communicate situations of groups’ oppressions, struggles, calling on readers to react actively in judging the crises. Its ideological force is the announcement of the individual self in a collective mode that calls for resistance in ways that have influenced the political struggle around the globe. One of the most famous examples is the book *I, Rogoberta Menchú* written by the Nobel Peace Prize winner Rogoberta Menchú.

Another modern form, *prison narratives*, is considered a descendent of captivity narrative. The authors write down about their own struggles, being incarcerated, with dehumanizing systems and tell the reader about the forging of identity in resistance. Numerous narratives of this type reveal a set of serious problems the humanity faces nowadays: the contradictions of democratic nations, the viciousness of particular regimes, and the dangers of dissidence. Such stories of surviving and resistance very often bring quick fame to their authors, because the readers tend to consider these stories acts of heroism, when people could resist the regimes with integrity and purpose.

Many critics state that *the Bildungsroman* maintains its status of the decisive form for the presentation of twentieth-century lives. By tradition,

the Bildungsroman has been considered as the novel of social development of a young man, as in Dickens's *Great Expectations*. The Bildungsroman culminates in the acceptance of one's constrained social role in the bourgeois social order, usually requiring the renunciation of some ideal or passion and the embrace of heteronormative social arrangements. The writers of the modern Bildungsroman cast their narratives in terms of conflicting concepts of education and social value. Consequently, modern *Bildungsroman* "becomes both a plot imposed by force and a potential space of refuge from and redress of state violence against the individual" (Slaughter 2007: 347). More recently the Bildungsroman has been taken up by women to strengthen a sense of rising identity and an amplified place in public life. On the other hand Bildungsroman may also be used negatively as a mean of absorption into the prevailing culture that is inaccessible and must be surrendered, or that generated isolation from the native community. While reading these writings, the critics consider them autobiographically, acknowledging the penetrable boundary of life writing and the novel. Dave Eggers's novel *What Is the What*, Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*, etc. are considered notable examples of such writings.

A vast number of life writings belong to *autopathographies* / *autosomatographies*, narratives of illness and disability. The first term belongs to Anne Hunsaker Hawkins and the second to G. Thomas Couser, but both refer to the stories of loss and recovery at the same time, functioning as a call for enlarged financial support for research, new types of treatment, and more visibility for those who have been labelled as *the unwhole*. The term autopathography, still, remains functional to differentiate first-person illness writings from those told by another one, in the third person. Such narratives show some of the ventures of presenting a disabled life in both its vulnerability and its materiality.

AIDS/ HIV narratives form a specific type of narratives of illness and which interlace memoirs of compassionate with arguments for the destigmatization of the illness, by this means interfering into the national and international debates about the significance and the appropriate response to the deadly diseases. Moreover all autopathographies help both readers and authors, having a profound therapeutic effect.

The problems of formerly secreted people, as gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transgendered form very trendy *coming-out narratives*. Having

emerged in the late 1960s, the narratives of sexual identifications, sexual violence and transformations present not only the stories of the costs of being accepted in their sexual identities but also the narratives of refuse a minoritized and stigmatized identity position. This type of prose is evident in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Dan Savage's *The Kid*, Jane Juska's *A Round-Heeled Woman: My Late-Life Adventures in Sex and Romance*.

Celebrity lives are narrated by means of *self-advertisements*. Dozens of such narratives are published annually, many of which have become best-sellers. Some of them are meant to satisfy desires for gossip, others to take advantage of momentary fame or to revive it, but the third group wants to project inspiring positive models for new generations. Among them, *jockographies* and *sports memoir*, form a very distinctive corpus of texts that incorporate some autobiographical patterns: the adaptation narrative, the coming-of-age writings, the physical limitations story, and the path of hope, triumph, disappointment, and wisdom. Thus, we can conclude that sports memoir is a hybrid form of autobiographical narrative. Young people have been interested in Bill Bradley's *Life on the Run*, Michael Jordan's memoirs and Andre Agassi's *Open: An Autobiography*. After numerous thorough studies, it has become obvious that the recent interest for celebrity lives can be explained by the fact that they function as lens for cultural studies of personality and everyday life.

One of the most ambiguous forms is *digital life stories*. Such scholars as Michel Leiris, Gloria Anzaldúa, Art Spiegelman, or Bessie Head, claim that digital forms are different in kind from the written ones, considering they are characterized by discontinuities, directness, mobility, transcultural hybridity. These inventive life narratives can now serve as productive sites for reconsidering the experiences and opportunities of "authoring" any life. But the central tension of digital life narratives is the constant play between flexibility of context and exaggerated supervision in online media.

We are certain that this short examination of contemporary forms of life writings demonstrates how autobiographical acts manage to manifest their individualities using discourse interactions, conflicts that animate competitions with one another, as narrators are involved into numerous contradictory self-positioning through a performative dialogism. The relationship between the narrator and the audience are renegotiated due to the emergence of the writers' new rhetorics of identity and strategies of

auto-presentation. The domain of autobiographical narratives comprises an extremely flexible set of discourses and practices for autobiographical genres, modes of address, and consciousness into everyday lives. Readers of autobiographical narratives can witness the desire of autobiographical subjects to break monumental categories that have culturally celebrated them, such as “woman” or “gay” or “black” or “disabled,” and to reconstruct a variety of pieces of memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency into new, often hybrid, modes of subjectivity. Appreciating the profound densities of these acts permit to better understand what is at stake in these narratives, in the narrator-reader interaction, and in the tradition of the autobiographical narratives at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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