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Notes on contemporary autobiographical prose

English introduction to the special section on Contemporary Russian Lifewriting.

At the turn of the century, an idea began to take root in the expert community that we live in ‘a biographical age’ (c.f. Roberts 2002; Clough et al. 2004; Renders 2016). The rapidly expanding list of published biographies, specialty bookstores and biography-themed web sites, life writing methods gaining popularity in social science – numerous indications pointed to the biographical turn in the making.

Two decades into the 21st century, we may be witnessing yet another turn that someday could be termed the *autobiographical age*. The signs are familiar – autobiographies on the bestselling lists, serialized diaries in high demand, blogs memorializing lives of renowned and unknown self-ethnographers, online guides and college courses explaining to neophytes how to write an autobiography... For all the hum surrounding the upsurge of interest in the subject, there is no consensus on what counts as autobiography and how it relates to life writing in general.

The basic idea sounds simple – autobiography is ‘the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bio*) by the individual himself (*auto*)’ (Misch 1951: 5). Yet each element in this definition begs the question: ‘What do we mean by the self or himself (*auto*). What do we mean by life (*bios*)? What significance do we impute to the act of writing (*graphe*) – what is the significance and the effect of transforming life, or a life, into a text?’ (Olney 1980: 6). Put a finger on a contemporary life writing sample, and you are likely to run into an argument as to whether it is a real autobiography or a fictionalized one, a personal diary or a memoir sketch, a mix of established forms or a novel specimen of the genre. Although attempts to narrow the definition have helped clarify the issues at stake, they did not quell the dissension.

One oft-quoted statement defines autobiography as a ‘Retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of his personality’ (Lejeune 1989: 4). This definition that Philippe Lejeune offered in his 1973 essay

'The autobiographical pact' centers on the author's life and prizes the willingness to flesh out one's character. Elizabeth Bruss updated the quasi-contractual agreement autobiographers and would-be readers are supposed to enter, stipulating that the 'autobiographer purports to believe in what he asserts', that the author's tales are 'susceptible to appropriate public verification procedures', and that the audience is willing 'to accept these reports as true and is free to "check up" on them or attempt to discredit them' (Bruss 1976: 10-11).

Other researchers questioned this approach with its emphasis on truth-telling as too narrow and ill-fitting the diversity of contemporary autobiographical narrative (Adams 1990; Eakin 1999, Olney 1999). Looking at the subject matter from the vantage point of literary criticism, James Olney discounts efforts to draw its 'generic boundaries', pointing out that we 'often cannot tell whether we should call something a novel, a poem, a critical dissertation, or an autobiography' (Olney 1980: 4). Paul de Man (1984) pressed a similar point in his article 'Autobiography as defacement'. Following Derrida's deconstructive tack, he claimed that autobiography has no generic properties, that its 'specular language' lends itself to more or less arbitrarily interpretation, and that the very act of writing one's life should be seen as a studied evasion or 'defacement' (a claim inadvertently drawing attention to de Man's refusal to square off with the antisemitic screeds he penned during WWII; see Smith 1996; Shalin 1993). Pierre Bourdieu attacked auto/biographical discourse because it succumbs to 'biographical illusion', because

the autobiographical narrative is always at least partially motivated by a concern to give a meaning, to rationalize, to show the inherent logic, both for the past and for the future... The inclination toward making oneself the ideologist of one's own life, through the selection of a few significant events with a view to elucidating an overall purpose, and through the creation of causal or final links between them which will make them coherent, is reinforced by the biographer who is naturally inclined, especially through his formation as a professional interpreter, to accept this artificial creation of meaning (Bourdieu 2000b: 298).

Timothy Adams (1990) acknowledges the problematic nature of the autobiographical act and pleads the case that elements of fiction and fact are present in any effort to render one's life meaningful:

This form of writing, which may or may not be a genre, possesses a peculiar kind of truth through a narrative composed of the author's metaphors of self that attempt to reconcile the individual elements of a lifetime by using a combination of memory and imagination – all performed in a unique act that partakes of a therapeutic fiction making, rooted in what really happened, and judged by the standards of truth and falsity and by the standards of success as an artistic creation (Adams 1990: 3).

The primary object of autobiography – the authorial self – is a phenomenon about which practitioners have also failed to reach a working consensus. Even the existence of the self is now open to doubt, notably among postmodernist writers (Ashley et al. 1994). Those who take the object of self-examination seriously are baffled by the self's elusive nature. 'Нет ничего более таинственного, чем "авто", свойство "быть собой", иметь свое "я"', writes Mikhail Epstein, one of the project contributors. His lament echoes a long-standing puzzlement over the enigmatic nature of the phenomenon, first pointed out by no lesser authority on self-reflection than Immanuel Kant:

That I am conscious of myself is a thought that already contains a twofold self, the I as subject and the I as object. How it might be possible for the I that I think to be an object (of intuition) for me, one that enables me to distinguish me from myself, is absolutely impossible to explain, even though it is an indubitable fact; it indicates, however, a capacity so highly elevated above sensuous intuition that...it has the effect of separating us from all animals (Kant 1983: 73).

The great German philosopher struggled mightily with this conundrum. By the time he wrote *Critique of Judgment* [1790], he hit upon a plausible solution: Every time the individual makes a general statement, 'he disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgment and reflects upon it from a universal standpoint (which he can only determine by placing himself at the standpoint of others)' (Kant 1951: 137). This observation applied primarily to aesthetic judgment, but Hegel was quick to generalize this insight into a proposition that all thinking, including self-understanding, is social to the core: 'The self perceives itself at the same time that it is perceived by others'. 'Self-

consciousness exists in itself and for itself... by the very fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or “recognized” (Hegel 1967: 661, 229). From that point on, romantic philosophers would tirelessly probe the thesis that self and society are bound together, that self-reflection is rooted in a social context and expresses the historical moment where it originated. ‘Society is nothing but social life: an invisible, thinking, and feeling person. Each man is a small society’ (Novalis 1960: 43). ‘Only by meeting with, so as to be resisted by, Another, does the Soul become a Self’ (Coleridge [circa 1820], quoted in Coburn 1974: 32). ‘Man, much as he may therefore be a particular individual... is just as much the totality – the ideal totality – the subjective existence of thought and experienced society for itself’ (Marx 1964: 138). Across the Atlantic, American pragmatists pushed the argument to its logical conclusion: ‘Human society as we know it could not exist without minds and selves, since all its most characteristic features presuppose the possession of minds and selves by its individual members; but its individual members would not possess minds and selves if these had not arisen within or emerged out of the human social process’ (Mead 1934: 227, 144). The circle such statements embody is neither vicious nor fortuitous – it is a hermeneutical circle par excellence.

The implication for life writing studies entailed in this theory is clear: An autobiographical report is at once a testimony about society in which a self originates and a critical reflection on one’s existence as being in sync, or out of joint, with its time. Herein lies Wilhelm Dilthey’s exalted view of autobiographical writing: ‘In autobiography we encounter the highest and most instructive form of the understanding of life... in its way, like a Leibnizian monad, it represents the historical universe’ (Dilthey 2002: 221). Or as Dilthey’s disciple put it: ‘Though essentially representations of individual personalities, autobiographies are bound always to be representative of their period’ (Misch 1951: 12).

Today, many analysts relax the prescription that autobiographers review their lives *as a whole*, allowing accounts that single out major chunks of the writer’s life (such as childhood, apprenticeship, literary achievements), epitomize a particular era (a historical period, a chronotope inhabited by the writer), or focus on the act of self-writing (notetaking, journal keeping, self-memorialization, see Harris 1990; Folkenflik 1993; Eakin 1992, 1999, 2008; Anderson 2001; Smith et al.

2010). Researchers adopting this broader perspective want to know 'how we come to be the people we say we are when we write' (Eakin 1999: ix), how autobiographical 'discourse produces the effect that it names' (Butler 1993: 20), and how, in the process, we bring into one continuum self-narrative with self-creation. They also valorize neglected species of life writing such as race-centered or gender-specific reflection (see, for instance, 'autogynography' of Stanton 1987; c.f. Smith 1987). This attitude helped legitimize a variety of autobiographical expressions which otherwise would remain on the margins of autobiographical discourse.

The life writing samples presented below testify to the difficulties of mapping the autobiographical domain within the life writing field. The selection from personal diaries prepared for this collection by Sergey Iur'enen, a Russian novelist and a broadcaster, comes closest to the traditional view of autobiography as rendering visible one's whole life. Starting with daily journal entries jotted down during his years as a student at Moscow State University, the author illuminates his life story by supplying generous excerpts from the journals he kept after defecting to the West, including his years in Paris, Munich, and Prague, then picking up the narrative through another tranche of journal entries documenting his life in New York and Washington D.C., where he had settled after his 25-year-tenure at the Radio Liberty came to an abrupt end. His project may not qualify as autobiography if we accept Georg Misch's proviso that 'the man who sets out to write the story of his own life has it in view as a whole with unity and direction and a significance of its own' (Misch 1951: 7). It certainly would not satisfy the injunction that autobiographers must not limit themselves to the 'the earlier judgments' stored in the notebooks while failing to 'detect significances which escaped them at the time'. As readers of this issue will see, Iur'enen shuns extemporaneous appraisal of his older selves (in contrast to what he and his co-author did in the dual autobiography *Encyclopedia of Youth*), letting readers to piece together his life story and its overall significance from the amassed fragments. Nonetheless, the compilation of diary entries prepared by Iur'enen meets a broader definition of autobiographical prose writing.

A selection from the personal documents provided below tells us a good deal about their authors' personal, political, and artistic sensibili-

ties. Although we have room for just a few fragments from the diaries Liudmila Ulitskaya kept over the course of some 40 years, her notebooks show an impressive range of autobiographical imagination and the subtle interfaces between her private persona, public engagements, and literary craft. Letters that Mikhail Shishkin exchanged with his fellow writer along with the reflections on the passing of a friend memorialize fleeting events and at the same time yield a sober judgment on our times, a judgment that is simultaneously deeply personal and emblematic of the present junction in history. *The Covid diaries* of Gasan Gusejnov are joyfully idiosyncratic and at the same time starkly evocative of the place in time where they were compiled. And Iur'enen's diary is an important document of an era that captures its idiosyncrasies and uncommon graces. These are powerful instances of life writing which bear a strong autobiographical stamp and show remarkable literary ecumene.

Mikhail Epstein's project of auto-noography does not fall neatly into any category. Its innovative bent brings to mind the warning issued by two early observers of the field: 'The modern autobiographer needs an especially flexible form, one that can always outrun attempts to define it, one notably amenable to innovation and experiment' (Spengemann et al. 1965: 516). Understood as a biography of the self, Epstein contends, autobiography is bound to fail since 'автобиография, в противоположность биографии, это не описание состоявшейся жизни, а проект ее продолжения, обращенный к фактам прошлого для создания возможностей будущего (в том числе, посмертного)'. Attempts to pin oneself down in real time are at odds with the project of *avtonoographia* which, according to Epstein, 'не только осмысляет жизнь, но и раскрывает жизнь самой мысли. Если биография – это описание жизненных событий, последовательность биограмм, то ноография – описание умственных событий, совокупность ноограмм (греч. νόος – ум, разум)'. Thankfully, Epstein's life writing samples go beyond strictly noographic generalizations. Among other things, they describe the author's experience as the child eagerly searching a newspaper for the winning number of the state bonds purchased by his family, with state power symbolized by the colorful pieces of paper issued by the government (a sample bond is reproduced in the text). The acclaimed author also shares with the reader "Ten personal

rules” that he distilled from experience, a decalogue setting guideposts for a meaningful being in the world according to Mikhail Epstein.

The autobiographical dialogues between Liudmila Ulitskaya and Dmitri Shalin is another example of life writing that does not readily fit the canon. The conversation began as an exchange of emails about the Fourth Nevada Conference on Russian Culture and evolved into a sustained attempt to trade ideas about autobiographical discourse, the use of documents in fiction, the pitfalls of metaprose, and kindred matters of mutual interest. Within this dialogue, both sides identify critical junctions in their personal development, with Ulitskaya looking back at her life to mark key stages in her lifecycle. This is a bird’s eye view of a whole life where the celebrated novelist traces the bond with her ancestors, explains the place of diaries in her daily routine and fiction writing. Excerpts presented below cover the early phase of this ongoing dialogue whose direction and analytical foci continue to evolve.

For all the differences, life writing samples collected in the special journal issue have a common thread. They are marked by what Wittgenstein (1958/1953) called ‘family resemblance’ – a network of overlapping themes, approaches, and intuitions that set these writers apart as a distinct group. Members of our team (a) pay close attention to the act of writing as a tool for self-understanding and self-mastery; (b) show an acute sense of historical time and one’s place in the world; (c) pass judgment on the present day cultural and political currents; and (d) demonstrate the intricate relationship between life writing and creativity in its sundry forms.

More than one contributor to this volume cites Tolstoy’s lifelong habit of keeping diaries. Rather than dutifully populating one’s books with events observed in real life, opined the Russian classic, ‘Гораздо лучше писать все в дневник, который стараться вести регулярно и чисто, так чтобы он составлял для меня литературный труд, а для других мог составить приятное чтение’ (Tolstoy 1937: 179).

There is more to diary keeping than sketching future compositions, however. It is also a tool of self-mastery, a form of askesis and self-therapy. ‘Помнить, что дневник пишу главным образом для того, чтобы исправить себя, а не для людей, которые будут читать’, scribbled a young man in his college journal. ‘Быть предельно прав-

дивым. Обязательство быть правдивым в дневнике, быть может, удержит меня от постыдных поступков... Приучить себя к мысли, что он погибнет ненапечатанным' (Iur'enen).

For Mikhail Epstein, 'Автобиография, где человек осмысляет свою жизнь, – это не только литературный жанр, но и модус осмысленного существования. По Сократу, неосмысленная жизнь не стоит того, чтобы ее проживать. Пока я существую лишь за пределами своей мысли, я еще не стал самим собой, я еще чужой для себя'. *Autonoography treats daily observations as a step toward a larger goal – justification of one's life in the face of eternity:*

Высшая смысловая точка автоноографии – автодицея (autodiscy): оправдание своего бытия, главная цель каждого существования: почему я, зачем я нужен? Не 'в чем смысл жизни', а 'в чем смысл меня'? Чем оправдано мое личное бытие? Автобиография, исповедь, дневник – лишь отдаленные аналитические подступы к этой синтетической задаче? Зачем я есмь, был и буду?

I have mixed feelings about the notion that unexamined (unrecorded?) life is not worth living, but the sense of purpose is sure to fill our existence with extra significance. In her writings, Ulitskaya alludes to life's ultimate goal, though her reflections are tinged with characteristic understatement and ambivalence:

В. и мне сказала, что я выполняю миссию. Совесть это слышать. Хотя я давным-давно знаю, что у каждого человека есть задание (я и слова поскромнее выбираю), и он его выполняет вне зависимости от того, понимает он это сам или не понимает. Но когда понимает, то дело идет лучше – осознанно. Тогда и я готова считать, что я «служащий». Хотя мне так хотелось в последние годы ощутить именно свободу, а не подчиненность идее, даже самой распрекрасной.

Ulitskaya connects her notetaking with strategic mindfulness – 'мои записки прожитого дня, они как раз о внимательности. Не упустить мимолетного впечатления, при записи оно укрепляется. Зачем это – другой вопрос. И ответить на него трудно. Есть какая-то

потребность сохранить живое впечатление, потому что ветер дует, все развеивает’.

In an exchange on the wisdom and timing of releasing one’s notebooks and in response to Ulitskaya’s take on text as ‘единственное, что сохраняется, будь то текст биологический и текст “второго порядка” – тот, который производит человек’, Shalin wrote:

Вы спрашиваете ‘подойдет ли вам этот прихотливый текст’. Мне подходит все, что выходит из-под вашего пера-компьютера. Каждое слово, предложение, дневниковая запись, автобиографический скетч ложится на палимпсест вашей жизни, добавляя к нему незаменимых штрих. Рукописи горят, но текст – после того как он вошел в ноосферу – остается там навсегда. Не нам судить, как отзовутся наши тексты, что в мусорном ДНК не кодирующем последовательности белков останется шумом, а что при изменении среды послужит сигналом будущим поколениям. Важно, чтобы не иссякли коммуникативные потоки. Не оставляйте стараний, Людмила, просто пишите всю жизнь напролет. И шлите тексты, разной длины и во всех возможных редакциях.

A life that stands to reason requires rules for meaningful action. Here are some of the guideposts Iur’enen set for himself as a young lad:

<...> 4) Говорить, когда необходимо и молчать, когда слова ни к чему. 5) Привыкать говорить или молчать – с твердым выражением лица или с улыбкой. Согнать с лица эту добрую, постоянную в разговорах с женщинами улыбку. 6) Всякое дело – хорошо ли, плохо – доводить до конца. Поэтому, когда берешься за дело, всегда знай, что его придется довести до конца, а поэтому хорошо обдумай: стоит ли начинать. 7) Наконец: жить настоящим, всегда имея в виду цель и смерть. Жить одному, наедине с собой, никого не допуская до внутреннего себя.

Epstein’s decalogue is less stringent, more abstract and philosophical, perhaps because it is the product of a mature mind:

Правило такое: объект воли своими границами совпадает с ее субъектом. Воля должна быть достаточно длинной, чтобы простираться только на самого волящего. Ну еще на детей, пока они дети, или близких людей, если им не хватает своей воли.

Как только я чувствую, что слишком глубоко влипаю в некое движение, тенденцию, группу, я начинаю отлипать, шевелиться, вылеплять себя из массы. Как только я чувствую, что начинаю намертво, в упор кому-то или чему-то противостоять, я чуть-чуть сдвигаюсь, переносу точку упора, чтобы была возможность маневра, обхода, свободы движения. Моя стихия – текучая середина, чтобы всегда оставалось чуть-чуть места и справа, и слева, чтобы не быть припертым к стене или загнанным в угол.

Нужно ли знакомиться с неизвестными девушками, ходить в чужие компании, наращивать социальные связи, притворяться ловким, свойским, общительным – и при этом чувствовать себя одиноким? Так я определял свою цель: приобретать опыт, не теряя души! Но постепенно понимал, что это почти так же сложно, как перейти реку, не замочив ног. Оставалось ходить по краю, по берегу, чтобы ноги замочить, но не утонуть. Этой осторожности, половинчатости я в себе не любил, но таким и приходилось себя принимать: нелюбимым.

Life writing documents paint a vivid picture of each person, sometimes unflattering, often self-critical, always revealing.

Недоволен собой. Нарушил свои нормы общения. Много и дружески выболтал Эпштейну, врал и хвастал. О женщинах не вспоминать и не говорить. О работах тоже (Iur'enen).

Как полагается людям моего зодиакального знака – Рыбы, я всю жизнь жажду страстно противоположных вещей: одна часть моей натуры зовет меня к строгому научному исследованию, другая – к художественному. Моя первая профессия – генетика, вторая – письмо букв по бумаге. Богемное начало победило, но ученый в глубине души брезгливо морщится (Ulitskaya).

Мысленно обозревая становление себя как политического субъекта, вижу, что я не был рожден для открытой борьбы с советским режимом. Мне, как и моему университетскому учителю [Игорю Кону], ближе либеральная полемика, хождение на грани допустимого, и то, что в России называют скользким термином “внутренняя свобода” (она же свобода от ответственности). На Красную площадь я не вышел бы, письма протеста не подписывал, общался с диссидентами и поддерживал их главным образом морально, помогал друзьям студентам, которым грозило отчисление из комсомола за идеологические проколы... Участвовал в компании за освобождение Сени Рогинского после его ареста, но уже из безопасного далека (Shalin).

Each personality that comes through in these self-constructions reveals a mixture of idiosyncratic attributes and emotional concerns germane to the entire social strata. Occasionally, we get a glimpse of what it's like to be an intellectual in a culture where public commitments often clash with private dreams. This tension is familiar to the Russian intelligentsia members hailing from different historical epochs:

Скучно. Не принадлежать себе, думать только о поносах, вздрагивать по ночам от собачьего лая и стука в ворота (не за мной ли приехали?), ездить на отвратительных лошадях по неведомым дорогам и читать только про холеру и ждать только холеры и в то же время быть совершенно равнодушным к сей болезни и к тем людям, которым служишь, – это, сударь мой, такая окрошка, от которой не поздоровится. Холера уже в Москве и в Московск<ом> уезде (A. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 16 August 1892; Chekhov 1977: 104).

Вечером сегодня передача на Эхе, а я ненавижу эти устные выступления, тем более про политику, так или иначе. И начала я про себя готовиться к этому разговору, и впала в настоящую истерику, и в ярость, и в невменяйку... У меня экзема, и от ярости, аллергии и злости у меня кожа с рук слезает, поэтому я себя берегу от разговоров о политике. Когда в политику придут люди образца Сахарова, Гавела и даже, на худой конец, Льва Шлосберга, о политике поговорим... Пат-

риоты меня объявили врагом отечества. Ну как объяснить, что «отечество нам Царское Село»? (Ulitskaya).

As befits journal entries, they often give the reader a wonderful feel for the fleeting moods. Epistles exchanged by Sergei Solov'ev and Mikhail Shishkin have their sweet moments, though their reveries can flow into weightier matters, mundane and celestial:

А в ладони моей – ладонь женщины, силуэт которой во тьме. И во тьме ее живота – наш ребенок, зачатый в джунглях, в опустевшей пещерке отшельника, отошедшего уже к другой речи. И вот я думаю, эта неясная полянка между мирами – там, в земле Семи Сестер, на чужом наречье, с этой ладонью в руке и заревом за спиной – и есть я, дом, род, родина, здесь и сейчас. Ведь родина – не земля под ногами, не могилы предков, и даже не язык, а блуждающее окно, которое вдруг совпадает с тобой и распахивается внутрь тебя. И произойти это может в любое мгновенье и где угодно. И так же безотчетно покинуть – до следующей встречи, непредсказуемой и иной. И этим окном может стать вечер, ладонь, зарево за спиной... Душе ведь закон не писан, и родина ее не здесь (Solov'ev).

And here is a reverie Liudmila Ulitskaya fell into on a summer afternoon in Cogoletto, Italy (journal entry, June 30, 2018):

...Вот неделю я не вставая из-за компьютера составляю этот единый текст – дневники на сорок лет жизни. Сокращаю, и уже нахожусь в 1991 году... Господи Боже! Какое счастье, что и на это рассмотрение жизни, в таком ее аспекте, хватило времени. При моей последних лет усталости от жизни, истощенности и тайного вопроса «когда это кончится, мне немного надоело, я готова уже», какое счастье, что дан этот кусок на монтаж. Совершенно раздвоенное существование – продолжаю спускаться с горы, плавать, писать письма, читать старое и даже новое, совершать глупости, тащить на себе ужасную суету и вздор, и вторым, или первым планом, идет сдача дел, подготовка к уходу. При том сейчас играет музыка, сначала Рихтер, потом немного Мацуев – меня потянуло в сторону Бетховена, и слушаю сонаты последнее время.

The diary entries have their moments of hilarity: ‘Принял сто граммов; трезв. Э. был косой: “Девять лет, и я переверну мир!” (Iur’enen). ‘Вы спрашиваете, что такое профессиональная деформация? Так я вам расскажу. Когда после четырех пар лекций и семинаров по риторике ты ставишь для одного маленького мальчика на удаленке кукольный спектакль по скайпу на острую педагогическую тему ‘Корова учит Слоненка какать в горшок’ (Gusejnov).

The noise of time intrudes, however, reminding readers about the brutalities on our doorsteps, eviscerating the sense of normalcy and well-being:

Сережа, дорогой, несколько дней ничего не мог ни писать, ни думать. Война. Вот так просто. Ни где-то когда-то, а здесь и сейчас. Чертов интернет открывает заслонку, которая всегда была между чьей-то далекой смертью и тобой. Никакой далекой смерти в мире больше нет. Все в прямом эфире. Убивают в моей комнате. В той самой, в которой мы играли в шахматы... Вот так просто война. Причем, самая подлая, звериная, утробная, среди своих. Почему так всегда: то, что начинается «За вашу и нашу свободу» превращается снова и снова в кровавое месиво. Но там, где месиво, там нет и не может быть свободы, ни нашей, ни вашей, ничьей (Shishkin).

All the life writers who signed up for this project were born in the Soviet Union, and this fact left an indelible mark on their autobiographical imagination. Mikhail Epstein offers a particularly poignant account of his soviet past and the curious imprint it left on his psyche:

Два чувства смешались, когда я прочитал, что Советского Союза больше не существует, что флаг его спущен, а президент ушел в отставку. Первое чувство: что все мое прошлое мгновенно унеслось от меня во времени, как оно унеслось в пространстве, кануло в глубь... На это первое чувство накладывалось и другое. Не то, что я остался смутной тенью в прошлом этой страны, – а то, что страна эта теперь переселилась в меня. Обосновалась. Во мне живет. Напеваает вполголоса дивные песни. “Эх, дороги, пыль да туман... Только ветер гудит в проводах... Где закаты в дыму...” И пусть я трижды антисоветский и даже постсоветский, все равно, я – послед-

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нее пристанище великой страны. Прекратившись исторически и географически, она еще сильнее воспрянула в нас, как метафизическая, вечная родина, как тот пепел, что, утратив свое земное тело, теперь стучит в наше сердце.

Serge Iur'enen tallies the unexpected cost of his decision not to return to the USSR after his first trip to the West:

Одна из трагедий чистого невозвращения – ни от кого еще не слышал, – что твои люди не уходят. Ты не был на похоронах. Не проводил в последний путь. Не знаешь точно. Поэтому они с тобой. Весь сонм. Импликации многообразны; иные, благодаря твоему отсутствию, упрямо продолжают жить, тогда как сам ты, несмотря на седеющую эспаньолку а ля Троцкий, переходя из страны в страну, а с континента на другой, пребываешь в вечно подростковом...

Here is another entry from the same diary hinting at the gruesome toll of leaving friends behind to fend for themselves in the land of ripe socialism guarded by KGB operatives: “Он не был другом моего сына! Они просто учились вместе! Он просто к нему заходил!” – повторяла в предсмертном бреду мать москвича Миши Э., о чем он рассказал мне перед убытием в Америку’.

Mikhail Shishkin recalls a story of the forgotten Russian author who chose to write for the desk drawer rather than play by the rules mandatory for Soviet writers:

Потом [Эдуард] Шульман совершил, наверно, главный поступок жизни. Он вернул своим текстам настоящее имя и стал писать в стол. Для советского писателя – это то самое «идеальное убийство». Больше Шульман нигде ничего не публиковал... Он стал писать без оглядки на то, что сегодня позволено, а что нет. Закрыв для себя путь в советскую печать – и освободился. Стал не советским писателем, а просто писателем.

Past nightmares are rekindled by present day news, absurd and cruel at the same time:

Корреспондент “Дождя” случайно напоролся на иностранку – гражданку Туркменистана, муж которой вышел в магазин и был задержан, а потом привезен в этот лагерь, где и начал ждать депортации в свой Туркменистан. Жена принесла очередную передачу. Корреспонденту, который мне очень нравится за бойкую и дельную работу, сразу стало скучно, и он переключился на своих. Вы спросите, почему ему стало скучно? Да потому что передачи свои эта женщина возит в Сахарово не два дня, а ДВА ГОДА. Рейсов в Туркменистан нет (Gusejnov).

Our life writers do not shy away from passing judgements on the realities of Putin’s Russia. This judgment can be harsh, as the authors grapple with yet another spiral of democratic reforms running aground. The Ukrainian and Russian brands of freedom fighting are the source of Shishkin’s disappointment:

То, что творится на Украине, как ни крути, это национальное движение, захватившее всех, сверху до низу, поэтому там с одной стороны горящих баррикад весь народ, а с другой – прорусское проворовавшееся начальство со своим и привозным из России спецназом, да привезенные из полурусских областей титушки, то есть, русские парни попроще. А в протестном движении в России виртуальные баррикады, которые никогда не загорятся, возведены между образованной публикой и миллионами наших собственных титушек. В демократической Москве некому строить баррикады, некому делать из ножки стола булаву. Это наши отечественные титушки могут, а мы – нет. Это они готовы размозжить дубиной наши головы, а мы их – нет.

Gasan Gusejnov blames the Kremlin authorities for the current state of affairs in the homeland he was forced to flee:

Как персонаж моих скромных писаний В.В.П. ни разу не обманул моих ожиданий и не опроверг моих оценок. Полное единство формы и содержания. Диалог поверх всех барьеров:

он для меня – пользователь и, в политическом смысле, создатель “клоачного языка”; я для него – “пещерный русофоб”.

Gusejnov goes on to update the glossary of Putin’s expressions that the famed philologist faithfully compiled since the president took office, inviting readers to opine on which of the old and new Putinisms are likely make history:

- Мочить в сортире?
- Она утонула?
- От мертвого осла уши?
- Сопли жевать?
- Это не факт, что человека нужно было убивать?
- Обрезать, чтобы ничего не выросло.
- ...
- Скощухи не будет!
- Двушечку вlepили.
- ...
- Мы попадём прямо в рай, а они просто сдохнут.
- Наняли шлюх за 10 долларов, чтоб меня дискредитировать.
- Бандерлоги, стуча копытами, ушли в сторону леса
- Тогда он был бы не бабушкой, а дедушкой
- ...
- Замучаетесь пыль глотать
- Вот Ганди умер, и поговорить не с кем
- Печенегии...
- В 1937-м утром человека арестовывали, а вечером родственникам выдавали труп.
- Зря вы хрюкаете!

The project participants’ shared priorities can also be gleaned from their public ventures, in their willingness to blend private interest with public engagement, to infuse their personal narratives with literary, social, and political concerns. Half of the contributors to this issue are professional fiction writers with poetry, novels, and short story collections to their credit. The other half are scholars specializing in philosophy, philology, linguistics, and humanistic social science. All participants are public intellectuals who have written extensively on cultural and political topics, who often weave personal stories into their professional writings. No bright line can be drawn between civic and private

concerns when it comes to our team members, between their autobiographical musings and broader cultural pursuits.

This vital intersection between life writing and culture at large is palpable in the life and work of Liudmila Ulitskaya – a political activist, a philanthropist supporting public causes, a novelist whose literary porose is autobiographical to the core. *Big Green Tent*, *Casus Kukotsky*, *Daniel Stein, the Translator*, *Jacob's Ladder* are just a few of the novels Ulitskaya wrote where she drew on historical documents, including her family archives, to connect national history with individual lives. Ulitskaya is keenly aware of this interplay:

Конечно, эта история моей жизни давно уже проросла в разные тексты, которые мне приходилось писать... Но всё, что хотелось мне сказать об этой особенности нашего поколения, я уже написала во множестве рассказов, в романе «Медя и ее дети», в «Казусе Кукоцкого»... Жизнь перерабатывает материал, из слез, переживаний и трагедий вырастает человеческий опыт. А писатель, глядишь, и напишет что-нибудь... (Ulitskaya 2013: 68, 126).

The diaries and notebooks Ulitskaya compiled over a lifetime are a valuable resource which allows one to see how writer's personal experience is transmuted into literary works and public documents. As these notebooks become publicly available, they will expand our understanding of the critical role life writing plays in artistic creativity. They will also afford a glimpse into the workings of a creative mind at a critical juncture in Russian history, struggling to make sense of social crosscurrents and take stock of her own ambivalent feelings, actions, and thoughts.

The life writing output by Ulitskaya stands out by its sheer volume, but it is by no means unique, as other documents assembled herein testify. Every contributor to this collection has been reporting on their life sojourns, sharing with the public personal experiences and private records. This is evident in the entries of Iur'enen whose literary career put him in touch with the likes of Iurii Kazakov, Andrei Bitov, and Vasil' Bykov, as well as in the drafts of his novels and short stories he was planning to write: 'Роман о постоянном страхе: Страх страха – Гос-

страх. Общественная эволюция страха – от пещерного как источника религии – до моего века’.

Mikhail Epstein, a public intellectual par excellence, has a lifelong habit of keeping a diary, making posts in social media, limning contours of Russian and American cultures. *Encyclopedia of Youth*, the dual biography he published with his friend and collaborator Sergei Iur’enen, is a fine example of his commitment to blending the private and public in his life (Epstein et al. 2017).

Gasán Gusejnov has been tracking developments in Russia for decades, mixing reporting, commentary, and creative writing in the process. The autobiographical turn is palpable in Mikhail Shishkin’s elegant prose filled with references to his personal encounters and intense feelings they evoked in the writer. Dmitri Shalin’s columns in American newspapers, contribution to public sociology, and involvement in cross-cultural dialogues exemplify his determination to bring his scholarly expertise to bear on the issues of the day and let his personal agenda invade his professional exploits (see Shalin’s page on the UNLV web site, Shalin n.d.).

A few words about the research agenda highlighted in this publication is in order here. The collection of autobiographical materials assembled in this volume can provide researchers in different fields tools for studying the relationship between life writing and society. And so will online archives currently under construction at the UNLV Center for Democratic Culture that house diaries, correspondence, video materials, and other personal documents of people connected with the Nevada Conference on Russian Culture (Nevada conference n.d.). Drawing on these resources, literary scholars will have a chance to examine in depth how personal documents are transformed into literary prose, to take a closer look at the relationship between writers’ personal life and their literary output. Vladimir Nabokov pinpointed this fraught relationship in his autobiography:

Я не раз замечал, что стоит мне подарить вымышленному герою романа драгоценную мелочь из моего прошлого, как она уже начинает чахнуть в искусственной среде, куда я столь резко ее перенес. Хотя мое сознание еще сохраняет ее, личное ее тепло, обратное обаяние пропадают, и вот уже она

становится частью скорее моего романа, чем моего прежнего “я”, которое, казалось бы, так хорошо защищало ее от посягательств художника. Целые дома рассыпаются в моей памяти совершенно беззвучно, как в немом кинематографе прошлого, и образ моей французской гувернантки, которую я одолжил когда-то мальчику из одной моей книги, быстро тускнеет, поглощенный описанием детства, с моим никак не связанного. Человек во мне восстает против писателя, и вот попытка спасти что еще осталось от бедной Mademoiselle (Nabokov 2008: 201).

Can we mine fiction for information about the author’s life, and how much fiction is permissible in the autobiographical writing? The pathway from notebooks to literary products has received a fair amount of attention; not so much the reverse flow from the fiction to life writing bent on authenticity. *Casus Kukotsky* contains vivid descriptions of the heroine’s painful encounter with vivisection in a biology lab; thirteen years later the same account reappeared, almost verbatim, in *Sacred Trash*, a collection of autobiographical prose by the same author. Is it art feeding on life or vice versa? If this is an instance of interdetermination, do we need to relax the rules demarcating literary fiction and life writing?

While the interfaces of literature and life are a much-studied area, the relationship between scholarly writing and personal agendas animating its authors is a less developed research field. It was C. Wright Mills, who pointed out that ‘The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. No social study that does not come back to the problem of biography, of history and their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey’ (Wright Mills 1959: 6). Alvin Gouldner agreed that ‘every theory is also a personal theory’, that ‘Much of any man’s effort to know the social world around him is prompted by an effort, more or less disguised or deliberate, to know things that are personally important to him; which is to say, he aims at knowing himself and the experiences he has had in his social world (his relationship in it), and at changing this relationship in some manner’ (Gouldner 1970: 40, 41).

Pierre Bourdieu offered fresh fodder to this line of inquiry. His work deserves close attention by students of autobiography despite his mis-

givings about this genre and ‘the biographical illusion’ (Bourdieu 2000b: ii). The concept of ‘corporeal knowledge’ or ‘habitus’ understood as ‘deep-rooted bodily dispositions’ activated by social situations has much to offer to students of autobiography (Bourdieu 2000a: 135, 151, 159). A study of Russian intelligentsia can benefit from Bourdieu’s theoretical and personal reflections on what he called ‘cleft habitus’ – conflicting dispositions acquired by individuals growing up in an environment ravaged by inequality, redolent with conflict, and breeding stigma. Bourdieu sees himself as a paradigmatic case of the intellectual plagued by ‘cleft habitus’ (Bourdieu 2000: 100).

I discovered little by little, mainly through the gaze of others, the particularities of my habitus which, like a certain propensity to masculine pride and ostentation, a marked taste for disputation, most often somewhat put on, or the propensity to indignation over ‘trifles’, now appear to me to be linked to the cultural particularities of my region of origin... Only slowly did I understand that if some of my most banal reactions were often misinterpreted, it was often because the manner – tone, voice, gestures, facial expressions, etc. – in which I sometimes manifested them, a mixture of aggressive shyness and a growling, even furious, bluntness, might be taken at face value, in other words, in a sense too seriously, and that it contrasted so much with the distant assurance of well-born Parisians that it always threatened to give the appearance of uncontrolled, querulous violence to reflex and sometimes purely ritual transgressions of the conventions and commonplaces of academic or intellectual routine (Bourdieu 2004: 89; see also Bourdieu 2008).

A research program of *biocritical hermeneutics* should be mentioned in this context as well. Social scientists working in this tradition converge on the premise that society’s history unfolds through the ongoing self-construction of its members while auto/biographical accounts draw on the narrative constructs and life-cycle resources available in a particular era. Biocritical hermeneutics examines self-framing as a somatic-affective-discursive process marked by indeterminacy and creativity, and it takes seriously Michael Polanyi’s contention that scholarly ideas have ‘a passionate quality attached to them’, that ‘no sincere assertion of fact is essentially unaccompanied by feelings of intellectual satisfac-

tion or of a persuasive desire and a sense of personal responsibility' (Polanyi 1952: 26).

The notion of self comes for a revision in biocritical research. No longer seen as a unitary being endowed with indelible characteristics, the autobiography's prime target emerges as the self-in-the-making ever ready to take the role of the other, to move beyond itself, to become something else. Human self is cast here as a nonclassically-propriated object akin to a particle in quantum mechanics that is everywhere at once when we do not look at it, and that emerges as an identifiable object *in actu* and *in situ* where it is compelled to take a stance and reveal some of its valences under the gaze of assorted others. Human identity, then, transpires as an ongoing accomplishment rooted in a possibility, nay certainty, that sooner or later one will fall short of, or exceed, what one claims to be.

The life and work of Erving Goffman have furnished raw material for fleshing out the agenda of biocritical hermeneutics. A renowned American sociologist of Russian dissent, Goffman imported from the source culture the metaphor of Potemkin villages and turned it into a highly influential theory of presentation of self in everyday life that takes social reality to be a collectively staged and institutionally supported performance (Goffman 1959, 1961). As interviews, letters, and documents collected in the Erving Goffman Archives demonstrate (Goffman 2007-2017), his entire theoretical corpus is cryptobiographical, with major turning points in Goffman's intellectual career aligned with his personal developments and wrought family history (Shalin 2014a, 2014b, 2016). A paper on the dual biography *Encyclopedia of Youth* is another example of what biocritique aims to illuminate (Shalin 2020). Twelve theses on biocritical hermeneutics gathered in the appendix to the paper spell out its theoretical assumptions and research strategies such as 'reverse editing' and 'triangulation' between the discursive, affective, and behavioral signs (see also Shalin 2010, 2011, 2012, 2021).

The division between fiction and nonfiction is one more area that invites reexamination from the perspective of biocritique. All fiction worth its name feeds on experience, its aesthetic quality owing a good deal to how well it reflects the feelings and aspirations of people inhabiting a lifeworld, how much it comports with historical records – which are increasingly incorporated into art in our autobiographical age.

Journalistic, scholarly, legal, and other fact-based forms of discourse dignified as *nonfiction* must, in turn, be understood as heavily steeped in rhetoric and susceptible to distortion and bias which open them to challenges inside and outside expert communities. Standards by which we judge each undertaking differ – one answering to aesthetic sensibilities and truthfulness canons informing an era, the other demanding a recourse to whatever passes for evidence and fact at the present time – yet neither escapes the conventions of a genre and both stand to benefit from respectful dialogue and cross-fertilization.

Whether one takes the present collaborative project as an example of contemporary autobiographical prose, a window into the mindset of contemporary Russian intellectuals, or a resource in literary criticism – it is my hope that readers will share the contributors' fascination with life writing and join the call to embody autobiographical reflection in textual form:

Владимир Иванович Вернадский, великий российский ученый, стоял у истоков великого открытия ноосферы. Если биосфера – совокупность всех живых существ, от инфузории-туфельки до человека, то ноосфера – хранилище всех мыслей, обращенных в тексты, всего интеллектуального богатства, созданного за 200 тысяч лет существования человека... Человеческая культура, сохраняемая текстами, нотными знаками, графикой и живописью – великая запись Творения, если угодно, дневник Господа Бога. Но пишут его люди, и не обязательно люди гениальные. Даже самый заурядный человек, записывая свои повседневные мысли и дела, оказывается участником и творцом уникальной человеческой культуры.

Some readers may even join Mikhail Shishkin on his journey to a faraway place where his intimate memories are buried, waiting to be excavated and brought back to life.

Юрия Зеликовича давно уже нет, теперь вот и Жени. А я еще тут, пишу эти строчки. В один странный день я сяду на Ярославском на монинскую электричку и поеду к ним в Загорянку. Ночь снова будет лунная, мы с Женей вылезем через окно в сад, пропитанный запахом белого налива. Будем читать

друг другу стихи, свои и не свои, и впереди будет бесконечная удивительная жизнь.

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