

Claudia Criveller, Andrea Gullotta

## Introduction to the 11<sup>th</sup> issue of *AvtobiografiЯ*.

The 2022 issue of *AvtobiografiЯ* celebrates the first ten years of the journal, which was created by a group of scholars coming from various parts of the world who shared an interest in the several forms of narrating the self in Russian culture and in other Slavonic languages. Since its conception and over the course of time, we have tried to create a shared platform where different but equally rich traditions of Life Writing studies, such as Russian and Western, could confront and nourish each other. Over the years, many have been the results achieved in this sense, and many have been the difficulties, dissatisfactions, and mistakes, which have always urged us to change course and seek new perspectives. Our literary and cultural perspective has always informed our work – it is from these areas that we have drawn our definition of the word ‘I’.

2022 turned out to be the year in which words in Russian culture – the culture to which most of us devote our work and passion

– are once again used with meanings that cannot be naturally assigned to them, or with political undertones that empty them of their authentic value and reduce them to unnatural and senseless clichés. Words like ‘war’, ‘gay’, ‘Nazi’, or ‘zombie’ have been banned or altered in such a way, that the memory of their original meaning in Russian seems to have been lost. The events that have tragically marked this last year, 2022, are strongly intertwined with the topics to which this issue of *AvtobiografiЯ* is dedicated.

The representation of Ukrainian culture in all its richness runs the risk of being swept away by a bloody war; gender studies research centres have been classified as ‘foreign agents’; LGBTQ+ movements have been seen as a threat to traditional Russian values and at the same time have been used to fuel anti-Western sentiments in Russia. In the West, superficial attempts to attribute political significance to Russian culture have partly harmed the freedom of expression of Russian identity and tra-

ditions. What remains are the facts – literary and cultural, but mainly human and ethical – on which it is not admissible to negotiate. On these premises, it is necessary to redefine the dialogue that our journal still seeks to foster. In this year's issue, *AvtobiografiЯ* opens up to two perspectives: the first one – on Russian queer culture and the peculiarities of the autobiographical corpus in which it finds expression – had been planned for years; the second one – on Ukrainian autobiographical culture, on the need to preserve it and divulge it, removing it from the isolation in which it has long remained enclosed – was chosen over the course of this past year.

As the editor of the special section that gives the issue its title Connor Doak notes in his introduction, Russian queer culture has its own specific characteristics, and to impose Western interpretative models on it is not possible. The development of Russian Life Writing, Doak notes, is dialogical. The identity of Russian queers cannot be confined only within the limits of its national context – the Russian LGBTQ+ community is broader and is nourished by its relationship with the international queer community. Today, they exchange information

through digital tools and social networking. They also share cultural practices such as the fictionalisation of the self and the mixing of autobiographical genres, which represents an ideal communication code on genres and forms in queer egodocuments between Russia and Western Europe. The presence of common traits between Eastern and Western European autobiographical traditions is further revealed in Persida Lazarević Di Giacomo's article in the Papers section, and in the works and authors discussed in the second section of this 2022 issue, dedicated to Life Writing in the Ukrainian literary tradition, edited by Tetiana Cherkashyna, who in her introduction to the section acutely reconstructs the history of autobiography in Ukraine.

Many of the articles published in this issue pose recurring and common theoretical questions, which mainly testify to the tendency towards the elimination of boundaries between genres and the creation of hybrid forms of self-representation, not only in contemporary literature but also in earlier works. Margarita Vaysman shows how narrative theory, queer history, and historical documentation merge in *Notes of a Cavalry Maiden*, an autobiographical narrative by

Aleksandr Aleksandrov (born Nadezhda Durova), a Russian-Ukrainian hero of the Napoleonic wars, dating from the 1830s. Rowan Dowling further testifies for this tendency in her article on the contemporary transgender collective autobiography published by the Russian LGBTQ+ activist initiative Vykhod [Coming out], while Olga Andreevskikh analyses different semiotic codes, both visual and textual, published on social media. The forms of interaction between autobiographical reality and fiction are outlined in the work of Kadence Leung, who studies the strategies of self-representation in two novels by the emigrant writer and translator Valerii Pereleshin, who, as Leung notes, proposes an autofictional poetry that is entirely personal, but at the same time close to original forms of representation developed both in the West and in Russia. In some cases, as Brian James Baer notes with respect to Sergei Eisenstein's memoirs, such strategies have even become canonical in modern gay subcultures, leading to an emerging queer literary canon. The novel *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* by Oksana Zabuzhko is, according to Svitlana Kryvoruchko, an example of fiction critique. It is another textual domain in which

different genres interact – it contains typical features of the essay and diary, but also biographical facts of the writer's life, all combined in the form of the novel. Persida Lazarević Di Giacomo examines a particular *paratextual autobiography* in Serbian literature. It is hidden in Pavle Solarić's *Predisloviје*, a translation from German of Johann Georg Ritter's *Von der Einsamkeit*, an autobiography camouflaged as a preface, which not only dialogues with Ritter's text, but also with wider autobiographical traditions, for example with the genre of the *zhitie*, or life of the saint, a common archetype in Slavonic literature. Several articles in this issue study how egodocuments contribute to the formation of identity, which is one of the key topics of Life Writing. Andreevskikh reflects on how in contemporary Russia confessional fiction writing through a digital self by activists for bisexual rights is used for the construction of one's bisexual identity. Masha Beketova shows how, through her novel *Severe Maiden*, Olga Zhuk – one of the most important early feminist activists in Russia, a Jewish non-heteronormative woman who migrated from Russia to Germany in the 1990s – outlines the evolution of her identity. In

some cases, particularly original and creative self-representation strategies are used to illustrate a coming-out narrative, as in the case of Valerii Pereleshin, whose strategies are unmasked thanks to the fusion of fictional elements. Finally, Vaysman reconstructs the identity path of Aleksandr Aleksandrov on the basis of a corpus of military and civil correspondence. Lazarević Di Giacomo also notes how Solarici's *paratextual autobiography* allows the author to shape his identity.

A key element in the definition of one's identity is language. This is confirmed by Dowling, who points out how, for gender fluid people, the grammatically gendered Russian language plays a specific role in the perception of the self and in the creation of characters, and by Oleksandr Halych, who brings out the struggle for the affirmation of Ukrainian language as a national literature in the diaries and memoirs of Serhiy Yefremov, a scholar of Ukrainian literature classics and an organiser of cultural initiatives for the affirmation of Ukrainian culture. Kryvoruchko also highlights how in Oksana Zabuzhko's novel the Ukrainian language is not only a tool, but also an emotional space and a sign of patriotism.

Style also plays its role in the formation of identity. This is what Brian Baer suggests in his article, where he outlines how stylistic choices are the key to accessing Sergei Eisenstein's memoirs, as they allow Baer to hypothesise an interpretation of encrypted references, word plays, symbols, and to capture queer subtexts, which reveal the unmasking of the director's coming-out. Egodocuments are used as biographical sources also in the case of Serhiy Yefremov's diaries and memoirs. In his study of Oksana Zabuzhko's novel, Kryvoruchko uses the biographic method to define the 'figure of the writer' and understand the relationship between author and work through such concepts as the 'author as subject of consciousness' and 'personality of the writer'.

The reconstruction of one's personality takes centre stage in the texts contained in the *Materials* section, thanks to the interview given to Connor Doak and Calum Doyle by Evgeny Pisemskiy, the director of a Russian LGBTQ+ organisation, who fled Russia and settled in the UK, where he continued his work supporting the Russian LGBTQ+ community, as well as in the annotated letters from the Soviet-era writer Grigorii Konovalov to the young student Evgeniia

Gutman, proposed and introduced by Dmitrii Shalin, in which Konovalov discusses the Russian literary tradition and his personal work as a novelist. A third example is provided by Giuseppina Larocca's interview with Andrei Andreevich Tarkovskii, which reveals biographical elements in the cinema of his father, Andrei Arsenevich Tarkovskii.

Tetiana Cherkasyna shows how the use of egodocuments is fundamental for the reconstruction of broader cultural contexts such as the portrayal of the city of Kharkov in works from the 1920s and 1930s, as they shed light on the city's cultural ferment and the terror experienced by its citizens. A special place in the section devoted to Ukrainian autobiographical culture deserves the work of Artem Halych, dedicated to the study of the literary portrait in the unpublished texts by 20th-century Ukrainian writers preserved at the Department of Manuscripts and Textology of the Taras Shevchenko Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyiv, and in particular the diaries of Varvara Cherednychenko and Mykhailo Ivchenko.

In the Translations section, we publish the Italian translation by Martina Napolitano of two short

stories by Evgenii Kharitonov, one of the most famous gay writers in Russian literature, although his works were only published posthumously.

In the year 2022 we lost two important contributors to our journal: Yuri Mann, who had generously accepted our proposal to join our Advisory Board and published one of his last articles with us, and our dear friend and colleague Natalia Rodigina, who was part of the *AvtobiografiЯ* team from its very beginning. To honour her memory, we have collected the bibliography of her many important works on autobiographical genres thanks to the help of Tatiana Saburova.

For this important and complex issue, our debt of gratitude goes to Connor Doak and Tetiana Cherkashyna, who have put together two clusters of articles capable of stimulating academic discourse on auto/biography on two topics that are particularly timely in such a time of crisis. Their work throughout the whole publication process – occurred through extraordinary times – has been outstanding, and we are grateful to both for that. We would also like to thank Anita Frison, who leaves her editorial role, and welcome Martina Morabito who replaces

her. Thanks also go to Stefano Aloe, Giulia De Florio, Bartosz Osiewicz, Adriano Pavan, Chiara Rampazzo, James Rann, Samuele Saorin and Raffaella Vassena for their contribution to this issue. Finally, we wholeheartedly thank Enza De Francisci, Greg Kerr and Josephine von Zitzewitz for their help with some of the texts published in this issue.

Disclaimer: The ideas and opinions expressed in this article by the editors are not necessarily shared by all members of the editorial and advisory board.