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From Autobiography to Autofiction: Narrative Strategies of Life Stories

(*Od autobiografie k autofikci. Narativní strategie vyprávění o vlastním životě*, Host 2024)

This monograph focuses on life writing in the context of the turbulent changes in both its practice and reception, including the increasing popularity of autobiographical and autofictional forms. The author relates these transformations to both broader cultural developments, such as recent changes in lived reality and media landscape, and twentieth-century conceptions of semiotic representation and of the self. The book draws on life writing studies and narrative theory to show how contemporary autobiographical and autofictional narratives engage with the conventions of autobiography as well as general life-storying templates. It examines the ways texts reflect, represent, and enact self-discovery and self-invention, problems of remembering, and the sense of (dis)continuity of one's own existence in time. Questions of identity permeate the book, which therefore offers insight not just into contemporary forms of published self-narration but also into the human process of self-definition and self-image construction.

The introduction briefly summarizes Philippe Lejeune's 1970s seminal conception of the autobiographical pact, which continues to be influential today. It then maps out the tremendous changes in how autobiography and autobiographical telling are conceptualized that have occurred over approximately the last sixty years: the view of autobiography as a historical document, a strictly factual narrative bearing testimony to the author's life and times, has given way to the idea that autobiography is an act of self-interpretation and self-representation. Following the interventions of modernism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and postmodernism, the perception of autobiography as an unproblematic portrayal of one's past and a straightforward reproduction of an already-formed self has been gradually replaced by the view that writers construct and perform their identity through language and narrative in the autobiographical process itself. The idea that autobiographical narratives provide an objective record of the authors' lives has been superseded by a conception of autobiographical truth as inevitably subjective. Autobiographical narratives mediate the author's recollections and interpretations, which are subject to distortions and inaccuracies due to the nature of human memory processes and are designed from the standpoint of the present to position the author in a certain way vis-à-vis both the other characters in the story and the reader. These narratives are also influenced by culturally circulated models of remembering and narrating one's life as well as general story templates—and may themselves co-create these patterns. Furthermore, feminist and postcolonial approaches have called attention to the ideological background of autobiography as a cultural institution that reflects, constructs, and helps

maintain normative ideas about what constitutes a "valuable" or "worthy" life and about appropriate ways of writing about people and lives. In doing so, they have contributed to loosening the conventions and expectations that traditionally had to be observed for a work to be considered autobiography. Thus, the eyes of scholars have turned from "autobiography," deemed obsolete, Western-centric, and patriarchal, to broadly conceived "life writing."

Building on these developments, the monograph scrutinizes various forms of life narratives on a continuum of factual and fictional narration. The author understands autobiographical narrative as an acknowledged account about oneself that can take many forms and be realized through a variety of media, and focuses primarily on narratives that break genre conventions to mediate their autobiographical content through more or less unconventional and innovative methods. Autofiction is seen as a mode of self-narration and as a strategy that can appear both within a predominantly autobiographical narrative and in texts that come closer to fictional genres. Fonioková acknowledges that the imagined scale ranging "from autobiography to autofiction" is not meant to be a linear series of forms from the most to the least factual, nor from the most traditional to the most innovative. Furthermore, the boundaries between forms are permeable, and the continuum of forms of self-narration does not end with autofiction but continues to evolve dynamically.

Chapter 1, "Stories we live by: Narrative and identity," examines identity at the intersection of narrative theory and psychology. It explicates diverse phenomena related to self-interpretation, remembering the past, and the narrative construction of personal identity, and demonstrates them using extracts from contemporary autobiographical and autofictional literature. Psychological conceptions of narrative identity are presented against twentieth-century Swiss writer Max Frisch's ideas that prefigure these theories; the primary focus is on Frisch's autofictional work *Montauk*. Apart from the concept of identity as a life story, the chapter pays attention to issues of memory and remembering, self-construction in everyday "small" stories, and the performative theory of identity and autobiography. The aim of this chapter is *not* to draw conclusions about the role of autobiographical acts in the real authors' self-construction. Rather, published autobiographical texts reflect, illustrate, stage, and comment on the continuous process of identification as well as ways of creating that which one considers to be one's identity. They can therefore enrich our understanding of these important aspects of life.

Chapter 2, "The cultural dimension of self-narration and possibilities of narrative resistance," spotlights the nexus between identity, narrative, and culture. All self-narratives, including everyday ones, interact with cultural models, patterns, and traditions. When seen as a cultural practice of organizing and interpreting one's own experience, life writing is not limited to reproducing existing

modes of self-definition: it may also alter these templates and provide alternative models of self-experience and self-expression. Nowadays, life writing is often considered a strong platform for the voices of marginalized people, enabling them to tell their stories from their own perspectives, to voice activist concerns, or to break taboos and resist stigmatization around certain experiences. They can practise "narrative resistance" and "narrative agency," challenging the cultural norms and social discourses that discriminate against them and impose a specific identity on them. The chapter further analyses Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, which depicts the protagonist's self-defining struggles as she navigates the master narratives of two cultures. Kingston's text functions as a counternarrative and exemplifies the subversive potential of autobiographical texts, which may offer both their authors and readers fresh perspectives on their experience.

Chapter 3, "I is (also) someone else: Narrative perspective in self-narration," applies narratological concepts, originally meant for analysing fictional narratives, to life writing. More specifically, the dichotomy of the narrating-I and narrated-I, Dorrit Cohn's concepts of dissonant and consonant self-narration, and Wolf Schmid's typology of narrative perspective are applied to texts by Günter Grass, Christopher Isherwood, and Mary Karr. Fonioková observes how these works' narrative strategies express different attitudes to remembering and narrating one's past: the techniques help the autobiographical narrators emphasize their sense of self-continuity or, by contrast, of change and discontinuity. These viewpoints manifest in different styles of narrative self-construction, and they also relate to the philosophical question of what constitutes "reality": Is a memory, inevitably shaped by the standpoint of the present, necessarily a less valid version of the original experience, or can hindsight yield a more meaningful and, in a sense, more truthful insight?

Chapter 4, "The slippery eel called autofiction," focuses on autofiction, surveying some of the numerous debates that have accompanied this term since Serge Doubrovsky popularized it in France in the late 1970s. The chapter considers the development of this phenomenon and its conceptions in the broader cultural context of the transformations of lived reality, the media landscape, and ways of writing and reading life stories. Originally defined as an autobiographical narrative breaking the conventions of classical autobiography, autofiction and its meaning have changed as notions of autobiography and the autobiographical have loosened. Together with competing definitions, such rapid developments make it difficult to clearly demarcate the autofictional. Fonioková suggests that a signalled autofictional intent and deliberate ambiguity of framing are important markers of contemporary autofiction. She then zooms in on a subtype of autofiction, which she calls meta-autobiographical autofiction, presenting Dave Eggers's *A*

Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius and Jan Němec's *Možnosti milostného románu* (Ways of Writing about Love) as examples. The analysis reveals that Němec's multimodal self-(re)presentation enters into a dialogue not just with the conventions of life writing but also with new media that transform the possibilities and strategies of life storytelling and of self-constructing acts more generally. In this way, it is highly pertinent to one of the central questions this monograph is concerned with: How do life narratives, together with conceptions of selfhood, respond to changing sociocultural circumstances?

The conclusion to the monograph reflects on the changing status of life writing in society and on its larger significance for the human search for meaning and self-understanding. Literary and other narrative works offer models that can help us grasp our own experience, endow it with meaning, and mould it into a "life" that will make sense to us. They inspire us in our search for a form that will facilitate sharing our subjective self-experience with others. While this is true of both fictional and autobiographical stories, our current age is characterized by a particularly strong demand for representations of "real" and "authentic" experience, and the last three decades or so have seen something akin to the "return of the author." This is not a resurrection of the unproblematized authorial subject, but rather an increased reflection of authorship and its manifestations both in and outside of texts. A distrust in the possibility of objective narration, a hallmark of twentieth-century theoretical thinking, persists. As a result, experienced readers might nowadays find classical, traditional autobiography inauthentic. By contrast, life narratives that acknowledge the subjectivity of remembering one's own past and narrating the self, including those using autofictional strategies, are becoming increasingly popular with both readers and authors. The conclusion further touches on self-narration in different media, including comics and online autobiographical acts, before coming back to the question of identity. Contemporary autofictions and innovative autobiographies tend to represent the self as an unstable, fragmented, collaborative work in progress. This tendency can be related to the more universal human struggle to find balance between reification of the self and endless fluidity: although the self cannot be understood as a fixed and autonomous entity, neither can the psychological significance of belief in its existence be denied. The current popularity of life writing might therefore be partly due to the inspiration it offers as to how to grapple with this conundrum.