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Autobiography Studies In America

For the past three decades in America autobiography has been among the most controversial literary genres. Various authors of theoretical and descriptive studies devoted to autobiography have been trying to define the genre, name its characteristic features, and examine its relations to other kinds of self-narratives. In their researches the autobiography critics have employed an impressive variety of methodological approaches, including those which concentrate on the text itself, as well as those in which extra-textual elements are important. Though the number of books and articles on the subject is quite significant, there remains little doubt that autobiography specialists are no closer to agreeing on what autobiography really is than they were two or three decades ago. Consequently no American critic has yet attempted to write a comprehensive history of the genre, or even of its American variety.¹

While most critics agree that the history of autobiography begins with St. Augustine, they have serious problems in trying to decide when the history of American autobiography begins; even the first appearance of the term „autobiography” remains questionable. According to Arnold Krupat, the first author who applied this term to the self-written narrative of his own life was Asa Greene, whose *A Yankee Among the Nullifiers, an Autobiography* was published in 1833². This view has recently been questioned by a German critic, Horst Dippel, who claims that the first man to use the term „autobiography” in reference to his own work was John Adams, who in 1802 started to work on his „Autobiography of John Adams, Part One:

¹ The only existing study which might without reservations be called „a history of autobiography” is a book by a German scholar. See Georg Misch, *The History of Autobiography in Antiquity*. Transl. by E.W. Dickes, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1951

² See Arnold Krupat, *American Autobiography: The Western Tradition*, „Georgia Review”, 35 (Summer 1981), p. 308

To October 1776."³ Although he may have been the inventor of the term, Adams was not the author of the first American autobiography. Many years earlier various Puritan authors wrote their „spiritual autobiographies” and diaries, victims of kidnapping by Indians told stories of their ordeal in „captivity narratives,” and many others wrote histories or travel accounts with strong autobiographical elements.⁴ It is not only difficult to name the first American autobiography, it is also hard, to decide which narratives belong in this category. The number of autobiographies published in America was estimated by Albert Stone in 1972 to slightly exceed ten thousand.⁵ However, the same estimate was given sixteen years later by another autobiography scholar, Robert Lee.⁶ It is obvious then that the two critics must differ in their understanding of the term and that Lee’s definition of autobiography is less inclusive. Indeed, the great abundance of various autobiographical texts published in the recent three decades alone contributes to the chaos of critical differences. First of all, there are more and more autobiographies whose authors purposely introduce elements of fiction into their self-narratives, and who try to obscure the line between what is real and what is imagined. Books of this kind are often dismissed, by more conservative critics, as works of fiction. At the opposing pole, there are dozens of schematic and often ghost-written autobiographies of celebrities, whose function is promotional rather than artistic or informational. Such texts, in turn, tend to be neglected by those critics who treat autobiographies as literary works or works of art. Such a diversity of autobiographical texts certainly adds to the prevailing uncertainty as to what can and what cannot be included in this „hopelessly confusing variety of writing.”⁷

The recent flourishing of autobiography is not unprecedented. Autobiographical literature was also particularly popular in the times of the American Revolution and in the 19th century,

³ Horst Dippel, *Autobiographies of American Presidents: The Ambiguity of the Franklin Tradition*. „Amerikastudien/American Studies”, 35 (1990), p. 255

⁴ For a description of this kind of autobiographical activity see: Daniel B. Shea, *The Prehistory of American Autobiography*, in: *American Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, pp. 25-46

⁵ Albert E. Stone, *Autobiography and American Culture*, „American Studies”, 2 (1972), p. 22

⁶ Robert A. Lee ed., *First Person Singular*. New York: St. Martin’s Press 1988, p. 9

⁷ James M. Cox, *Autobiography and America*, „Virginia Quarterly Review”, 47 (1971), p. 253

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before the Civil War. The popularity of autobiography in these times was not, however, accompanied by any theoretical reflection concerning the genre. The first American study of autobiography comes from 1909, but its author, Anna Robeson Burr, deals primarily with European autobiographies and journals, only briefly mentioning Benjamin Franklin.⁸ The English language studies of autobiography which followed did not - until the 1950s - treat autobiography as a separate and distinct genre. For most scholars, autobiography was not much different from biography, since both were considered to be variants of life stories.⁹ Moreover, both autobiography and biography were treated as marginal and inferior forms of writing. Such, for example, was the attitude of the New Critics, who treated autobiography as a minor genre which encouraged a biographical approach to the study of literature, the approach they were so much against.

This hostile attitude to the study of autobiography changed decisively in the mid-50s and the early 60s. Three major bibliographies of English and American autobiographies published at that time made critics realize that thousands of hitherto neglected, and at the same time complex and varied texts, awaited critical inspection.¹⁰ This, combined with a growing tendency to cover in literary research texts less „pure” and less „literary” than the novel or the short story, started a serious scholarly inspection of autobiography. This scholarly interest was given an additional impetus by the publication of Roy Pascal's *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, the first major study of self-narratives where the author distinguishes between autobiography, the autobiographical novel, journals, and reminiscences, and enumerates all those features which make autobiography a separate and distinctly unique genre. Pascal's pioneering and seminal study, paved the way for other critics, who in their own research stressed either *design* or *truth* in autobiographies, and directed their attention to the question of the legitimacy of autobiography as a literary genre.

⁸ Anna R. Burr, *The Autobiography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909

⁹ This is perhaps best seen in: Edgar Johnson, *One Mighty Torrent*. New York: Stackpole Sons 1937, p. 27

¹⁰ See: William Matthews, comp., *British Autobiographies*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1955
Richard G. Lillard, comp., *American Life in Autobiography*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1956
Louis Kaplan, comp., *A Bibliography of American Autobiographies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1961

Numerous articles on autobiography published in the last three decades show surprisingly different ways of understanding the term. While most critics have finally realized that self-narratives are not a sub-genre of biography, they remain deeply divided as to exactly what literary phenomena the term covers. One of the critics, for example, claims that „autobiography embraces not only itself as a mode of writing but diaries, letters, interviews - and, to move to a more formal and continuous mode of discourse, memoirs.”¹¹ Another critic, Thomas Cooley, insists that autobiography is not a genre, but rather „a cluster of genres,”¹² while Gordon O. Taylor generally avoids the word „autobiography” and prefers its adjectival form and writes about „autobiographical novel,” „autobiographical short story” or „autobiographical essay.”¹³

The critics who have adopted the above approach in their analyses often deal with texts which - in the traditional and narrow understanding of the word - are not considered as autobiographies. For example, Janet V. Gunn includes in her study of autobiography two poems by W. Wordsworth, „Resolution and Independence” and „Tintern Abbey,”¹⁴ while James Olney interprets as basically autobiographical T.S.Eliot's *Four Quartets*.¹⁵ Yet another critic, Ann W. Fisher-Wirth, in her study on William Carlos Williams insists that all of the poet's writing, including his poetry and dramas, constitutes his autobiography.¹⁶ An even bolder proposition comes from W. Spengemann, who wants to give the appellation of autobiography to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* and Dickens's *David Copperfield*, all of which „help us to trace the formal evolution in autobiography

¹¹ G.C., „Procustes' Bed”. „The Sewanee Review”. 2 (Spring 1989), p. LX

¹² Thomas Cooley, *Educated Lives*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press 1976, p. 4

¹³ Gordon O. Taylor, *Chapters of Experience*. New York: St. Martin's Press 1983, p. XV

¹⁴ Janet Varner Gunn, *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1972

¹⁵ James Olney, *Metaphors of Self*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1972

¹⁶ Ann W. Fisher-Wirth, *William Carlos Williams and Autobiography: The Woods of His Owns Nature*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press 1989

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There exists, however, an opposite tendency. Some critics feel that while autobiography is indeed a very flexible and commodious genre, the term should not be used to cover too many different, though related, literary phenomena. Such views are held, for example, by Brian Finney, who insists that „subjective autobiography” - a term he introduces - is generically different from memoirs and reminiscences,¹⁸ and by Karl Weintraub, who feels that it is „necessary to differentiate genuine autobiographic writing from yet another autobiographically colored genre - the literary self-portrait.”¹⁹ James Cox is also among those who insist that the term „autobiography” should be used more restrictively. He writes:

the term is so dominant that it is used retroactively to include as well as to entitle books from the present all the way back into the ancient world. Thus Franklin or Vico, who wrote accounts or memoirs of their lives, appear before us with autobiographies. In addition to its triumph over time, autobiography is imperially employed in space by those who apply it to novels, poems, essays, or even prefaces.²⁰

Different ways of using and understanding the term, and the frequent applying of it to strictly fictional and even nonliterary material, have resulted in a great onomastic and generic confusion.²¹ This confusion is perhaps best exemplified by T.D.Adams, who notices that Richard Wright's autobiographical *Black Boy* was referred to and treated by various reviewers

¹⁷ William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography*. New Haven: Yale 1980, p. 132

¹⁸ Brian Finney, *The Inner I*. New York: Oxford University Press 1985, p. 14

¹⁹ Karl J. Weintraub, *Autobiography and Historical Consciousness*. „Critical Inquiry” 4 (1975), p. 828

²⁰ James Cox, *Recovering Literature's Lost Ground*, in: James Olney ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980, p. 124

²¹ Among various forms of nonliterary autobiography A. Fleishman mentions „much of Smetana's music, most of Fellini's films, the sequence of Rembrandt's self-portraits, and such mixed media entities as Louis Zukofsky's: *Autobiography* (1970), consisting of musical scores with brief prose links.” *Figures of Autobiography*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1983, p.5

and critics as: „biography, autobiographical story, fictionalized biography, masterpiece of romanced facts, sort of autobiography, pseudoautobiography, part fiction/part truth autobiography, autobiography with the quality of fiction, and case history”.²² In such circumstances it is not surprising that more and more critics have begun to recognize the need for a widely accepted definition of autobiography. This need was directly expressed by M. Carlock, who in 1970 appealed to autobiography critics to finally agree on one definition of the genre. Without such a definition, she claimed, there was no way of knowing whether numerous and often contradictory statements concerning autobiography referred to the same phenomenon.²³

At the time Carlock formulated her appeal there had already existed various definitions of autobiography, but apparently none of them seemed satisfactory. Georg Misch, the first serious scholar of autobiography, argued that the word „can be defined only by summarizing what the term implies - the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*auto*-).”²⁴ Definitions from recent decades do not differ very much from Misch’s formulation (e.g. J.Cox’s „a narrative of a person’s life written by himself.”)²⁵ The new definitions, however, include a new element - absent from Misch’s concept - namely, the *truthful* character of autobiography. Thus W.Shumaker claims that autobiography is „the professedly ‘truthful’ record of an individual, written by himself, and compressed into a single work.”²⁶ B.Mandel modifies this definition into „a retrospective account of man’s wholelife (or a significant part of life) written as avowed truth and for a specific purpose.”²⁷ A similar definition has been coined by Albert Stone, for whom autobiography is the „retrospective account of an individual’s life, or a significant part thereof, written by that person with the avowed intent of telling the truthful story of his or her public and private

²² Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1990, p. 69

²³ Mary Sue Carlock, *Humpty Dumpty and the Autobiography*. „Genre” 3 (1970), p. 340-350

²⁴ Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography*, p. 5

²⁵ James M. Cox, *Autobiography and America*, p. 254

²⁶ Wayne Shumaker, *English Autobiography*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1954, p.106

²⁷ Barret J. Mandel, *The Autobiographer’s Art*. „Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism” 27 (1968), p. 217

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experience".²⁸ Stone, however, expresses doubts about his own definition. He is not quite sure what exactly is „a significant portion" of one's life, wonders about the status of ghost written autobiographies and is, finally, worried about the word „truthful," especially since many authors of autobiographies admit the presence of a fictive element in their life-stories.

The above definitions do not differ significantly from many others quoted in various books and articles on autobiography. The most popular definition, however, especially outside the United States, remains Philip Lejeune's formulation that autobiography is a „retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality."²⁹ Like Stone, Lejeune felt dissatisfied with his own definition as it failed to show a distinction between autobiography and the autobiographical novel. Because, according to Lejeune, there was no way of distinguishing between the two, he combined his definition with his concept of *le pacte autobiographique*. This pact is a form of contract between the author and his readers, in which the former promises to undertake a sincere effort to present an honest and possibly accurate account of his life. Lejeune's extra criterion, which helped him to distinguish between autobiography and the autobiographical novel, was the identity of the name shared by author, narrator, and protagonist.

Lejeune's definition, combined with his concept of the autobiographical pact, has been accepted by many autobiography critics as a convenient criterion for distinguishing between autobiographies and non-autobiographies. It soon turned out, however, that there remained many autobiographical texts whose authors, for various reasons and in many different ways, preferred to remain ambiguous about the generic nature of their autobiographical narratives. Especially, the last three „postmodern" decades abound in texts whose complex, hybrid character puts them outside Lejeune's definition. To deal with such texts, several critics have

²⁸ Albert E. Stone, *Autobiography and American Culture*, p. 24

²⁹ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1989, p. 4

felt necessary to introduce terms such as „mock autobiography”³⁰ or „avant-garde autobiography,”³¹ even when their publishers insisted on labelling them as fiction.

Lejeune’s much-celebrated concept of the autobiographical pact did not stop other critics from offering their own solutions. James Olney, for example, insisted that any variety of writing, including literary criticism, can be a form of autobiography. Olney claimed that the notion of autobiography is relative, and „what is autobiography to one observer is history or philosophy, psychology or lyric poetry, sociology or metaphysics to another.”³² An even more radical suggestion came from Paul de Man, who considered the whole autobiography debate pointless. De Man, a post-structuralist theorist, claimed that any referential foundation of autobiography is non-existent, since the self - the basic source of authority in autobiography - is merely a language construct.³³ This reasoning led de Man to conclude that because there is no distinction between fact and fiction, autobiography cannot be treated as a special genre. De Man’s theory, somewhat ironically described by Ihab Hassan as „the death of autobiography,”³⁴ created in the 1980s a major controversy among autobiography specialists and became an important intellectual provocation. The recent evidence, however, indicates that it was merely yet another episode in the history of critical controversies, and that a majority of critics seems to agree with Lejeune’s statement that „in spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing.”³⁵

Many recent studies, though they are far from employing the post-structuralist theories of de Man, are to some extent influenced by them. For example, de Man’s views have encouraged Th. Couser to question the authority of autobiography, though this critic’s methods and language

³⁰ Timothy Dow Adams, *The Contemporary American Mock-Autobiography*. „CLIO: An Interdisciplinary Journal” 3 (Spring) 1979

³¹ Alfred Hornung/Ernstpeter Ruhe eds., *Autobiography & Avant-garde*. Tübingen: Narr 1992, p. 401

³² James Olney, *Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction*, in: James Olney ed., „Autobiography”, p. 5

³³ Paul de Man, *Autobiography as De-facement*. „Modern Language Notes: Comparative Literature” 94 (December 1979)

³⁴ Ihab Hassan, *Selves at Risk*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1990, p. 33

³⁵ Philippe Lejeune, *The Autobiographical Pact (Bis)*. In: Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p.131

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do not have much in common with the essence of de Man's theories.³⁶ Similarly, Timothy Dow Adams, who takes a position remote from de Man's, shows in his definition of autobiography, a kind of critical caution, which most likely would not have existed if not for the impact post-structuralist theory has had on autobiography critics. Adams writes that autobiography is a form of writing

which may or may not be a genre (and) possesses a peculiar kind of truth through a narrative composed of the author's metaphors of self that attempt to reconcile the individual events 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 both by the standards of success as an artistic creation.³⁷

Adams adds that „no solid distinction can or ought to be made between confession, autobiographical novel, mock autobiography, even though we can sometimes isolate nearly pure specimens of each."³⁸ While Adams does not insist that autobiography is a unique literary genre, he is far from adopting the theories of critics such as de Man or, for example, Avrom Fleishman, who argues that „autobiography is not generically distinguished by formal constituents, linguistic register, or audience effects," and „therefore has no history as a genre."³⁹

Debates on the definition and generic status of autobiography have been closely connected with discussions concerning the presence in it of fiction, and of historical truth. Whether autobiography should be treated as fiction or as a genre of history, early became one of the major points of controversy. In this debate perhaps the most orthodox view was upheld by the Library of Congress classification system, where autobiography is treated as subclass of

³⁶ G. Thomas Couser, *Altered Egos*. New York: Oxford University Press 1989

³⁷ Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies*, p. 3

³⁸ Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies*, p. 7

³⁹ Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography*, p. 36

„Biography,” which in turn is listed among „Auxiliary Sciences of History.” When this classification system was first introduced, most critics accepted without reservations Wilhelm Dilthey’s concept of autobiography as „the germinal cell of history”⁴⁰ and regarded it as a basically factual and informative kind of writing. In recent decades, however, the situation has changed decisively, and those for whom autobiography is a basically factual and informative kind of writing are definitely in the minority.

One of the critics for whom autobiography is first of all a documentary genre is J. Morris, who considers it at its simplest as „a species of history” - „a straightforward chronicle that begins at the beginning and proceeds more or less mechanically, toward the present or whatever moment of termination the author has chosen.”⁴¹ Other critics adopt more liberal views; James Cox writes, for example, that „autobiography is at once an act and a convention lying between the literature of the imagination and the literature of fact.(...) It is an attempt both to make and record a life.”⁴² Similarly, Albert Stone „remain(s) uneasy over the tendency to treat autobiography chiefly as a branch of imaginative literature,” and suggests that „Life is the more inclusive sign not *Literature* - which deserves to be placed above the gateway to the house of autobiography.”⁴³ Stone is supported by Herbert Leibowitz, who writes that „only the most fanatical devotee of literary artifice would quarrel with Stone that we must assign supremacy to life, in all its rugged diversity, not to Literature.”⁴⁴ Leibowitz admits, however, that „over the last century (autobiography) has annexed - or had ceded to it - vast tracts of land formerly belonging to novelists.”⁴⁵ Yet another critic, Barrett J. Mandel,

⁴⁰ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History*. New York: Harper and Row 1960, p. 89

⁴¹ John M. Morris, *Versions of the Self*. New York: Basic Books 1966, p. 10

⁴² James Cox, *Recovering Literature's Lost Ground*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1989, pp. 8-9

⁴³ Albert E. Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1982, p. 19

⁴⁴ Herbert Leibowitz, *Fabricating Lives*. New York: Alfred Knopf 1989, p. XVIII

⁴⁵ Herbert Leibowitz, *Fabricating Lives*, p. XVII

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calls autobiography „literature with a difference”;⁴⁶ elsewhere he enumerates three „generic restrictions” that help to differentiate it from fiction. Mandel’s first restriction is that an autobiographer’s materials must be the content of his own life; his second is that this kind of writing necessarily has a retrospective character; his third, that the autobiographer is expected to write „with fidelity to the spirit of truth.”⁴⁷

All those critics who tend to treat autobiography as a historical and primarily factual kind of literature certainly realize that some of its varieties are closer to fiction and yield more readily than others to strictly literary analysis. Alfred Kazin, for instance, distinguishes between several kinds of autobiography, and concentrates on one which he calls „autobiography as narrative.” According to Kazin, this kind of narrative „has no purpose other than to tell a story, to create the effect of a story.”⁴⁸ Kazin rightly observes that the authors of such autobiographies are usually novelists or poets.

The more influential group consists of those critics who have serious doubts about the nature of autobiography’s „facts,” and those who, while taking for granted the importance of autobiographical truth, stress the fictional nature of autobiography. Ihab Hassan, who belongs to the former group, expresses his doubts in the following way: „Is there any hope of distinguishing between fact and fiction in autobiography, any more than we can distinguish between them in our media? Isn’t memory sister to imagination, kin to nostalgia?”⁴⁹ For others the difference between autobiography and fiction can only be determined on the basis of „the signals the author sends about the nature of his narrative”⁵⁰ or by „the expectation the reader brings.”⁵¹ Autobiography, then, as some critics want it, may at the same time be factual and informative, or fictional and imaginative.

⁴⁶ Barret J. Mandel, *Full of Live Now*. In: James Olney, ed., *Autobiography*, p. 62

⁴⁷ Barret J. Mandel, *Autobiographer’s Art*, p. 219

⁴⁸ Alfred Kazin, *Autobiography as Narrative*. „Michigan Quarterly Review” 3 (Fall 1964), p. 211

⁴⁹ Ihab Hassan, *Selves at Risk*, p. 30

⁵⁰ G. Thomas Couser, *American Autobiography: The Prophetic Mode*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts 1979, p. 7

⁵¹ Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. New York: Oxford University Press 1968, p. 67

The dominant tendency in the study of autobiography in recent decades has been to stress its fictional character. Those who practice this approach try to show that autobiography possesses many features traditionally thought of as belonging to fiction. H. Wolfe and R. Porter describe autobiography as „a work of art with a particular design and a self-cause, choice of symbols, metaphors and images.”⁵² Other critics notice that autobiographers usually assume one of several identities (prophets, heroes, villains etc.)⁵³ or follow one of several mythopoetic motifs commonly used in fiction (paradise or paradise lost, the heroic journey, and others).⁵⁴ An autobiographer then, as D. Mansell notices, makes „the same kinds of aesthetic decisions, resulting in the same kind of aesthetic product, as any other artist.”⁵⁵ As some critics point out, autobiography gains its fictional quality through the conscious efforts of writers. According to others, however, the fictional process begins earlier. For Mutlu Konuk Blasing, the very act of writing gives autobiographic texts a fictional character. She claims that the lapse between the time of experiencing and the time of narrating already creates a fictional situation, since „the experiencing 'I' is being created out of the memory and within the conceptual framework of the recording 'I'.”⁵⁶ According to W. Spengemann and L.R. Lundquist, this „experiencing I” is at the same time „a fictive character who undergoes adventures drawn from the author’s memory, and a narrative persona who reports those experiences and evaluates them.”⁵⁷ While the three abovementioned critics still see several differences between autobiography and fiction, another autobiography specialist, Robert Elbaz, categorically remarks that autobiography „can only be fiction (...) and fiction is autobiography, both are narrative arrangements of reality.”⁵⁸

⁵² Roger J. Porter and Howard D. Wolfe, eds., *The Voice Within*. New York: Alfred Knopf 1973, p. 22

⁵³ William C. Spengemann and L.R. Lundquist, *Autobiography and the American Myth*. „American Quarterly” 17 (Fall 1965), p. 504

⁵⁴ Susanna Egan, *Patterns of Experience*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1984

⁵⁵ Darrel Mansell, *Unsettling the Colonel’s Hash: 'Fact' in Autobiography*. In: Albert E. Stone, ed., *The American Autobiography*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1981, p. 71

⁵⁶ Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *The Art of Life*. Austin: University of Texas Press 1977, p. 3

⁵⁷ William C. Spengemann and L.R. Lundquist, *Autobiography and the American Myth*, p. 502

⁵⁸ Robert Elbaz, *The Changing Nature of the Self*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 1937, p. 1

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⁵⁹ Paul John

⁶⁰ Robert F.

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ecades has been to stress how that autobiography (n. H. Wolfe and R. Porter and a self-cause, choice ofographers usually assume ne of several mythopoetic ic journey, and others).⁵⁴ ds of aesthetic decisions,⁵⁵ As some critics point ous efforts of writers. or Mutlu Konuk Blasing, She claims that the lapse eates a fictional situation, d within the conceptual nd L.R. Lundquist, this rgoes adventures drawn hose experiences and see several differences ecialist, Robert Elbaz, fiction is autobiography,

red Knopf 1973, p. 22
 Myth. „American Quarterly” 17
 na Press 1984
 ert B. Stone, ed., *The American*
 p. 3
 Myth, p. 502
 Press 1937, p. 1

While Elbaz's views may seem somewhat extreme, the conviction that autobiography and fiction remain diametrically opposed genres seems nowadays dated. The prevailing attitude to the problem of fiction in autobiography has been expressed by Paul Eakin:

to presume of fiction in autobiography is not something to wish away, to rationalize, to apologize for, as so many writers and readers of autobiography persist in suggesting, for it is as reasonable to assume that all autobiography has some fiction in it as it is to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical.⁵⁹

Whereas the presence of fiction in autobiographical narratives has become accepted, and is now taken for granted, truth - autobiography's opposing pole - is more and more often treated as something elusive, unattainable and, often, as not particularly important. That the presentation of the full truth by an autobiographer is impossible, requires no special evidence, in the 19th century, Richard Henry Dana, Jr. wrote: „our Maker knows and each man's own soul knows that there are thoughts and intents of the heart, sometimes put forth in act, which no man would be willing or need or ought to open to all observers.”⁶⁰ A few decades later William Carlos Williams, in the introduction to his autobiography, claimed that: „Nine-tenths of our lives is well forgotten in the living. Of the part that is remembered the most had better not be told: it would interest no one, or at least would not contribute to the story of what we ourselves have been”.⁶¹ A contemporary writer, Annie Dillard, adds another element which restrain autobiographers from telling the whole truth of their lives. Writing about her own autobiographical essays, she feels pressed to explain:

I tried to leave out anything that might trouble my family. My parents are quite young. My sisters are watching this book very carefully. Everybody I'm writing

⁵⁹ Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1985, p. 10

⁶⁰ Robert F. Lucid ed., *The Journal of Richard Henry Dana, Jr.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1977, p. 3

⁶¹ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*. New York: Random House 1948, p.

about is alive and well, in full possession of his faculties, and possibly willing to sue.⁶²

There are, of course, many other factors which make the expression of the full truth about the autobiographer's life impossible. Of special importance among them is the necessity to think about the aesthetic form, something of which all autobiographers should be aware if they want their autobiographies to be successful artistically. This necessity, for example, makes writers select from many minor incidents in their lives, so as to avoid repetitions and monotony. What is generally acceptable in the diary may well disqualify any autobiography as.

Autobiography critics, then, tend to agree with F.Hart, who has observed that „truth is a definitive but elusive autobiographical intention,”⁶³ and with B. Mandel who notices that what unites all autobiographies is „their common avowal to speak truthfully.”⁶⁴ The publication of many autobiographical texts whose authors themselves stress that telling the whole truth of their lives is impossible, has strengthened the scepticism of autobiography critics. It has become obvious that „personal” and not „factual” truth was fundamental to autobiography, and that autobiography could give insight into man's personality even if not all details presented in it were factually correct. For Spengemann and Lundquist, autobiography „does not communicate raw experience, for that is uncommunicable. It presents, rather, a metaphor for the raw experience.”⁶⁵ Other critics, like Paul de Man, go even further and seem to want to wipe out the term „truth” from all discussion of autobiography. Paul John Eakin again offers a conciliatory view, claiming that autobiography does possess a peculiar kind of truth; he goes on to explain that „autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content

⁶² Annie Dillard, *To Fashion a Text*. In: William Zinser, ed., *Inventing the Truth*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987, p. 69

⁶³ Francis R. Hart, *Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography*. „New Literary History” 1 (Spring 1970), p. 485

⁶⁴ Barret J. Mandel, *Autobiographer's Art*, p. 220

⁶⁵ William C. Spengemann and L.R. Lundquist, *Autobiography and the American Myth*, p. 502

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in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation.”⁶⁶ While many autobiography critics continue to study the problem of truth and its varieties, others begin to consider seriously autobiographers' lies. This has been done by T.D. Adams who, in his study of several modern American autobiographies, defends his thesis that lying in self-narratives is a deliberate strategic decision of the authors, and that it can tell us as much about him as all the factually accurate parts of his narrative.⁶⁷

The recent changes in autobiography theory and the growing tendency to employ the wide and inclusive definition of the genre, will undoubtedly have a significant influence in shaping of the canon of American autobiography. The familiar classics of American autobiographical writing are already being supplemented by various autobiographical texts which are characterized by an amphibious generic status, as well as by hit her to little known life stories by the representatives of ethnic and other minorities.

⁶⁶ Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, p. 3

⁶⁷ Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies*, p. IX-XI