

## THE ANATOMY OF AUTHENTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIC NARRATIVES

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### Abstract

*The diversity of form is what has characterized autobiographical discourse since the beginning of the Western literary narrative tradition. One of the consequences of this diversity is the complexity and ambiguity of the explanation of this term, the autobiography being historically classified as one of the oldest forms of narrative, its construction model being associated with the paradigm of the ancient novel. The value of the autobiography derives from the act of writing, but also from the authenticity of the testimony presented in accordance with other documents, which describe the same events in the life of the autobiographer. The autobiography should not be read as a document of the past, but as an elaboration of consciousness or an interface between the past and the future, between experience and recollection, between the subject that reflects on writing and the text itself. The reader of an autobiographical text must insist on the authenticity and identity of the author of the text and the author from within the text, because only here the reader can find his own authenticity.*

**Keywords:** Alexei Marinat, author's identity, autobiography, authenticity, memoirs

### Rezumat

*Diversitatea formei este ceea ce a caracterizat discursul autobiografic încă de la începutul tradiției narative literare occidentale. Una dintre consecințele acestei diversități este complexitatea și ambiguitatea descrierii termenului, autobiografia fiind istoric clasificată ca una dintre cele mai vechi forme de narațiune, modelul său de construcție fiind asociat paradigmei romanului antic. Valoarea autobiografiei derivă din actul scriiturii, dar și din veridicitatea dovezilor prezentate în concordanță cu alte documente, care descriu aceleași evenimente din viața autobiografului. Autobiografia nu trebuie citită ca un document al trecutului, ci ca o elaborare a conștiinței sau o interfață dintre trecut și viitor, dintre experiență și rememorare, dintre subiectul care reflectă asupra scrierii și textul propriu-zis. Cititorul unui text autobiografic trebuie să insiste asupra autenticității și identității autorului textului și autorului din text, deoarece doar aici cititorul își poate regăsi propria autenticitate.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Alexei Marinat, identitatea naratorului, autobiografie, autenticitate, memorialistică

The underlying theme of this study constitutes the authenticity of the autobiographical narrative. The diversity of form is what has characterized autobiographical discourse since the beginning of the Western literary narrative tradition. One of the consequences of this diversity is the complexity and ambiguity of describing the term, the autobiography being historically classified as one of the oldest forms of narrative, its construction model being associated with the paradigm of the ancient novel. This close association between the novel and the autobiography is identifiable from the very be-

ginning of the narrative, when there are series of autobiographical and biographical forms that have had a considerable influence on both European biography and the development of the European novel as a whole, emphasizes Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 130). To project oneself, to confess oneself, to express oneself through fiction, this is what the writers have done more or less intentionally since J. J. Rousseau, writing diaries, at the same time, confessions, autobiographies in which the "authorial self" reveals itself freely. In the eighteenth-century autobiography penetrates decisively into fiction and this cohesion will give birth to autobiographical fiction or fictional autobiography.

The distinctive features of these early narrative forms were defined in terms of "biographical time" and the new conception of the individual, who is aware of its uniqueness, i.e., "individual's autobiographical self-consciousness" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 130). Lifelong records constitute the essential feature for the modern definition of autobiography. In researching the origins of autobiography, Mikhail Bakhtin identifies three fundamental models: (1) Plato's scheme, which elucidates the course of the individual's life in search of truthful, authentic knowledge; (2) the rhetorical model, in which the author presents himself to the public through the normative-pedagogical consecration of the "self"; and (3) memoirs, the narrative form focused on history, in which the individual is identified by his fate, heritage, or mastery. On the whole, many researchers of autobiography agree that, from a thematic and structural point of view, it is essential for the narrator to recognize the process of his own "evolution", concomitantly with the course of the narrative. Therefore, the structure of the autobiographical discourse requires a balance between the narrator's awareness of his own experience and the objectivity of this experience in the narrative. Hence, the narrative structure of autobiographical discourse is based on both the recognition of the author and the reader, the interaction or tension between the course of the narrative and an "autobiographical consciousness".

According to the authors of the study „Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives“, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *autos*, in Greek, means *self*, *bios* – *life* and *graphe* – *writing* (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 1). Taken together, they represent the three fundamental components of autobiography, projected over time by three generations of critics. The first generation, including the famous Sainte-Beuve with his method of biographical analysis, focused primarily on the *bios*, considering the authenticity of the autobiography as a factual biographical issue that can be confirmed or rejected by resorting to the historical register. The second generation of critics – Philippe Lejeune, Elizabeth Bruss, Jean Starobinski – paid attention to *autos*, focusing on the analysis of truthfulness in the representation of the "self", especially of the author's identity. These researchers are not focused on assessing the truthfulness of an autobiography in its moral and factual implications, but approach the autobiographical narrative from a psycholog-

ical perspective, considering that any expression in autobiographical texts embodies that indisputable identity of the autobiographer (or the “authentic self”). Critics of the third generation, mainly structuralists and poststructuralists, are interested in *graphie/graphia*, or the act of producing a text, and question the referentiality of language, the authenticity of the self, founding their opinions on those “mystifications, bewilderment and confusion” (Loesberg, 2008, p. 173). A current movement, identifiable among critics of the third generation, turns its attention to the *reader* of the autobiography. In this context, the autobiography is seen as the manifestation of an act of prior reading by the author who recites his literary and cultural conventions or who seeks to seduce the reader involved in order to put the rhetorical construction of the “self” into existence. The analysis of the narrative techniques in Alexei Marinat’s memoirs of detention can be superimposed on the objective pursued by the critics of the third generation, which investigates the deep consciousness of the narrator and the reader through the prism of the act of writing. The critical accentuation of *graphie* should not challenge our research effort and the *bios* and *autos* components, all of which contribute to a holistic view of autobiographical discourse.

The debates on the distinctions of *autobiography - fiction*, *facts - truth*, *the reader - autobiographer relationship* in the autobiographical space, have not been resolved so far. James Olney argues that while some find it difficult to identify which text can be considered the first autobiography in literature, the appearance of the autobiographical critique may be specifically dated back to 1956, with the publication of the study “Conditions et limites de l’autobiographie” by Georges Gusdorf (Gusdorf, 1980, pp. 28-48). For James Olney, Georges Gusdorf’s essay constitutes a breakdown from previous approaches to the study of autobiography, precisely because of the understanding of its subject (or of *subjectivity*), the critic’s interest being focused on what is at the heart of this philosophical-psychological-literary-humanistic constellation, namely the *individual*, a self-conscious person, a witness of his own life. The emphasis is placed on the possibility of autobiography to offer a way of reflection, recollection and self-confession of a fully formed “authorial self”. Under these conditions, autobiography can no longer be perceived as a subcategory of biography or history, because it dominates the *literary* status of the reflection upon the self, and the creation of “self” in writing and not the factual status of autobiography, the revelation of an individual life experience or the actual confidences, revealed by confession. Here we identify the truth of the *individual* rather than the truth of the *facts*, which becomes legible and even pre-established in the autobiographical discourse. Thanks to the fundamental value attributed to reflection, a great emphasis is placed on *recollection*. In the author’s understanding, repetition or narration substantiates the meaning of some memories and this reiteration generates the appearance of *autobiographical consciousness*, a transfer of emphasis from the *bios* to the *autos* (the act of reflection upon the “self”). More-

over, a "Historical overview of authenticity documents a variety of mental and behavioral processes that account for how individuals discover, develop, and construct a core sense of self and, furthermore, how this core self is maintained over time and situation" (Kernis et al., 2006, p. 293).

In these circumstances, the autobiography should not be read as a document of the past, but as an elaboration of consciousness or an interface between the past and the future, between experience and recollection, between the subject that reflects on his writing and the text itself. It is from here that the reconsideration of the autobiography derives, conferring the status of a literary text, written by an author marked by his own subjectivity, in accordance with Georges Gusdorf's "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", investing the autobiographical text outside the boundaries of the objective, historical document.

The advocates of authenticity resort to various forms of narrative, which they concentrate in a variety of literary species, such as memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, journals, letters, evocations. It is true that Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are constantly changing their narrative style in an attempt to avoid the illusion of creating a system. For this reason, the main purpose of authentic authors is to externalize the *pathos of authenticity* (Golomb, 1995, p. 10) in Jacob Golomb's opinion, to recreate a personal mental strength and a sense of individuality, literature being a source inspired by capturing the reader's attention, challenging him to co-participate. "Moreover, the writers of authenticity change their genres and styles to stress the fact that certain kinds of pathos originate within themselves. The variety of their styles is yet another expression of the revolt against the tradition of impersonal and detached objectivity, a constant reminder that we are reading their writings, the personal products of their own values and goals" (Golomb, 1995, p. 10).

It determines him to follow the path of authenticity without formulating explicitly this mainly purpose. By recounting the experience in an autobiographical act, the readers are given the illusion of authenticity, this being certified by the narration in the first person, the confessional tone, the use of the present tense, etc. Taken as a whole, "most perspectives on authenticity stress the extent to which one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors reflect one's true or core self. Moreover, most perspectives emphasize a nondefensive stance toward evaluative information, openness toward, and trust in, internal experiences, and fulfilling interpersonal relationships" (Kernis et al., 2006, p. 294).

The value of autobiography derives from the act of writing, but also from the authenticity of the evidence presented in accordance with other documents, which describe the same events in the life of the autobiographer, as well as the sincerity of the author, consistent in what he narrates. No matter how *subjective* the "inner" point of view, the autobiographer must conform to the request to tell the truth or at least what he thinks is true. Moreover, he

must convince the reader, through the power of writing, of the authenticity of the events related. His extra-textual commitment to the truth forms the connection point between autobiography and fictional autobiography or what some critics call autobiographical fiction. Here it is necessary to analyze the essential components of the *subjective* self, as they appear in a text, through which one can, furthermore, determine the features of the autobiography as such. In determining both the authenticity and the authority of an autobiography, the *self* substitutes the documentable *facts*; the registration of a conscience replaces the archival evidence. In this regard, Dorrit Cohn differentiates a first-person novel from a third-person novel in "The Distinction of Fiction" (Cohn, 1999). In "Autobiographies of Others: Historical Subjects and Literary Fiction" (Boldrini, 2012), Lucia Boldrini adopts the term *heterobiography* for novels-autobiographies of historical characters, bringing to light the concept of *identity theft*, as a result of merging historical, fictional and authorial identity in the characters of the narrative: "Heterobiography, the autobiography of the other, brings fully into the foreground that the concept of individual identity is an etymological contradiction: if, on the one hand, «identity», meaning sameness, requires at least two things that can be the same, on the other hand «individual» derives from *individuus*, indivisible" (Boldrini, 2012, p. 41).

Accordingly, we could adopt the notion of *fictional autobiography* to cover both scenarios, in which the narrator is a fictional character or a historical character. The fiction of *fictional autobiography* does not impose the commitment to fidelity to the lived act and the ethical obligation to tell the truth, giving freedom to *literariness* and creativity. It is oriented towards a historical context that disguises fictionality and creates a myth of *authenticity* and *truth*. An autobiography, on the other hand, must exclude fiction and aim at the historical context and authorial subjectivity, given that the author's intention, in the realm of authentic autobiography, is to create an effect of the *unquestionability*, "a powerful reality effect that qualifies authenticity as a sense, an impression, perhaps an *emotion*, rather than a fact-based certainty" (Boldrini, 2012, p. 81). However, by appealing to fiction, the historical setting and truth in autobiography can be mystified. From this perspective, autobiography implies the duality of truth and myth, along with objectivity and subjectivity, reality and fiction. Consequently, the autobiography merges the facts with the fiction and, as a result, it "breathes" fictionality, despite its declarative intentions to tell the truth. Given that the notion of *truth* is subjective, ambiguous and illusory, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson consider that the autobiography is characterized by *subjective truth* and not by *fact* (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 10), the truth being reached through subjectivity.

In an attempt to reveal who we are, we prove to be marked by the social constraints of a deterministic environment. It was the research of this social framework that led Sainte-Beuve to conceive of the method of *biographical analysis*, later described as a critical creative direction of portraits, of the

works of a writer and the nature of his genius, using his biography with all its peculiarities (Bratu, 1974, p. 35). Obsolete today, Sainte-Beuve's biographical method is based on the study of biographical data (race, family, education, social background) and historical documents referring to an author, the search for clues that reveal his true background, the oppositions and approaches that highlight his dominant passion and his own way of thinking, the analysis of the individual himself, despite those disguises that the literary attitude or public prejudice interposes (Bratu, 1974, p. 35), the emphasis being placed on the uniqueness of the creator, that authenticity of the "brilliant self" in cohesion with the "biographical self". Similarly, we find ourselves in a constant mode of an evolutionary adaptation, which explains the resizing of our identity in time and in the rewriting of the "self", revealed in autobiographical works, understood as the experience of self and self-experience [Eakin, 1999, p. xi]. This reconfiguration is even more valid in the memorialistic literature of detention. Since "when people are confused as to their self-identity, a serious quest for genuine self can begin. When one is painfully conscious of the danger of abandoning one's self, a cry for authenticity is heard. Indeed, given the negative sense of the notion of authenticity, discussed above, and commonsense psychology, one might dare to put forward the following rule: only one who has deeply experienced the conflict between authentic and inauthentic patterns of life and has frequently struggled to decide between them can become conscious of the importance of being authentic. Only such a person will recognize the vital significance of authentic identity and strive to make it an operative value in his life. We set about looking for our selves when we feel we are actually experiencing the disintegration of our selves and our own identity. The role of these existential predicaments explains the tendency of the philosophers of authenticity to engage in self-questioning and self-analysis; to probe the innermost layers of their selves and their turbulent lives (Golomb, 1995, p. 21).

In his research on autobiography, Paul de Man concludes that, empirically, autobiography is not subject to a generic definition. However, Elizabeth Bruss formulates several principles for defining autobiography as a genre in terms of the *authenticity of the autobiographical text*, warning of an inevitable violation of these essential rules and establishing new conventions: (1) The autobiographer is the source of the subject and structure of the text. He assumes individual responsibility for the creation and systematization of the narrative, and his existence is supposed to be a verifiable fact. (2) It is assumed that the information and events recorded by the autobiographer have taken place and are true. No matter how difficult it may be to verify the events or attitudes recorded, their authenticity is appealed to. (3) Even if what is rendered may be or has been discredited, the autobiographer appeals and insists on the authenticity of the text (Bruss, 1976, pp. 10-11).

The various forms of autobiographical writings explain the dual origin of the autobiographical narrative. The mixture and juxtaposition of the two

seemingly opposite directions, approached by autobiographical writings, gave rise to a variety of forms. On the one hand, we delimit the confessions that have their origin in the depths of the psyche and intensify the subjective presentation of the consciousness or the subconscious. On the other hand, there are the memoirs that give priority to the cultural dimension of life, their approach being to record an individual history, as an integral part of history itself or to reveal how individual life is determined by external forces. The autobiographical narrative is therefore governed by both external and internal forces.

The creation of a set of norms in the autobiographical literature and the inclusion in the memoirs of a rich factual material accentuates the authenticity of this *documentary* literature, as well as the emphasis placed on the subjective projection of the narrative, on the individual, personal and confessional aspect of the autobiographical discourse. The literary term of *documentary prose* is broader than that of *autobiography* or *memoir*, as it encompasses both. However, it is not necessary to distinguish between *documentary* and *biographical* literature, as the memorialist uses the document, both narratives being represented by a rich factual material, with a congruent aesthetic orientation towards authenticity and a natural use of documents, personal memories, authentic testimonies.

As the aim of this study is not to analyze the diversity of autobiographical discourse, we will insist on unconventional narrative structures, memoirs, and writings about the authorial *self*. Personal experience is the only authority and source of belief in the authenticity of the narrative, in which the narrator plays an intermediary role.

"Similarly, the artist seeks his personal authenticity in his entire autonomy – his goal is to be as self-defining as the art-object he creates. As for the audience, its expectation is that through its communication with the work of art, which may be resistant, unpleasant, even hostile, it acquires the authenticity of which the object itself is the model and the artist the personal example" (Trilling, 1972, p. 100).

Since the truth at the heart of some memoirs is of psychological nature, traditional methods of determining authenticity by corroborating the content of the memoir with documented external evidence are not sufficient. Each memoir is authentic insofar as it reflects the author's *self*, the authenticity being ensured not only by the presence of externally verifiable facts, but also by the memorialist's intention to present material connected to the *sincerity* of the facts, protecting the potential reader from possible distortion of information. Thus, in an authentic memoir, we can identify determinations of the real world, referring to space and place, time, characters and their portrayal, to their own names, all having the function of authenticity marks in the text, confirming its veracity, since "to praise a work of literature by calling it sincere is now at best a way of saying that although it needs be

given no aesthetic or intellectual admiration, it was at least conceived in innocence of heart" (Trilling, 1972, p. 6).

Returning to James Olney and the representation of the autobiography through the prism of the consciousness of the individual *self* in written form, we find the author's circumspection towards the opinions of the representatives of structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstructivism, regarding the autobiographical text. Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes are concerned with researching the text as the only plausible object of study. In response to the proclamation of the autobiography's death (mirroring, of course, Roland Barthes's 1968 announcement of the *author's death*), James Olney chose to save the autobiographical text or, more specifically, the *self* from the modern critic (Olney, 1981, p. 22), the study of autobiography lasting only as long as the *subject* exists. In disagreement with James Olney is Philippe Lejeune, who is not concerned with the psychological substratum of autobiography, but rather with the *contractual pact* between the author and the reader (Lejeune, 1989, pp. 3-30), with the *convention of authenticity*, made by this contractual relationship, with the imaginary presence of an autobiographical subject, who animates and gives to the autobiography the presumed meaning and vigor, emphasizing the convention of the autobiographical narrative. The convention of authenticity is revealed in the autobiographer's effort to record the *self* or the *truth* about the self through the autobiographical narrative, that indisputable investment in the capacity of the *truth* of the text, in the relationship of credibility and sincerity between the author and the reader. Therefore, not only the authenticity of the text but also the life, the relationship of the author and the reader with this *authentic life* is outlined, the reader playing the role of an expert in verifying the authenticity of the narration, insofar as the contractual agreement between the author of the text and the author from the text that bears his name is abided by or not. The reader of an autobiographical text must insist on the authenticity and identity of the author of the text and the author from the text, because only here the reader can discover his own authenticity. Insisting upon an individual *self* behind an "autobiographical self" reveals, in fact, the authentic individual *self* of the reader. Philippe Lejeune puts autobiographical criticism in the service of differentiating *authentic* creatures and fictions of the *self*. A different approach is illustrated by Paul de Man (1979), who does not present the existential phenomenological subject behind a text to convey the truth, the truth of an *authentic self* that has lived, reflected, and wrote about his life. For the author, the point of articulation of the autobiography is the aspect (face) or the conferment of a face in writing, the moment of the specular substitution between the subjects of the autobiography, since it "veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause" (de Man, 1979, p. 930). Thus, autobiography consists of the unsuccessful attempt to



find or locate the *self*, i.e., the referent of language. Being absorbed by the desire to identify the authentic substratum of memories, we find that the reality revealed by any autobiographical text is reflected in the author's impulse to confess in writing, despite the uncertainty about the ability of memories to rigorously represent the authentic experience of the authorial self. If there is a belief in an authentic representation of the *self*, it becomes imperative to draw the distinction between memory and fiction, which abolishes the possibility of the existence of a *self* detached from history, from authentic existence. How do we differentiate the *authentic* from the *fictional self*? Inevitably, if the reader is convinced of the authenticity of an individual's self that is not just a product of the author's imagination, but one with a life congruent or heterogeneous with his, then this belief is, in fact, the foundation of an authentic narrative. If the reader is convinced that an author is able to convey the truth and essence of the *self* through autobiographical narration, then he will experience the revelation of de-facing this self through the authenticity of the text. The biographical text, contaminated with fiction, is usually vehemently accused of knowingly misleading its readers. Therefore, the critics rely not only on the text itself, but also on its transcendental evaluation that supports the truth and the proper meaning of the text. Thus, the reader is mandated to meticulously monitor the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, in order to be accurate to his own truth.

In conclusion, we can say that the writer seeks in the literature of confessions a liberation of the *self* through the cathartic function of confession, as "the self expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors; but it did not exist as it now does and as it now is before creating its metaphors. We do not see or touch the self, but we do see and touch its metaphors: and thus we «know» the self, activity or agent, represented in the metaphor and the metaphorizing" (Olney, 1972, pp. 30, 31, 34).

In this context, we also refer to Michel Foucault's relevant project on the truth and act of confession. In opposition to James Olney, Michel Foucault argues that the truth does not provide information and access to the individual who records an autobiography. All the less this truth is the key to an authentic self. Only confession, the act of enunciating the truth, the confession itself, reconstitutes the individual as such. In the context of modernity, truth is not a pre-established immutable mystery, but must be approached in a framework of secularization, which is extracted from within the individual. In this way, only the individual has access to own *genuine* truth. Through confession, the truth is externalized and certified, the individual being able to authenticate, in Michel Foucault's terms, through a discourse of truth [Foucault, 1978, p. 58], regarding the authentic *self*. There is no doubt that the rhetorical procedures used by the author in the act of writing certify the nar-

rator's life experience, facilitating the transposition into writing of an authentic live *self*, after textualization. The authenticity of Alexei Marinat's memoir is reinforced by the writer's aspiration to record, as faithfully as possible, his own experience in the name of a moral pact with the past and the present.

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