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## DECONSTRUCTIONIST THEORY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICALITY: BACKGROUNDS AND PROSPECTS

*The paper develops and supplements literary studies in the field of theory and history of such a diverse literary phenomenon as auto/bio/graphicality. The new scientific ideas about this complex issue have been presented, the methodological gaps in the study of autobiographical prose has been highlighted.*

*A concise comparative analysis of resonant contemporary concepts of parabiography (I. Hassan) and otobiography (J. Derrida) has been proposed. Ihab Hassan, the creator of the influential conceptions of paracriticism and parabiography, masterfully explicate the personal in a critical text. Paracriticism, according to Hassan, has to be such a form of self-improvement for a critic that corresponds to the central idea for postmodernist aesthetics – transgressiveness, and rejects such fixed conventions as a rigid genre affiliation. A distinctive feature of Hassan's works is a new analytical strategy which destroys the barriers between criticism and literature, stimulating the perception of new forms and exposing the endless nuances of meaning.*

*Not only the main lines of modern theoretical thought deserve attention but also the literary works that carry a powerful heuristic potential. The concept of autography is updated in a new way in E. A. Poe's works. The value and meaning of this literary phenomenon within the limits of modernity is outlined. This approach makes it possible to unveil the polemically sharpened connection between artistic practice and literary theory. Fitting Poe's autograph into the modern theoretical matrix makes it clear that the American Romantic was the first to highlight the gap between signifier and signified, a signature and a proper name. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on the functions of the signature and the proper name, Derrida introduces the concept «dynamis» into philosophical and literary usage and discovers the inner discrepancies in autobiographical writing space.*

**Key words:** deconstruction, autobiographicality, signature, proper name, parabiography, otobiography, autography.

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## ДЕКОНСТРУКТИВІСТСЬКА ТЕОРІЯ АВТОБІОГРАФІЗМУ: ПЕРЕДУМОВИ І ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ

*Стаття розвиває та доповнює літературознавчі дослідження в галузі теорії та історії такого різноманітного літературного феномену, як авто/біо/графізм. Викладено нові наукові уявлення про цю складну проблему, висвітлено методологічні прогалини у вивченні автобіографічної прози.*

*Запропоновано стислий порівняльний аналіз резонансних сучасних концепцій парабіографії (І. Гассан) та отобіографії (Ж. Дерріда). Доведено, що Іхаб Гассан, творець впливових концепцій паракритики та парабіографії, майстерно експлікує особисте в критичному тексті. Паракритика, на думку Гассана, має бути такою формою самовдосконалення критика, яка відповідає центральній для постмодерністської естетики ідеї – трансгресивності, і відкидає такі усталені умовності, як жорстка жанрова приналежність. Відмінною рисою творчості Гассана є нова аналітична стратегія, яка руйнує бар'єри між критикою та літературою, стимулюючи сприйняття нових форм і оголюючи нескінченні нюанси смислу.*

*Увагу приділено не лише основним напрямкам сучасної теоретичної думки, а й літературним творам, що несуть у собі потужний евристичний потенціал. У творчості Е. А. По по-новому актуалізується поняття автографії. Окреслено цінність і значення цього літературного явища в межах сучасності. Такий підхід дає змогу розкрити поемічно загострений зв'язок художньої практики з теорією літератури. Вписування автографа По в сучасну теоретичну матрицю дає зрозуміти, що американський романтик був першим, хто висвітлив розрив між означальним і означуваним, підписом і власним іменем. В середині минулого століття, зосереджуючись на*

функціях підпису та власного імені, Дєрріда вводить у філософський і літературний обіг поняття «дунатіс» і виявляє внутрішні розбіжності в автобіографічному просторі письма.

**Ключові слова:** деконструкція, автобіографізм, підпис, власне ім'я, парабіографія, отобіографія, автографія.

**Introduction. Actuality of the Subject.** The crisis of modern worldview, which emerged in the middle of the last century, was succinctly defined by J.-F. Lyotard as «incredulity toward metanarratives» (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). This crisis highlighted the problem of identity as the centre of contemporary culture and became the impetus for the autobiographical turn in literary theory. The new autobiographical writing, which in the era of postmodernism receives different definitions (autography, autofiction, parabiography, I-text and so on), is associated with the artistic transformation of the level of reality inherent in classical autobiography. The bitmap of autobiographical details, the textualization of author's life reality, the multi-channel artistic interference of life and literary work become the main principle of autobiographicality of the late 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The leading theorists and critics are aware of the complexity of the analytical task to unveil and grasp Proteus's nature of contemporary autobiographical writing; therefore, contradictions and difficulties find expression in their works.

**Goal.** The article proposes a concise comparative analysis of resonant ideas embodied in the concepts of parabiography (I. Hassan) and otobiography (J. Derrida). It is noteworthy that not only the main lines of modern theoretical thought deserve attention to show a fundamentally different dimension of ambiguous literary texts but also the lesser known literary works that carry a powerful heuristic energy, manifested at the beginning of the new millennium. The concept of autography is updated in a new way in E. A. Poe's works, the existence of this phenomenon within the limits of modernity is outlined. This approach makes it possible to highlight the polemically sharpened connection between artistic practice and literary theory.

**Analysis of research.** In recent decades, autobiography and autobiographicality has been in the centre of attention as foreign (F. Lejeune, V. Colonna, M. Sprinker, W. C. Spengemann, S. Smith, A. E. Stone, P. L. Jay, A. G. Loureiro, A. Huges and others) as Ukrainian researchers (V. Fesenko, V. Lipina, N. Vysotska, Y. Pavlenko). It is obvious that the views of traditionalist researchers on this issue are increasingly being challenged. The theory of deconstruction inspires researchers of modern autobiographical prose and shifts the focus from the categories of genre, reality, truth to the elements of language, text, meaning, a name and a signature.

**Discussion.** Traditional for the classical autobiography look into the past from present, which is perceived as a reference point for retrospection, is being destroyed. Instead of the image of a noble old man writing a spiritual testament to his descendants and quietly reflecting on what he has experienced, the reader sees a bizarre combination of authorial selves which are writing, thinking, observing, distancing. The analysis of new forms for conversion of personal experience into the artistic text constitutes the core of new approaches to understanding such complex phenomena as autobiography and autobiographicality.

The principle of distancing, according to researchers, is a distinctive feature of this kind of writing. The artistic nature of this distancing is poorly understood. However, this quality of modern literature is clearly manifested in the autobiographical works of J. Barth, S. Dixon, J. Heller. In Heller's testamentary novel *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man* (2000) this distancing is realized as «deconstruction of retrospection» – a technique that is also used by such post-modernist writers as J. Barth, S. Dixon, R. Sukenick, R. Federman.

R. Barthes, one of the main destroyers of the category of Subject, creates a text that can be defined as an «anti-autobiography». The essence of this anti-form lies in the transformation of deeply entrenched in the canonical autobiographical text principles of self-disclosure. Barthes-theorist sees his goal not in registering the existing techniques, but in substantiating and implementing the theoretical task: «to empty a sign and infinitely to postpone its object so as to challenge, in a radical fashion, the age-old aesthetic of representation» (Barthes, 1969: 148). In other words, the analogy between the signifier and the signified is destroyed, the world of the text correlates with itself rather than with the reality of the external world.

It is noteworthy that the transformations affected the very term «autobiography» which significant elements auto/bio/graphy either disappeared (*autography* E. A. Poe), or were replaced (*otobiography*: J. Derrida, *parabiography*: I. Hassan, *autofiction*: S. Dubrovsky, *sym/bio/graphy*: C. Rivera-Fuentes, *auto/biografiction*: M. Saunders, *autogynography*: D. Stanton). These new sophisticated terms-conceptions define new artistic forms and strategies for self-revelation. These changes illustrate suavely L. A. Renza's thesis that «theories of autobiography themselves tend to persist or endure as self-productive fictions» (Renza, 1988: 274). At the same time

new principles of autobiographical writing have been declared, where recreating the subject in all entanglement and alterity is to be the paramount importance.

F. Jameson, the prominent theoretician of postmodernism wrote about the new image of literature of the second half of the 20th century in *Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture* (1979) and *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). These works shed light to the controversies of autobiographical narratives which are also affected by “the corrosive force of reification” (Jameson, 1991: 96). As a result, fixed forms have been replaced by “the unclassifiable Livre” which “ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments” (Jameson, 1979: 136) and, after all, “reference and reality disappear altogether, and even meaning – the signified – is problematized” (Jameson, 1991: 96). In postmodern art, according to Jameson, natural is worse than artificial and formal features are no longer characteristics and elements of a specific form, but only signs and traces of old forms, so called “meta-generic or omnibus forms” (Jameson, 1979: 136). The negative side of such transformations is seen in disappearing of monumental works of the modernist type, which is a consequence of deepening the reification process. It means that abstract representations are fixed in the language and perceived as real-life phenomena. The consciousness of the individual splits and loses integrity which is reflected in an autobiographical text.

However, the very process of selecting certain forms reveals a new nature of subjectivity, which manifests itself in a special kind of linguistic adventure of the author. Therefore, the referent, lamented by Jameson, does not disappear. It manifests itself in a different way. Each author creates an individual figurative projection of the authorial self in the text. Thus, the specificity of autobiographicality in Joseph Heller’s novel *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man* (2001) cannot be reduced either to the external similarity of the author and the hero or to the coincidence of the name in the text and on the cover and so on. The writer creates the acronym *Pota* (Portrait of an Artist) to incarnate himself in this artistic projection. In this portrait, different levels of artistic and living reality, clothed in a deliberately parodied form of different genres – biography, autobiography, diary, self-portrait, psychological novel – coexist concurrently. The connective tissue for these heterogeneous elements is auto-reflection of a postmodernist writer, which absorbs various forms and artistic techniques. Such artistic devices as a mismatch of names, transitions from the first to the third person in the process of narration, the demonstration of the simultaneous presence of the author in the text and

his/her elimination are inherent in contemporary autobiographical fiction or non-fiction.

Ihab Hassan, the creator of the influential conceptions of paracriticism and parabiography, masterfully explicate the personal in a critical text. Paracriticism, according to Hassan, has to be such a form of self-improvement for a critic that corresponds to the central idea for postmodernist aesthetics – transgressiveness, and rejects such fixed conventions as a rigid genre affiliation. A distinctive feature of Hassan’s works is a new analytical strategy which destroys the barriers between criticism and literature, stimulating the perception of new forms and exposing the endless nuances of meaning.

Parabiography is also considered by Hassan as a form of artistic polemics with the existing techniques of self-disclosure. The term parabiography, in which the Greek prefix *para* indicates the similarity of phenomena (in this case, a semblance of autobiography), was introduced by Hassan in 1979. The essence of this new form is in a dialogue of genres and points of view and it is not an ordinary discourse, but a “human cacophony of critical spheres” (Hassan, 1984: 422). The theorist defines desire (desiring), reading (reading) and action (acting) as critical areas. He singles out these three “fragments” of autobiography among the endless variety of types of critical experience, explaining such a step by the need to protect himself from the dangers of “direct” autobiographicality.

The impossibility of a “direct” autobiography, according to Hassan, lies in the absence of the answer to the questions: “how can a life come alive to itself, without winding in the infinite folds of its own hermeneutic circle? How can self apprehend itself in the very act of its flight from death?” (Hassan, 1984: 422). In search of an answer, Hassan turns his *I*, which he defines as “the critical self”, into the object for the analysis. The definition “critical self” has a special meaning in this case: it is not about the chronicle of life, but about introspection, self-understanding and self-making.

In the essay *Parabiography: Types of Critical Experience* (1984), the researcher, referring to the works of Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Barthes, Deleuze, initiates the process of elicitation of truth, which gradually turns into verbal actualization of thought. This approach is a reference to the works by J. Derrida.

Derrida in his famous essay *Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name* (1984) distinguishes between the concepts of a proper name and a signature. In the concept of the French theorist, the name and signature are

not identical, their functions are different. A proper name as a signifier is not identical with the signified, in this case, the identity of the author. It is a “false name” (Derrida, 1985:8), since it cannot reflect all characteristics of the subject it represents. In addition, a proper name can be reproduced, replicated. In this context, it acquires the features of a “floating signifier”. Being included in the associative game of signifiers, the name avoids direct signification, i.e. binding to a real subject. It acts as a “trace”. Within the framework of the concept of writing proposed by Derrida, “trace” is the spatial and temporal realization of *différance* – “ontological double genitive”, while “writing, passion of the origin, must also be understood through the subjunctive genitive” (Derrida, 1978: xvii, 296). This implies the simultaneous coexistence of opposites within the process of differentiation, i.e. the existence of both the real author and the other one, created in the word. Derrida believes that the movement of the author under masks, under other names, is intended to undermine our theoretical conviction regarding authentication. The author, according to this hypothesis, cognizes himself through the “I-double”. He reads his *I* through the text he created. In this case, the function of the signature is to give autobiography the meaning of a document, an authoritative source, to create a credible textual subject that exists within the autobiographical discourse.

Focusing on the problems of the signature and the proper name, Derrida introduces the concept “*dynamis*” into philosophical and literary usage. This term reflects the fluid nature of the edge between the author and work, which is “not an invisible or indivisible trait lying between the enclosure of philosophemes, on the one hand, and the life of an author already identifiable behind the name, on the other” (Derrida, 1984:8). The theorist thinks of this edge as a space where the biological, biographical, the *autos* of the autobiographical, thanatological and thanatographical intersect. At this intersection, new bundles of meanings arise, in which strict logical argumentation loses its power and theatrical violation of the laws of genre and academicism comes to the fore. The attention of writers and critics is shifted from the *fact* to the problem of writing and representation.

It should be noted that the difference between the functions of a name and a signature was noticed by E. A. Poe long before the issue was raised by the French poststructuralists. Using modern terminology tools, I can say that Poe was the first to highlight the gap between the signified – a real person and a signifier, id est a signature, placing these two interrelated elements on the border between fiction and reality. In this context, Poe’s *autograph*

*articles* have not been studied by either domestic or foreign science. Although, a recent study notes that “with *Autography* (1836), Poe merged fiction with criticism” (Semtner, 2018: 57), researchers have seen in the genre invented by Edgar Poe predominantly historical material, which expands the understanding of the aesthetic tastes and social mores of that time and enriches the writer’s biography with new facts – facts, but not artistic forms.

Obviously, the term “autograph” is not new. However, it is a landmark in the space of artistic and theoretical thought, which correlates with modern trends in literature and criticism. Namely, new forms of auto(bio)graphical writing, which becomes a sphere of radical experimentation and, at the end of the 20th century, declares itself in new genres of “auto(bio)graphical fantasies” by S. Doubrovsky, A. Robbe-Grillet, R. Barthes, J. Barth, S. Dixon and others, reduce or completely remove ontologically and semantically significant element “bio” from their multidimensional structure. This indicates a fundamental break with the tradition of classical autobiography.

Edgar Allan Poe, a central figure in American Romanticism, first coined the term autography in the early 1840s. During this period, Poe published in various magazines (The Southern Literary Messenger, Graham’s Magazine) a series of letters – “epistolary fabrications”, which were invented by himself and certified by facsimile or fictitious autographs of his contemporaries. Poe called this new genre “autography”, deliberately emphasizing the fictitiousness of the messages. The specificity of the genre lies in the absence of eventful lines of the plot. The new sujet is an analytical journey to the depths of the inner life of a particular person through the study of his/her written “trace” – the autograph (Poe, 1841: 224).

The miniatures created by Poe formed not only a portrait of an entire era, but, like a photographic negative, retained the features of their creator. The energy of the author’s response to life and art was embodied in the word. The writer did not set the task to tell about himself. And yet, the personal in all its versatility and shades colored the thought turned outward. This was expressed in that special combination of states and intonations that Poe was looking for in himself. This synthesis of internal and external creates the desired effect, which the writer reflects on in his famous essay *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846). He notes that the desired effect is achieved not under the influence of “ecstatic intuition”, but as a result of an analytically verified combination of aesthetically significant moments, such as volume, unity of impression, intonation,

“suggestiveness” and “under-current, however indefinite meaning” (Poe, 2009: 70).

This would be taken up later by the modernists. M. Proust, according to the observations of W. Benjamin, revealed to us, with a new artistic power, the value of analysis in the reconstruction of the experienced. The Proustian study of the nature of memories, the scientist believes, the identification of its patterns was reflected in the volume of the work, and mystification and thoroughness were harmoniously combined in Proust’s novels in order not only to empty “the dummy, his self, at one stroke”, but steadily and exquisitely create *the image* that “carefully heralded and securely supported, it bears a fragile, precious reality” (Benjamin, 2005: 240).

There is no mention of Poe’s experiments in connection with the phenomenon of autography in the theoretical works under consideration, but I propose to introduce this material to comprehend the processes that led to the autobiographical turn in literature and theory. Similarly to many other artistic innovations of Edgar Allan Poe – the founder of science fiction, detective and thriller, autography contains heuristic energy, the potential of which will be discovered much later – in the middle of the twentieth century, in

the process of analyzing the nature of the sign, name and signature.

**Conclusion.** The intention of the text is not limited to the intention of the author – this is the key thesis of postmodernism, poststructuralism and deconstruction that has a well-recognized source in the New Criticism. The famous work by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946) refers us to this issue. Thus, the thesis about the rejection of traditional methods of reading and understanding the text for the sake of penetrating the essence of autobiographicality takes on particular relevance in the new historical and literary situation of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

It is obvious that the line between language and reality becomes thinner, and the direct experience of the writer correlates with the depicted one due to a sophisticated artistic form. On the threshold of a new millennium, theorists have questioned the traditional concept of the autobiographical genre. The conventional status of the subject in literature was undermined, the unity of the author, narrator and character was called into question. The idea of “truth” and credibility was displaced by “openness”, creative freedom and inexhaustibility as literary as critical text.

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