

# 1. Autobiography as a research field

*Telling one's own life story can be considered the most significant, meaningful task undertaken by anyone and determines one's sense of identity, their image of the world and of other people. At the same time, it has a social meaning because it is associated with understanding one's place in the social world, with planning activities and designing the course of events.<sup>20</sup>*

In a broad sense, autobiography is the story of one's own life, which has an interpretive dimension in addition to the factual one. This dimension is the effect of reflecting on one's life by relating autobiographical experiences to one's knowledge and self-knowledge. This is how biographical work comes to fruition.

## 1.1. An attempt at a definition

The term “autobiography” comes from Greek and consists of three elements: *autós*, *bíos* and *gráphō*, which mean, respectively, the writing self, life/experience and writing.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it is literally a description of one's life. The following definition can contribute to the discussion on what an autobiography is:

[Autobiography is] one's own full or partial life story; a statement about oneself, i.e., one whose subject matter is the fate, trials, thoughts and lived

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<sup>20</sup> A. Giza, *Życie jako opowieść. Analiza materiałów autobiograficznych w perspektywie socjologii wiedzy*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1991, p. 108 [translator's note: all translations from Polish are mine (Helena Marzec-Gołąb)].

<sup>21</sup> M. Głowiński et al. (eds.), *Podręczny słownik terminów literackich*, Open, Warszawa 1999, p. 32.

experiences of an individual presented by that person themselves in greater or lesser connection with external reality.<sup>22</sup>

There are several important threads in this definition: the question of authorship (one's own), the scope (full or partial life story), the object of study (fate, trials, thoughts and lived experiences) and the relationship to external reality. In addition, the term "statement" appears, indicating that autobiography does not have to be exclusively in written form; it may just as well be an oral narrative. All these elements—the question of authorship, the scope of autobiography, etc.—have been the subject of in-depth, often critical, analysis and discussion in both the humanities and social sciences.

However, the multiplicity of theoretical positions (philosophical, literary, anthropological, historical, psychological, sociological, pedagogical, etc.) and the diversity of autobiographical forms (text, oral story, graphic/visual presentation, etc.) compel me to outline a rather general framework and present only a few selected ways of understanding and interpreting the concept of autobiography. The selection is subjective and deliberate, dictated by my reading of autobiographical texts by women and guided by the idea of creating a fairly broad horizon of looking at the issue of my interest. I want to show that autobiography is not only a fascinating subject of cognitive study in various scientific disciplines, but also that it is impossible nowadays to think about autobiography without taking into account the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives. As I will show below, it is an area of research in which different perspectives, both epistemological and methodological, intersect. It is thus difficult to discuss it without going beyond the epistemologically narrow framework of a single discipline of science.

I will begin by citing the concepts developed by scholars who specialize in literary criticism and literary history, among others.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> D. Szajnert, s.v. Autobiografia [in:] *Słownik rodzajów i gatunków literackich*, G. Gazda, S. Tyniecka-Makowska (eds.), Universitas, Kraków 2006, p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> It is not my goal to present autobiographical theories in historical terms. Nor am I trying to confirm or refute the hypothesis that theories about autobiography emerged first in the context of literary research. I do not take up this thread at all.

These concepts primarily take as their object of analysis autobiographies published in the form of books, written by well-known public figures who are often associated with literature or, more broadly, with the arts. Many fundamental questions have been articulated in the field of literary studies, including those that tackle the status of the autobiography, which remains unclear to this day. For some, autobiography is a literary genre and for others, a type of reading.<sup>24</sup> The main point of disagreement is the problem of *referentiality*.

Roman Zimand sees referentiality as the basic criterion for defining autobiographical texts.<sup>25</sup> The Polish researcher assumes that autobiography is a non-fiction text, which distinguishes it from literary fiction, represented mainly by the novel.<sup>26</sup> Zimand classifies autobiography as belonging to personal document literature, a rather broad area of autobiographical writing that also includes journals, diaries, memoirs and letters.<sup>27</sup> The two fundamental poles of the literature of the personal document are the world of writing about oneself directly and the world of eyewitness testimony. These poles are assigned certain writing approaches: the confessional approach and the approach of a witness who gives an account not so much of oneself as of the observable world. To these autobiographical approaches distinguished by Zimand, Małgorzata Czermińska adds a third one, the challenge approach, thus creating the autobiographical triangle. This approach provides a space for the reader to engage—a place for some kind of “you.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In a 1968 article, Stephen A. Shapiro called autobiography “the dark continent of literature.” See S. A. Shapiro, *The Dark Continent of Literature. Autobiography*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 1968, 5(4), pp. 421–454.

<sup>25</sup> R. Zimand, *O literaturze dokumentu osobistego w ogóle a o diarystyce w szczególności* [in:] idem, *Diarysta Stefan Ż.*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1990, pp. 32ff.

<sup>26</sup> Non-fiction prose consists of three categories: non-fiction, personal document literature and essay.

<sup>27</sup> The essential feature of personal document literature is “the singular: primarily the first person thereof, joined by the second in letters.” R. Zimand, *Diarysta...*, p. 16. The term “personal document” itself was borrowed from sociology. More on this in the following section of the chapter.

<sup>28</sup> M. Czermińska, *The Autobiographical Triangle. Witness, Confession, Challenge*, transl. by J. Ward, Peter Lang, Berlin 2019, pp. 24–26.

The presence and active role of the reader is a theme that is explicitly addressed in post-structural theories.

With the spread of post-structuralism in the 1970s, critical methodology became increasingly important. The concepts of language as a neutral medium and the text as a reflection of “real” experience became objects of critique. These concepts assume that the subject, as well as the reality depicted in the (autobiographical) text, are not *reflections* of extra-textual reality but are *constructions* of it. The famous statements of Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault about the “death of the author” even proclaim the end of authorial intention.<sup>29</sup> According to Barthes, the author of the text is not the sole interpreter or “owner” of the text, for in the act of reading, it is the reader who gives meaning to the work and in turn becomes the creator of the text.<sup>30</sup> Foucault, meanwhile, refers to the category of discourse: “In short, it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse.”<sup>31</sup>

The theme of the subject as solely a metaphor for the actual author is also taken up by Paul de Man, who argues that both the text itself and the writing subject are created. Another problem, however, is the impossibility of enclosing autobiography in a specific genre framework because autobiographical texts tend to move seamlessly into other types of speech:

Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes

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<sup>29</sup> The author as an institution, not a person who gives themselves the right to be an authority on the reading of the text.

<sup>30</sup> R. Barthes, *The Death of the Author* [in:] idem, *Image, Music, Text*, essays selected and transl. by S. Heath, Fontana Press, London 1977, pp. 142–148.

<sup>31</sup> M. Foucault, *What Is an Author?* [in:] idem, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. by J. D. Faubion, transl. by R. Hurley et al., (*Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, Vol. 2), The New Press, New York 1998, p. 221.

the subject. This specular structure is interiorized in a text in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding, but this merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be by someone and assumed to be understandable to the extent that this is the case. Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical.<sup>32</sup>

A position polemical to de Man's is represented by Philippe Lejeune, who treats autobiography as a supra-genre category belonging to non-fiction prose.<sup>33</sup> According to him,

Autobiographies are not objects of aesthetic consumption, but social means of interpersonal understanding. This understanding has several dimensions: ethical, emotional, referential. The autobiography was created to pass on universal values, sensitivity to the world, unknown experiences – and this within the framework of personal relations, perceived as authentic, non-fictional.<sup>34</sup>

The French researcher offers a definition of what autobiography is, referring to the identity of the author: “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.”<sup>35</sup> He lists four conditions of autobiography, namely: the form of language (retrospective story in prose), the subject (individual life or the story of a personality), the situation of the author (the author

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<sup>32</sup> P. de Man, *Autobiography as De-facement*, *Comparative Literature*, 1979, 94(5), pp. 921–922.

<sup>33</sup> In addition to the study of published autobiographies (including the diary of Anne Frank), Lejeune is involved in the analysis of autobiographies and diaries that were never published and exist in their original versions. He is also the founder of the French Association for Autobiography and Autobiographical Heritage (Association pour l'autobiographie et le patrimoine autobiographique), <http://autobiographie.sitapa.org/>.

<sup>34</sup> P. Lejeune, *Czy można zdefiniować autobiografię?*, trans. R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska [in:] P. Lejeune, *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii*, ed. R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska, Universitas, Kraków 2001, p. 18 (English translation after: E. Rybicka, *The Anthropological and Communicative Aspects of Epistolographic Discourse*, *Literature and Society*, 2016, 2, p. 55).

<sup>35</sup> P. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. and with a foreword by P. J. Eakin, transl. by K. Leary, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989, p. 4.

and the narrator are identical) and the position of the narrator (the narrator and the principal character are identical). The *sine qua non* of autobiography, according to Lejeune, is the unity of author, narrator and protagonist. It is this unity that establishes a contract between the author and the reader, by virtue of which the reader accepts the accounts as true, without questioning their authenticity.<sup>36</sup> Lejeune calls this agreement an autobiographical pact.

According to Lejeune, autobiography can still be a reference work. The reference pact is a kind of promise the author makes to the reader rather than a *sine qua non* condition. The author promises to tell the truth, but this does not mean that everything the reader finds in the autobiography is consistent with the actual experiences of the writer. In other words, an autobiographer is not someone who tells the truth about their life, but someone who creatively expresses it. In Lejeune's terms, autobiography is more a reconstruction of life than a re-creation of it. It is supposed to provide information about extra-textual reality, the goal being *similarity* to the truth, not *probability*. Autobiographical truth is nothing more than a certain convention of writing and reading, whereas autobiography in this context is "a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing; it is a historically variable contractual effect."<sup>37</sup>

According to Paweł Rodak, who uses the analysis of diaries as an example, truth in autobiographical texts is not a category in opposition to lies and falsehoods or creation. In this type of texts, we are dealing not with the truth of the text, but with the truth of the person's life.<sup>38</sup> The author is present in the text through what is written and through what is not written.<sup>39</sup> Referring to Lejeune, Małgorzata

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<sup>36</sup> "The reader might be able to quibble over resemblance, but never over identity." Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> P. Rodak, Prawda w dzienniku osobistym, *Teksty Drugie*, 2009, 4, p. 25. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from [http://rcin.org.pl/Content/50234/WA248\\_66374\\_P-I-2524\\_rodak-prawda.pdf](http://rcin.org.pl/Content/50234/WA248_66374_P-I-2524_rodak-prawda.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 34. Rodak lists three types of truth in a diary: "... the truth of events (historical truth), the truth of experience (psychological truth, the realm of bodily, emotional, intellectual experience) and the truth of reality (metaphysical or transcendent truth)."

Czermińska proposes to look at the category of truth in autobiographical texts as having "... a minimum of recognizable similarity or dissimilarity characterized by authenticity."<sup>40</sup> Authenticity refers to extra-textual reality through dissimilarity, veiling, phantasm and play. For Czermińska, "... what is fundamental is the mere recognition of similarity, not its detailed verification. In today's reading of writings containing an element of autobiography, the focus has shifted elsewhere: the question of veracity has been replaced by the question of meaning."<sup>41</sup>

A somewhat polemical view toward Lejeune's autobiographical pact is presented by Georges Gusdorf, a French philosopher and historian.<sup>42</sup> In his view, autobiography exists beyond truth and falsehood. Gusdorf sees autobiography as a document of a life, and at the same time a work of art.

Every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been. What is in question is a sort of reevaluation of individual destiny; the author, who is at the same time the hero of the tale, wants to elucidate his past in order to draw out the structure of his being in time.<sup>43</sup>

According to Gusdorf, in autobiography, the strictly literary and ultimately anthropological function is more important than the historical one. Its privilege lies in the fact that it reveals the "effort of a creator to give the meaning of his own mythic tale."<sup>44</sup> Talking about oneself becomes a way of searching for oneself, an act of "personal justification."<sup>45</sup> Autobiography is not a simple summary of the past, but "... a kind

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<sup>40</sup> M. Czermińska, Postawa autobiograficzna [in:] *Studia o narracji*, J. Błoński, S. Jaworski, J. Sławiński (eds.), Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1982, p. 226.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>42</sup> G. Gusdorf, *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, transl. by J. Olney [in:] *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical*, J. Olney (ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton 1980, pp. 28–48.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

of apologetics or theodicy of the individual being.”<sup>46</sup> The difficulty, GUSDORF claims, is that the autobiography is lived and acted out before it is written. Its “original sin,” he says, lies in logical coherence and rationalization: “The narrative is conscious, and since the narrator’s consciousness directs the narrative, it seems to him incontestable that it has also directed his life.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, GUSDORF proposes seeing autobiography as a second reading of experience, truer than the first one, because “it adds to experience itself consciousness of it.”<sup>48</sup>

By enabling the work of becoming aware of one’s own experiences, autobiography becomes one of the tools for learning about oneself. According to CZERMIŃSKA, the question “Who am I?” includes a communicative aspect in addition to the sense of identity and the dimension of time.<sup>49</sup> It is directed at someone. The autobiographer addresses this question primarily to themselves, but, according to CZERMIŃSKA, they do not write only for themselves.<sup>50</sup> One of the purposes of creating a story about oneself is to communicate—to also *meet* the reader.

The outlined views and concepts developed within the humanistic discourse focused primarily on two questions. First, can autobiography be treated as a reliable description of real life? That is, does it allow us access to real experiences? Or conversely, should it be treated in terms of creation and text? The second question concerns the genre affiliation of autobiography. Does autobiography constitute a separate (literary) genre, and does it belong to literature at all? Or perhaps the assumption of the referential nature of autobiography does not contradict the assumption that writing autobiography is also sometimes an act of creation, of imagination. LOUIS A. RENZA proposes to define autobiography as a unique phenomenon, one that is neither fiction nor non-fiction, nor a mixture of the two.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> M. CZERMIŃSKA, O autobiografii i autobiograficzności [in:] *Autobiografia*, M. CZERMIŃSKA (ed.), Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, Gdańsk 2009, pp. 10–11.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>51</sup> L. A. RENZA, The Veto of the Imagination. A Theory of Autobiography, *New Literary History*, 1977, 9(1), pp. 1–26.



In the 1970s, James Olney formulated the theory of autobiography that expanded the concept itself beyond genre and historical boundaries. “A theology, a philosophy, a physics or a metaphysics—properly seen, these are all autobiography recorded in other characters and other symbols.”<sup>52</sup> Olney argues that autobiography is a form of self-knowledge and that there is no significant difference between literature and other forms of expression. In this sense, autobiography is not so much a record of events as an individual way of organizing the world, and the only common feature of all autobiographies is experiencing oneself as a projection of our vision of the world.<sup>53</sup>

The experiences of the individual and the subjective story of their life constitute the value of autobiographical texts in the social sciences, where a kind of ennoblement has been given to many unpublished texts authored by people not professionally connected with literature. Analyzing the specifics of Polish autobiographical research, Ewa Kos writes:

In considering the usefulness of autobiography in social research, attention has been paid to the possibility of analyzing the material in terms of various manifestations of social life, such as beliefs, aspirations, inclinations, likes, dislikes, personal ideals, complexes, family and social relationships, ties, class and national prejudices, and especially social learning, development and formation of the individual.<sup>54</sup>

In the social sciences, personal documents came into their own as an object of study with the publication of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, a five-volume work.<sup>55</sup> Florian Znaniecki used for his research thousands of letters written by Polish emigrants, including the diary of Władysław Wiśniewski, a baker’s apprentice from Konin

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<sup>52</sup> J. Olney, *Metaphors of Self. The Meaning of Autobiography*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1972, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> E. Kos, Specyfika polskich badań autobiograficznych. Geneza i rozwój do lat 70. XX w., *Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja*, 2009, 3(47), p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> W. I. Thomas, F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America. Monograph of an Immigrant Group*, Vol. 1: *Primary-Group Organization*, R. G. Badger, The Gorham Press, Boston 1918. Subsequent volumes were published between 1918 and 1924.

and a globetrotter who emigrated to the United States of America at the beginning of the 20th century to earn his bread.

Znaniecki treated personal documents as written statements which, while reporting the participation of the writer in a certain social situation, also contain the author's personal view of these situations, a description of events that took place and a description of the author's behavior.<sup>56</sup> He saw in autobiographical documents the humanistic coefficient, i.e., the meaning that an individual gives to things and situations, interpreting the social reality they experience and in which they act.<sup>57</sup> As can be read in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, "... personal life-records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material."<sup>58</sup>

The subjective story of a life contained in personal documents is, on the one hand, a source of information, and on the other hand, a testimony to a state of consciousness. Personal records are thus "a unique material that gives insight into psychic life, a pathway to access consciousness, a record of subjective experiences and the connection of personal experiences with those of other people."<sup>59</sup>

It is difficult today to determine who first used the term "personal documents." Ewa Kos writes that it was probably not Znaniecki, but his student, Jan Szczepański, who in 1951 wrote a text entitled *Metoda dokumentów osobistych (autobiograficznych)* [The Method of Personal (Autobiographical) Documents].<sup>60</sup> Jacek Leoński adds that "due

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<sup>56</sup> J. Szczepański, *Odmiany czasu teraźniejszego*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1973, p. 624.

<sup>57</sup> On the humanistic coefficient, see F. Znaniecki, *Współczynnik humanistyczny*, introd. and selection of texts by A. Przystalski, J. Włodarek, Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, Poznań 2011, pp. 177–192.

<sup>58</sup> W. I. Thomas, F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America. Monograph of an Immigrant Group*, Vol. 3: *Life Record of an Immigrant*, R. G. Badger, The Gorham Press, Boston 1918, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> D. Lalak, *Życie jako biografia. Podejście biograficzne w perspektywie pedagogicznej*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie "Żak", Warszawa 2010, p. 115.

<sup>60</sup> E. Kos, *Specyfika...* In turn, as Małgorzata Szpakowska notes, Znaniecki wrote about "human documents," and Chałasiński used the term "autobiographical statements." See M. Szpakowska, *Listy w sprawach osobistych na łamach prasy*, *Napis*, 2003, 9, pp. 229–236. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from [http://rcin.org.pl/Content/56620/WA248\\_68773\\_P-1-2795\\_szpakowska-listy.pdf](http://rcin.org.pl/Content/56620/WA248_68773_P-1-2795_szpakowska-listy.pdf).