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Trends in Autobiography Theory and Writing

Nurty w teorii i piśmiennictwie autobiograficznym

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Słowa kluczowe
autobiografia, genre, samo-reprezentacja; pisanie życia

Abstract
This paper offers a survey of autobiography theory and writing in the Western tradition; and seeks to contribute to autobiography studies, by bringing together a variety of autobiographical writings and methods to present an over-reaching understanding of autobiography in theory and practice. It explains different approaches to autobiography: historical, terminological and critical. It is divided into five main sections which deal with the following: the development of autobiographical writing; the emergence of autobiography theorising; generic boundaries and intersections; hybrid genres; and current trends. The paper marks the recent theoretical shifts in autobiography studies, and considers the future of both autobiography and life-writing in terms of genre and critical inquiry.

Abstrakt
Praca prezentuje przegląd teorii i piśmiennictwa autobiograficznego w tradycji zachodniej. Celem pracy jest wniesienie wkładu do studiów autobiograficznych, przytaczając i połączając różne teksty oraz metody autobiograficzne ku ogólnemu zrozumieniu autobiografii w teorii i praktyce. Praca wyjaśnia różne podejścia naukowe do autobiografii: historyczne, terminologiczne i krytyczne. Artykuł jest podzielony na pięć głównych części, które zajmują się następującymi zagadnieniami: rozwój piśmiennictwa autobiograficznego; powstanie teoretyzowania autobiografii; granice oraz skrzyżowania *genre*; hybrydowe gatunki autobiograficzne; obecne prądy w teorii i praktyce.

Hala Kamal

Trends in Autobiography Theory and Writing

Autobiographical writings have for long occupied a position between history and literature in Western humanities, with emerging critical debates about identity, self-expression and self-representation. This paper offers a survey of autobiography theory and writing in the Western tradition, bringing together historical and critical perspectives on autobiography theory and writing, highlighting the most recent developments in autobiography theorising. The study highlights the generic differences and intersections between autobiography, biography and fiction, while at the same time explaining the sub-genres that divert from traditional autobiography; and answers questions about different approaches to autobiography: the historical, the terminological and the critical. It is, accordingly, divided into five main sections. The first section presents the rise and development of autobiographical writing in the European literary tradition, followed by section two which addresses the emergence of autobiography theorising. In the third section, I deal with issues related to terminology and generic boundaries through an exploration of autobiography in relation to other similar genres and subgenres such as memoir, diaries and letters, as well as recent shifts of autobiography to life-writing. I then move to a discussion of two hybrid genres, combining elements of both autobiography and fiction: the autobiographical novel and autofiction. In the last section I trace the most prominent current trends in autobiographical writing and theorising, with particular focus on feminist autobiography, postcolonial autobiography, and Arab autobiography. The paper, thus, seeks to contribute to autobiography studies (the space of critical inquiry into autobiographical cross-generic modes of expression and theorising), by bringing together historical and critical approaches to present an over-reaching understanding of autobiography in theory and practice.

The Development of Autobiographical Writing

The earliest autobiographical writings can be traced back to the personal accounts engraved on the walls of ancient Egyptian temples as well as the tablets and documents dating back to the ancient Greek and Roman civilisations[1]. Autobiography theory considers *The Confessions of St. Augustine*

[1] For more on the ancient origins of autobiographical writing, see for example: Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, p. 51ff; and Estelle Jelinek, *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography*, pp. 11ff.

(circa 398–400 A.D.) an early precursor of autobiography as a distinct literary genre[2]. According to Roy Pascal, St. Augustine's *Confessions* mark a major development in personal writing influenced by the Christian tradition of confession, and a representation of a personal spiritual journey, thus considering this text the most significant complete autobiography produced in medieval Europe[3]. Similarly, Linda Anderson acknowledges the pioneer status of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, but sees its main contribution as a model of autobiographical writing hailed for its literary form and spiritual content as an expression of an exceptional achievement, instead of its potential function as a mode of self-exploration and personal historiography[4].

Feminist autobiography critics have pointed out that many medieval autobiographical texts have been overshadowed by St. Augustine's *Confessions*; especially women's autobiographical writings. In her book, *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography* (1986), Estelle Jelinek establishes a history of women's autobiography, shedding light on women's contributions to autobiographical writing across history, and giving voice to their narratives. She traces the earliest woman's personal voice back to an Egyptian princess from ancient Egypt (circa 2450–2300 B.C.), who left fragments of her prayers engraved on the walls of her burial chamber[5]. Similar voices can be heard in ancient Greece and Rome as well as in the early days of Christianity in Europe – all in the form of women's spiritual expressions in prose and verse, such as *The Revelations of Divine Love* by Dame Juliana of Norwich[6], who lived in the second half of the 14th century. This text recounts the suffering of Christ with personal references to the author's spiritual experience[7]. Yet, the more prominent voice can be heard in *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1436–1438) which, in addition to the author's spiritual experience, includes information about her personal life, her marriage and luxurious life, which she abandoned upon experiencing a spiritual moment of revelation. She also describes her journeys to the holy sites in Jerusalem and Rome as well as to Spain and Germany[8]; hence moving beyond strict autobiography to travel writing. Jelinek's comparison between the two women's texts emphasises the

2 See for example: Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, pp. 22–23; and Linda Anderson, *Autobiography*, pp. 17–18.

3 R. Pascal, op. cit., p. 24.

4 L. Anderson, op. cit., p. 17.

5 E. Jelinek, op. cit., p. 11.

6 Dame Julian of Norwich could not read or write, so her account has been dictated and preserved as such, so her authorship of the text is not contested because of the personal references included in the text.

7 E. Jelinek, op. cit., pp. 14–15.

8 Ibidem, pp. 15–17.

existence of a tradition of women's autobiographical writing, and its earliest medieval texts as precursors of women's autobiography across the centuries up till the 20th century, as well as tracing this literary history thematically and politically.

In the past few decades, autobiography writing and theorising has been influenced by cultural developments and theoretical contributions. In their collection of their own research in autobiography studies since the 1990s, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson mark the theoretical shift from autobiography to life-writing in the following:

> Since 2000 in North American scholarship "life writing" has been a preferred umbrella term for the heterogeneous genres, modes, and media of autobiographically-inflected storytelling and self-representation. At the same time there is wider recognition that differing national histories and traditions infer quite different connotations with "autobiography"[9].

It is, therefore, interesting that the genre itself has been extended to become more of an umbrella term that includes a variety of autobiographical subgenres such as traditional autobiography, memoir, letters, diaries; as well as crossing the boundaries of prose to include autobiographical verse, autobiographical fiction, and non-fictional prose such as the autobiographical essay, prison literature, among many others, in addition to other forms in the arts such as autobiographical films and self-portraits, not to mention recent technologies of self-representation. Another dimension in autobiographical writing has to do with critical approaches which have influenced the reading and categorisation of autobiography in terms of postmodern, postcolonial, feminist, immigrant, slave narratives, and even in regional terms such as Arab or Arab women's autobiography. A further development has occurred, specifically in the past decade, with the emergence of online personal writing, especially in the form of Facebook statuses and perhaps more significantly in personal blogs. Interdisciplinarity has, thus, added to autobiography theory, widening its scope and extending it to all forms of life-writing, and using life-narratives as an over-reaching term that moves beyond the literary and historical boundaries of autobiography into the social sciences[10].

9 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run*, p. xxi.

10 In a recently published article in Arabic language, I have explored the shift from the humanities to the social sciences, with particular focus on the history of Arab autobiographical writing and theorising in: Hala Kamal, "From Autobiography to Life-Writing: Trajectories and Intersections across the Humanities and Social Sciences", "Alif" 40: New Directions in the Humanities (American University in Cairo, 2020), pp. 65–103.

The Emergence of Autobiography Theorising

According to Felicity Nussbaum, the term of 'autobiography' as a genre has emerged in the late 18th century, as the concept itself used earlier was that of 'self-biography'[11]. Detaching autobiography from biography, James Goodwin connects the genre to its origins in European prose-writing, specifically in the personal writings represented by the apology, confessions and memoirs. He maintains that the earliest exponents of the genre can be identified in Socrates' *Apology* dating back to the 4th century B.C., yet established by *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (4–5th century), and *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself* (16th century), while *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini* (16th century) can be considered more of a memoir[12]. Goodwin further differentiates these subgenres from diaries and letters, which are marked by the immediacy of experience, unlike confessions, memoirs and autobiographies written in retrospect at a moment in the present reflecting on the past[13]. Goodwin further maintains that the rising interest in autobiography can be attributed to the 18th century context, marked by "the American and French revolutions, which greatly advanced the cultural and political importance of the common individual"[14].

The beginnings of autobiography theorising, however, go back to the early years of the 20th century, with the publication of Georg Misch's two-volume book *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, originally published in German in 1907, then appeared in its first English version in 1950, in which Misch not only writes a history of autobiography in ancient literature but also traces its influence on the development of the genre. Following WW2, and particularly from the 1950s onwards, significant critical attention was given to defining autobiography in relation to literature and history. Wayne Shumaker was the first to distinguish autobiography from biography by asserting its literary nature, while Robert Sayre established connections between autobiography and fiction through their similar reliance on the literary elements of themes, characters, structure, narrative technique, setting and style[15]. This shift in reading autobiography as a literary rather than historical text is consolidated by William Spengemann, who establishes autobiography as a literary genre, with particular focus on the roles of memory, reflection and imagination in relation to the use of language, creation of meaning, and stylistic expression. He argues that autobiography consists of two main features: the historical

[11] Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*, p. 1.
[12] James Goodwin, *Autobiography: The Self Made Text*, pp. 3–5.
[13] Ibidem, pp. 10–11.
[14] Ibidem, p. 3.
[15] Robert Sayer, *The Examined Self*, p. 15.

and the poetic, whereby the historical manifests itself in the personal experience while the poetic aspect is expressed through the process of reflection and invention embodied in allegorical language[16].

Roy Pascal offers a more critical reading of autobiographical writings, whereby he asserts the distinction of autobiographical writing from other prose-writing, and argues that autobiographies, memoirs and reminiscences represent "true autobiography", characteristic of a mature vision, reflective perspective and sophisticated structure, while he relegates diaries and letters to a secondary position[17]. He adds, however, another feature of autobiographies (distinctive from subgenres such as diaries or letters), based on the focus in autobiographies on the self, while memoirs place the individual in an elaborately presented socio-historical and political context[18]. Pascal further distinguishes biography from autobiography[19], explaining that the former narrates factual events, while the latter relies on individual memory[20]. He, thus, explains autobiography as an account of a life or a phase in one's personal life expressed in a structured form, dividing it into various stages and experiences, while at the same time making reflective and interpretive connections between the self and the world, relying on a process of selection and omission of events in a narrative style[21]. In a similar vein, James Olney foregrounds the formal literary aspects and narrative techniques of autobiography rather than focusing on its historical content[22].

The most influential understanding of autobiography in Western literary theory is attributed to the French critic Philippe Lejeune, whose book, *On Autobiography*, published in French in 1975 (and translated into English in 1989), defines autobiography in terms of a retrospective narrative by a person about his/her life. His definition is based on the four categories of language, subject-matter, author and narrator. According to him, autobiography is a narrative in prose, dealing with the life of an individual, where the author, narrator and protagonist are identical; and it is written from a "retrospective point of view"[23]. The other more general, though absolutely essential, feature of autobiography is the correspondence between the identity of author,

16 William Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography*, p. xii.

17 R. Pascal, op. cit., pp. 3–5.

18 Ibidem, p. 5.

19 An earlier distinction between these two genres was introduced by Wayne Shumaker in *English Biography* (1954), considering autobiography literary rather than historical writing.

20 R. Pascal, op. cit., pp. 18–19.

21 Ibidem, pp. 9–10.

22 James Olney, *Metaphors of the Self*, p. 3.

23 P. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p.4.

narrator, and protagonist, whereby the author of the text is identical to the "I" narrator of the text, and the central character or protagonist (in literary terms); thus offering what Lejeune has termed as "the autobiographical pact", where the identity of the author/narrator/protagonist is asserted, and not left to interpretation[24]. A mere resemblance between author, narrator and protagonist relegates the text to an autobiographical novel rather than autobiography proper. It is the identity of the name (as a real person) not the resemblance of the narrative to real life that is the cornerstone of autobiography.

Autobiography theory has witnessed a major development since the 1990s, when it gained an interdisciplinary dimension in relation to various schools of literary theory such as post-structuralism, deconstruction, and feminism. It was at this point that the clear-cut generic and ontological borderlines were questioned, problematised, and blurred, even in the terms used to indicate the relevant genres. For example, in her groundbreaking book *The Auto/Biographical I* (1992), Liz Stanley contends that biography and autobiography are two intersectional genres as they both offer a revision of the past through individual and collective memory, which is subjected to a process of selection and omission. In this sense, Stanley views biography and autobiography as combining elements of reality and the imagination[25]. The cultural turn in literary studies added a further dimension in its rising concern with identity politics and discourse analysis, reading autobiography as the site of cultural identity construction, such as in the work of Leigh Gilmore on self-representation as a process of creating meaning and generating knowledge[26] and Julia Swindells' attention to autobiography as a site of individual awareness and struggle between the individual and society, in which the autobiographer plays the role of mediator between the self, the author and the socio-cultural context[27]. Furthermore, the continued joint work of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson since the 1990s has established the connection between postmodernism and autobiography and hence destabilised the traditional notions of a monolithic self that can be expressed in a unified fixed narrative.

A century of autobiography theorising marks the shifts in autobiographical writing, from a declaration of personal achievement in traditional autobiography to a site of resistance, negotiation and agency. In writing one's autobiography, the individual is practicing an active role in self-representation, in which she or he is involved in conscious selection, omission, expression, and construction. In this sense, contemporary autobiography theory pays critical attention not only to modes of expression, but also to the motives behind

[24] Ibidem, p. 13.
[25] Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, p. 92.
[26] Leigh Gilmore, *The Mark of Autobiography*, p. 7
[27] Julia Swindells, *The Uses of Autobiography*, p. 2.

exclusion and silence. It is through the contributions of postcolonial and feminist critics that autobiography has gained a political dimension where self-representation becomes an act of resisting cultural and gender stereotyping, and a tool of empowerment.

Autobiography: Generic Boundaries and Intersections

In his historical study of autobiographical writing, *Autobiography: The Self-Made Text* (1993), James Goodwin defines the genre of autobiography as derived from the term itself with its three components: auto (the self), bio (life), and graphy (writing). Autobiography here is clearly distinguished from biography, which refers to a written life of someone other than the author himself/herself. In this sense, these two terms are self-explanatory, as autobiography for example refers to any writing about one's life. The most influential definition of autobiography in Western literary theory is attributed to the French critic Philippe Lejeune, who defines autobiography as a "[r]etrospective 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"[28]. The keywords in this definition can be identified as 'retrospective', 'real', 'own', 'individual' and 'personality', which differentiate autobiography from other narratives such as memoirs, biographies, autobiographical novels and diaries, based on the location of the self in relation to the socio-cultural and political context, as well as the temporal position of the writer in relation to the narrated events. Autobiography has for long been considered the over-reaching term for all first person referential writing, and has theoretically developed into autobiography theory and autobiography studies – under which all forms of self- and life-narratives have been conceptualised and theorised.

Memoir shares with autobiography most of its features, but differs in the position of the author/narrator/protagonist in the narrative. Linda Anderson and asserts its role as a form of cultural memory[29]. This is attributed to the fact that memoirs do not focus on the protagonist alone, but actually set the protagonist against an elaborately portrayed socio-historical and political context, which led Linda Anderson to perceive it as a form of cultural memory. Smith and Watson explain the two main features distinguishing memoirs, namely that historically speaking memoirs are "a mode of life narrative that situated the subject in a social environment, as either observer or participants", but have been increasingly concerned with "a segment of a life, not its

[28] P. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 4.
[29] L. Anderson, op. cit., p. 114.

entirety, and focusing on interconnected experiences"[30]. In this understanding, memoirs can be divided into sub-categories depending on the kinds of experiences they elaborately portray: family memoirs, war memoirs, political memoirs, academic memoirs, among many others. In general, memoirs tend to shift the centre of the narrative from the author/narrator to the community, historical moment, setting personal experience in a collective setup, and as such tend to destabilise the boundaries between self and other, individual and community, experience, society and history. Memoirs about journeys are categorised as travel writing, which include travelogues, travel journals, adventure narratives; it is an autobiographical genre as "[t]ravel narratives are usually written in the first person and focus, in progress or retrospectively, on a journey"[31], and in this sense may combine the retrospection of memoirs with the temporal immediacy of diaries and letters.

Diaries and letters differ from autobiography and memoir in their temporal immediacy; yet differ in their intended readership. Letters are defined as follows; "directed, and dated, correspondence with a specific addressee and signatory, letters seem to be private writings" yet they are occasionally shared and publically read[32]. However, letters are usually published in a book collection at a moment much later than that of their composition, and frequently undergo processes of selection and editing, with the purpose of shedding light on their authors or on their socio-historical significance. Diaries too are characterised by their temporal immediacy, though they are usually not written with any readership in mind, but rather as a form of authorial self-reflection. They are, moreover, usually published at a later stage in the author's life or posthumously in the case of public figures, whose personal experiences are considered of value and importance. In that sense, both letters and diaries are not retrospective, nor do they present a holistic portrait of their author and society; and most importantly, they are usually written without the intention of publication.

Life-writing has recently been established as an all-inclusive term with the publication of *The Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms* (2001). Due to its transdisciplinary nature, life-writing moves beyond the strictly autobiographical to encompass biography and other forms of writing lives. This includes the established forms such as memoirs, diaries and letters, as well as epistolary fiction, the autobiographical novel, autobiographical poetry, and the autobiographical essay, as well as *testimonios*, manifestos and legal testimonies, in addition to more innovative

30 S. Smith and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 274.

31 Ibidem, p.284.

32 Ibidem, 273.

forms of self-expression such as personal blogs and social media personal notes and posts. Thus, life-writing is no longer restricted to the humanities, but involves the social sciences, arts, law, technology, and more. It has been even further expanded to the notion of 'life narrative', which does not limit itself to the written word, but carries its approaches, methods, concepts and analytical tools into wider horizons. Life-narrative is an even more inclusive term than life-writing, as it is not restricted to written texts but is extended to include oral and audio-visual narratives about oneself. Smith and Watson explain and define life-narrative in the following terms:

> We understand *life narrative* […] as a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital. In other words, we employ the term *life writing* for written forms of the autobiographical, and *life narrative* to refer to autobiographical acts of any sort[33].

It is interesting to note that Smith and Watson do not extend the term to refer to works about other people's lives, and restrict it to autobiographical narratives, while expanding its media and technologies. In a more recent reflection on the shift from autobiography to life-narrative they recognize the limitations of these emerging terms in the following:

> Now, of course, even the terms "life narrative" and "life writing" seem too limited for the ever-increasing modes of presenting, performing, imaging, and circulating a "life" in the multimedia of graphic memoir, performance art, visual art, and online platforms[34].

Hybrid Genres: The Autobiographical Novel and Autofiction

Margo Culley draws an insightful comparison between different forms of narrative, stating that "[a] novel creates a fictional world complete unto itself, while an autobiography or memoir looks back from a fixed point in time, which is the terminus of the retrospective. A diary, on the other hand, is created in and represents a continuous present[35]. This statement establishes the retrospective feature of life-narratives, where the author writes about the past (his/her past) from a moment in the present, thus relying on memory, selection and structure, comparable to the novel as a narrative form that presents a complete world, where the autobiographical world is structured using the form of the novel – reminiscent of the bildungsroman among other novelistic

[33] Ibidem, p. 4.

[34] S. Smith and J. Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run*, p. xxii.

[35] Margo Culley, *Introduction*, pp. 3–26.

subgenres. Culley does not, however, refer here to generic intersection and hybridity, where autobiographies and memoirs sometimes employ the diary form within their narrative; nor narrative subgenres that are hybrids of various genres or subgenres. In terms of generic hybridity, direct combination of both novel and autobiography can be seen as manifested in both the autobiographical novel and autofiction.

Although autobiography and memoir use novelistic techniques, most notably in narration, characterisation, setting and structure, the same can be said of some novels which rely on first person method of narration and centrality of protagonist's experience in the narrative within a realistic time and place. The autobiographical novel, however, is an intentional genre where aspects of the character's real life are represented in novelistic form. The text itself is defined as novel, and established with the absence of author/narrator/protagonist correspondence. It is the reader's/critic's ability to discover referentiality that identifies the text as an autobiographical novel – an exercise usually achieved through the contemporaneity of reader and author and asserted through paratexts[36]. In the absence of material evidence on the connection between author and protagonist, the text can only be defined as a novel. Smith and Watson clarify the intersections between these two genres in the following statement: "Life writing and the novel share features we ascribe to fictional writing: plot, dialogue, setting, characterization, and so on. But they are distinguished by their relationship to and claims about a referential world"[37]. The key difference is that autobiography represents a world that has reference in reality, while the novel creates a world based on the imagination, though with elements from reality. In an autobiographical novel, there is a proven correspondence between the protagonist's experience expressed through certain literary elements and the author's life.

The intersection between autobiography and fiction has also led to the emergence of another subgenre, namely autofiction, which can be considered a subgenre of autobiography where Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact' is replaced by Jacques Lecarme's 'autofictional pact' as "autofiction uses textual markers that signal a deliberate, often ironic, interplay between the two modes"[38]. Autofiction is, however, different from the 'autobiographical novel', which according to Pascal combines features of both autobiography and fiction, giving the writer the possibility to address his or her personal concerns and experiences in fictional form. To him, autobiographical novels are essen-

[36] Gerard Genette divides paratexts into epitexts and peratexts, according to their location within the text in back-cover blurbs or prefaces; or in their external relevance to it in the author's other writings or interviews.

[37] S. Smith and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, pp. 9–10.

[38] Ibidem, pp. 259–260.

tially "novels which build on a particular personal experience of the author" in a conscious process where "authors feel impelled to transfer it to fictional characters in an invented world and impose on it fictional outcome"[39]. Pascal concludes that autobiography reflects experience and requires a degree of maturity, unlike the autobiographical novel which suits young writers better as "the autobiographical novel is much more appropriate, where he both interprets himself and invents situations to reveal what he feels is his potential reality"[40]. Smith and Watson, too, point out the differences between the autobiographical novel and autofiction, suggesting that the former is more closely related to the genre of the novel and its structure, while the latter is more reliant on a narrative technique that seeks to manipulate the interaction between reality and fiction within the text, and without verification in the real world[41].

The main difference between autobiographical fiction and autofiction is that the former does not initially establish the connection between the text and the real world – between the author and protagonist. On the other hand, one of the clear indicators of the autofictionality of a text lies in the identical naming of author and protagonist. Yet, the correspondence between author/narrator/protagonist, established through naming in autofiction, is simultaneously undermined via the other literary elements which seem to challenge the reality, actuality and referentiality of the elements of the text. Hence, although the autobiographical novel and autofiction are situated at the intersections of autobiography and fiction, the main difference between the two genres seems to lie in the point of departure of each of them: while the autobiographical novel is essentially a novel with elements, aspects, motifs that bear semblance to the author's real life, autofiction is essentially an autobiography that is intentionally fictionalised through blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction. A critical reading of autofiction texts, thus, requires an approach that is informed by narratology and literary theory as well as autobiography theory and life-writing theorising. As an area open to further research, Smith and Watson conclude their recent discussion of autofiction with a series of questions about "its focus on the blurring or disruption of ontological and illocutionary boundaries between narrative worlds"[42], manifested in the author/reader 'autobiographical pact', 'autofictional pact' as well as the fictional pact of verisimilitude. Autofiction is viewed here in relation to fiction and autobiography, where Lecarme's 'autofictional pact' is set against Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact', whereby the correspondence between author, narrator and protagonist is questioned; as well as autobiographical sty-

[39] R. Pascal, *op.cit*., p. 165.

[40] Ibidem, p. 178.

[41] S. Smith and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, pp. 259–260.

[42] S. Smith and J. Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run*, p. xxxviii.

listic features being more significant than 'referentiality' or the correspondence of the fictional world to the 'real' world[43].

In the recently published *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* (2019), Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf points to the differences between autobiography and autofiction from the reader's perspective, whereby contemporary critics, influenced by postmodern literary theory, read autobiographical works with an awareness of the roles of narration and the imagination in self-representation; while the same critics approach an autofictional work with an awareness of the author's intentional manipulation of language[44]. She suggests that autofiction is essentially fictionalised autobiography, and the autofiction author is consciously masquerading his/her life behind a fictionalised world, while at the same time asserting her/his identity through the Lejeunian author/narrator/protagonist identification. It is worth noting that autobiographical fiction as a genre has emerged from literary studies, and particularly as a subgenre of the novel, where the text is read from within literary theory. Thus an autobiographical novel is essentially a novel in which there are references to real life – references at varying degrees of proximity and referentiality. Autofiction, on the other hand has been recently revived within life-writing frameworks, which approach autofiction as an essentially personal narrative where referentiality is intentionally manipulated and distorted. Finally, while the autobiographical novel is comfortably established as a subgenre of the novel, autofiction continues to raise questions about whether it is a subgenre? And in that case, is it a subgenre of autobiography? Or is it a narrative technique that fictionalises reality?

Current Trends in Autobiography Studies

Women's autobiography studies are among the most recent developments of autobiography theory. It emerged in the 1980s at the intersection of feminist theory and autobiography theory, with the publication of Jelinek's edited collection of studies, *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (1980), in which gender was introduced as an analytical tool in reading women's autobiographies. A few years later, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck published their co-edited volume, *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (1988), in which the editors assert their attempt to widen the scope of critical readings of women's autobiographies by addressing voice, gender and identity, and extend the analysis to include intersectional positions and cultural minority identities. The feminist approach was introduced at length in Stanley's

[43] Hywell Dix, *Autofiction in English*, pp. 5–6.

[44] Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, p. 2.

book, *The Auto/Biographical I* (1992), in which she argues that feminist autobiographies consciously cross generic boundaries[45]. Similarly, Leigh Gilmore introduced the term 'Autobiographics' as a feminist critical concept inclusive of both author and reader, as a connection is established between the process of self-representation and interpretation, where gender intersects with race, class and sexuality.

Another significant contribution of feminist autobiography critics can be found in their critiques of established notions such as Philippe Lejeune's 'the autobiographical pact' and Jacques Derrida's 'the law of the genre'. In *The Female Autograph* (1984) Domna Stanton turns the attention from content to form and from the account of a life to writing the self. She argues against Lejeune's assertion about the existence of an objective reality that the author and reader acknowledge as a fact. Similarly, from a generic point of view, Caren Kaplan took issue with Derrida's understanding of genre and argues for 'out-law genres' which she identifies as existing in the cultural margins[46]. She sheds light on such genres as prison literature, and asserts their position as political spaces of resistance, where the author, and particularly the woman author, is portrayed as involved in a political national liberation movement or anti-imperialist struggle. Thus, both Stanton and Kaplan write against traditional critical approaches, and suggest alternative modes of women's writing. Feminist critics, thus, also reject the fact that autobiography theory tends to relegate letters and diaries to a secondary position, giving prominence to traditional autobiographies and memoirs. Feminist autobiography theory in general recognizes the connection of letters, diaries and oral histories to women and other minority groups that do not have the luxury of extended retrospection, self-representation and publication of extended autobiographies and memoirs, while they can resort to letters, diaries and oral life-narratives for immediate self-reflection and self-expression.

Within the framework of life-writing, Bart Moore-Gilbert offers a reading of postcolonial autobiographical writing in his book, *Postcolonial Life-Writing* (2009), in which he divides Western autobiography theory in the 20th century into three stages based on the contributions of Misch, Pascal, and Lejeune where critical attention was mostly Eurocentric[47]. Moore-Gilbert acknowledges the role of feminist critics since the 1980s in introducing feminist readings of autobiographical writing. This was also the period which witnessed the emergence of postcolonial literary theory. Using a postcolonial approach, the author pays critical attention to autobiographies produced in

45 L. Stanley, op.cit., p. 247.

46 Caren Kaplan, *Resisting Autobiography*, p. 130.

47 B. Moore-Gilbert, op. cit., pp. xi-xiii.

former colonies during pre- and post-independence; with specific consideration of identity cultural representation and self-narration techniques. At the same time, he argues that "the distinctiveness of postcolonial life-writing needs, however, to be extended beyond considerations of thematics of subjectivity to questions of style"[48]. He, thus, argues for life-writing instead of autobiographical writing as more inclusive of postcolonial, postmodern and transnational forms of self-representation and stylistic experimentation.

In her book, *Literary Autobiography and Arab National Struggles* (2017), Tahia Abdel Nasser focuses on Arab literary autobiographies; that is to say autobiographies written by prominent Arab literary and critical figures. In her introduction in which she connects autobiography to 20th century modernity and national independence movement, she states that autobiographical writing was influenced by the general conditions of colonial rule, revolutionary acts, and independence struggles; thus leading to autobiographical texts where the personal experience was integrated within the general atmosphere of national struggles: "As a form that flourished in anticolonial movements and postcolonial cultures, autobiography was typically read as a communal form within which writers framed the story of the individual at particular national and cultural moments"[49]. In this sense, the writer's reflections on the self are not individual but rather set in relation to anticolonial struggles, national independence movements, and postcolonial nation-states. On the other hand, in her *Arab Women's Lives Retold* (2007), Nawar Al-Hassan Golley is concerned with life-narratives as generated by intersections with cultural discourses towards an understanding of life-narratives as involving identity construction and representation. The focus, however, remains set on Arab women's autobiographical writings which "are analyzed in relation to discourses of feminism, postcolonialism, nationalism, socialism, hybridity, and religion – discourses that have also dominated the autobiographers' experiences"[50]. Golley explores contemporary Arab women's identities as expressed not only in their autobiographical writings but in other writings by women, highlighting women's self-representations as well as their reflections on their own experiences through their personal perspectives, within and across the established literary genres.

It was Smith and Watson who, in their *Women, Autobiography, Theory* (1998), transported autobiography beyond the limitations of prose writing, thus establishing the interdisciplinarity of women's autobiography studies, where various concepts, approaches and methodologies are developed and

48 Ibidem, p. xxi.

49 Tahia Abdel Nasser, *Literary Autobiography and Arab National Struggles*, p. 8.

50 Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, *Arab Women's Lives Retold*, p.xxvii.

discussed through such notions as: identity, experience, agency, pedagogy, genre, voice, memory, gender, sexuality and the body. Their research has extended across decades, and they have expanded autobiography into the more over-reaching area of life-writing. In their *Reading Autobiography* (2001), they assert "the shift from genre to discourse" in the rising focus on the forms of self-representation rather than the content telling a personal life story[51]. In this framework, the 'fidelity' of representing the self and the world is replaced by attention to "generic instability, regimes of truth telling, referentiality, relationality, and embodiment"[52]. In their latest collection of their own writing on autobiography since the 1990s, *Life Writing in the Long Run* (2016), Smith and Watson declare their adoption of 'life writing' as a contemporary replacement of autobiography which to them has become "insufficient to new modes of life writing"[53].

Conclusion

This paper offers a survey of autobiography as a literary genre and theory. It is focused on the emergence and development of autobiography as well as shedding light on its most prominent trends. It defines autobiography and other auto/biographical (sub)genres, and points out their various intersections – definitions which as much as they attempt to specify their boundaries, they end up revealing their flexible and often blurred nature, which eventually led to challenging autobiography's inclusivity. The paper also explores the shift from autobiography to life-writing, and hence the multiple modes of personal narratives within the humanities and beyond. It is worth noting that autobiography has emerged on interdisciplinary grounds within the humanities, and has developed at intersections with the social sciences. Thus, the shift from autobiography to life-narrative is a reflection of a theoretical shift from an oscillation between history and literature to journeys into sociology, psychology, technology and the media. This study does not tell a complete life story of autobiography writing and theorising; it is rather a journey into autobiography as a genre and theory that has been extremely lively throughout the centuries, and in constant flux with ebbs and flows. The current trends in particular raise more questions about the future of autobiography than giving answers, opening up vistas of creativity for life-narratives, while at the same time expanding the horizons of critical inquiry and theorising.

51 S. Smith and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 3.

52 Ibidem, p. 211.

53 S. Smith and J. Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run*, p. xxii.

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