



Early Russian Autobiography: Old Texts, New Readings

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

The article discusses research perspectives in the study of Russian pre-modern first-person writings that are commonly called autobiographies. Its first part starts with definitions of what is “early Russian” and “autobiographical,” briefly introduces six texts, gives a condensed review of the approaches to the study of these texts by literary and cultural historians from 1950s to the present, and concludes with suggestion of some new perspectives to their analysis. The article argues that re-questioning of early Russian autobiographical writings is prompted by some recent important changes in the humanities and social sciences and by some insights from historians and literary scholars who study first-person texts of the Western tradition. The second part of the article is a case-study that examines one autobiographical text, *The Life (Zhitie)* of monk Epifanii (? – 1682) and focuses on one topic: representation of the hero/author’s pain and healing. The analysis of this representation is conducted in relation to concrete social and political contexts of the text. The study concludes that contextualizing pre-modern first-person narratives as social activities embedded in historically specific reality helps in better understanding of their meanings.

ABSTRACT IN RUSSIAN

Ранняя русская автобиография: Старые тексты, новые прочтения

В статье рассматриваются перспективы изучения древнерусских сочинений от первого лица, которые обычно называют автобиографиями. Ее первая часть начинается с определения понятий «древнерусские» и «автобиографические» затем дает краткие характеристики шести текстов, содержит сжатый обзор подходов к изучению этих текстов историками литературы и культуры с 1950-х гг. по настоящее

время и завершается предложением возможных новых направлений их исследований. В статье утверждается, что новые вопросы к древнерусским автобиографическим сочинениям диктуются недавними важными переменами в социальных и гуманитарных науках, а также результатами, полученными историками и литературоведами, изучающими сочинения от первого лица в западноевропейской традиции. Вторая часть статьи представляет собой кейс-стади, рассматривающий один текст, «Житие» инока Епифания (? – 1682), и сосредотачивающий внимание на одной теме: репрезентациях героем/автором боли и исцеления. Анализ этих репрезентаций осуществляется в связи с конкретными социальными и политическими контекстами появления сочинения Епифания. Этот анализ приводит к заключению о том, что контекстуализация ранних рассказов от первого лица как социальных действий, укорененных в исторически обусловленной действительности, способствует лучшему пониманию их смыслов.

Keywords: first-person writings, autobiographical studies, medieval Russia, contemporary humanities.

First, it is worth clarifying the meanings of two basic terms frequently used in the article. The attributive “Early Russian” or “Old Russian” (*dreverusskie*) means written in the language commonly labeled as the “Old Russian” (to be more precise, it is the Old East Slavonic language and its later successor Muscovite Slavonic). The synonym for “Early/Old Russian” may also be “Russian medieval,” because the texts discussed belong to the period from the early twelfth to the second half of the seventeenth century, and according to the most common periodization of Russian history, the medieval period spans from the late ninth to the late seventeenth century (pre-Petrine Russia). “Autobiographical writings” refers to those first-person narratives that contain detailed retrospective accounts of their authors’ lives. The somewhat anachronistic attributive “autobiographical” that refers to the name of the genre in modern European literature is used to specify self-testimonies in the wider bulk of life-writings.

To make further discussion more focused, it is worth concentrating on the following six texts: *The Instruction (Pouchenie)* by Vladimir Monomakh (1053–1125), *The First Letter to Andrei Kurbskii (Pervoe pis'mo k Andreiu Kurbskomu)* by Ivan IV the Terrible (1530–1584), *The Story of My Life (Povest' o zhitii)* by Martirii Zelenetskii (?–1603), *The Tale of Anzerskii Cloister (Skazanie ob Anzerskom skite)* by Eleazar Anzerskii (?–1656), and two *Lives (Zhitia)*, one by Protopope Avvakum (1620–1682) and the other by the monk Epifanii (?–1682)¹. The selection of these texts is based on the following criteria:

¹ See the texts and bibliography in Zaretskii (2009).

resemblance to what we now call “autobiography” – i.e. a retrospective life account of a person written by him or herself; biographical completeness – i.e. the entirety of the life-story told; the scholarly tradition of labeling these texts as “autobiographies” or “autobiographical writings,” and finally on the task of making a representative list of such texts.

These six autobiographical texts are remarkably different. Their differences embrace the time of composition (from the early twelfth century to 1670s), the length (from about 2,100 to about 23,000 words), the authorship (two famous Russian rulers, three barely known monks and a spiritual leader of the Russian seventeenth century schism), the autobiographical content (from factual life-accounts to spirited expositions of inner struggles and emotions), the language (from dry formal to colorful energetic colloquial). At the same time, some similarities between them are also revealing, especially between the life-stories of Eleazar and Martirii and between the life-stories of Avvakum and Epifanii. In the first case both are initial autobiographical parts of larger stories of foundations of monasteries that are addressed to their monks; in the second, both are separate self-narratives of martyrdom addressed to the authors’ followers.

Though the practice of labeling some early Russian writings as autobiographies originated more than a century ago,² the distinction and separation of autobiography as a specific cluster in the body of Russian culture began only in late 1950s. Since then, the dominant interpretation strategy has been shaped by scholars who treated autobiography as a specific constituent part of Old Russian literature (though some paid considerable attention to “historical reality,” i.e. to links of autobiographical texts with concrete social, cultural, religious, and political circumstances). The basic focus of this scholarship was on such questions as genre attribution (autobiography or not); uncovering principles of composition; detection of narrative structure (constituent parts, episodes and the ways they are connected to each other) and narrative order (chronological, thematic or mixed); on literary/hagiographical clichés used by authors; and on specific features contributing to the integrity of the texts.

This scholarship was mostly concerned with the issue of genre.³ Where does the autobiography fit within the structure of genres of Old Russian literature? Is it possible to identify the autobiography (or put more delicately: the “autobiographical tradition”) within it? If yes, where does this tradition start and what text should be considered “the first Russian autobiography?”

² Specifically referring to Avvakum’s *Life* – see Pypin (1898, p. 315). It should be noted that the brief overview below does not cover textual criticism.

³ See more recently: Ranchin (1999, pp. 158–77).

Literary historians have also approached the early Russian autobiographical writings from the aesthetic perspective, in particular, by discussing such characteristics as poetics and style. In their studies these characteristics are most often viewed as means by which authors managed to create works of certain “artistic value” (*khudozhestvennaia tsennost’*). According to this approach, the autobiographical text is treated as a product of “literary creation” (*literaturnoe tvorchestvo*) of its author and, correspondingly, a source for the reconstruction of the “author’s design” (*avtorskii zamysel*), of “artistic design” (*khudozhestvennyi zamysel*) and of “artistic devices” the author used (*khudozhestvennye priemy*). The ultimate aim of this type of study is to uncover peculiarities of the “artistic nature” (*khudozhetvennaia priroda*) of this or that autobiographical writing, and to portray the autobiographical style as a “certain set of literary means for representation of human life and the human inner world.”⁴ What is common in all of the approaches of literary historians and critics discussed above, are their efforts to trace continuity, i.e. to uncover what they call “the ways of formation and development” of autobiography and its “genetic connections.”⁵

Besides literary historians and critics, autobiographical writings have attracted substantial attention from historians of culture and religion, and to some extent, from political historians. This group of scholars has mostly used first person narratives as sources for biographical studies of concrete historical figures, especially in cases when other documentary data on their lives were not accessible. Most studies that use methodology of this kind took an autobiographical story as a documentary record not only of biographical and political facts, but also of such “realities” as the author’s unique personality or his “inner self” (*vnutrennee ia*).⁶ Accordingly, these studies were mostly directed at portraying this unique personality and its development, at describing the author/hero’s individual feelings and emotions, his psychological collisions, his mental turmoil, etc.

The above-mentioned approaches have a number of common characteristics that are rooted in some fundamental conventions of European nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship. Two of these conventions are most vivid: the understanding of the relationship between text and reality in the way that every autobiographical writing represents the “objective world” and the understanding of the author of an autobiographical text

⁴ Robinson (1958, p. 205).

⁵ Kopreeva (1972, pp. 102–4, 107).

⁶ Idem (pp. 94–8, 102). See also: Krushel’nitskaia (1996, p. 164): “authorial inner source” (*avtorskoe lichnostnoe nachalo*), “authorial self” (*avtorskoe “ia”*).

as a concrete “historical figure” who generates all meanings of his text. Such understandings dictated the task of deciphering an autobiographical text in order to uncover its author’s inner world (*vnutrennii mir*), or less ambitiously, his ideology (*ideinaia pozitsiia avtora*) imprinted in the writing. From two other fundamental conventions of this scholarship – the general vision of the past as a progressive continuity (the earlier textual forms have gradually transformed into modern ones) and understanding the progress of human history as a progress of individualism (development of “autobiographical forms” indicates this progress and vice versa) – came a view “from above,” considering the first Russian autobiography as the first manifestation of the individualistic self in Russian culture.

However, recent theoretical developments in the humanities and social sciences suggest a variety of new approaches to the study of pre-modern autobiographical texts. Some of these approaches have considerably influenced the reading of medieval and early modern self-narratives (German, French, Dutch, English and others). Three of them are briefly outlined below.

Probably the most significant one is *social constructionism* (or *social constructivism*).⁷ According to this approach various basic concepts and notions that seem firm and obvious, as if directly coming from nature or from historical reality (state, nation, madness, the Orient, Europe, the self, etc.), in fact are flexible, historically changeable constructions of a given society and culture. In other words, they are not “objective” categories but variable by-products of the interplay between different social forces and the outcome (“inventions” or “artifacts”) of different human activities. The growing power of constructionism resulted in undermining the very basis of the traditional model of what is called “the history of subjectivity” or “the history of the self.” The key constitutive element of this model, the concept of the integral human self as a part of reality and a producer of evidence about itself, has little by little lost its incontrovertibility and has been replaced by other concepts and frames.⁸ The very notions of the self, the individual, and the person have been often substituted by an even more ambiguous notion of the “subject,” generally understood as something that is “produced” or “made.” According to this perspective it is not the subject that produces discourses but, on the contrary, it is socially and culturally established discourses that produce the subject. As Parveen Adams and Jeff Minson formulated this shifted view on subjectivity: being a subject means “being subject to definite

⁷ On constructionism and deconstructionism in history see: Jenkins and Munslow (2004, pp. 61–240).

⁸ Heller, Sosna, and Wellbery (1986); Porter (1997).

conditions of existence, conditions of endowment of agents and conditions of exercise.”⁹ The constructionist approach to the notion of the subject and, correspondingly, to the “history of subjectivity” has made a strong impact on autobiographical studies and, in particular, on the attempts at working out new visions of the history of autobiography.

The second shift that strongly affected autobiographical studies – concurrent and in many ways linked to constructionism – is the so-called *linguistic turn*.¹⁰ If “‘things’ as such have no social reality apart from their linguistic construction,” if “they are not objective givens in themselves, but rather the product of a linguistic process of ‘objectification,’”¹¹ then this is also true for such “reality” as the individual self. Correspondingly, autobiographical texts are, first and foremost, evidences of how this “reality” is “objectified” in language and speech. Influenced by these language limitations, many recent historical studies of autobiographical writings drifted far away from the traditional readings that approached them as “sources,” created to inform us about the “real” self of a “real” person (the Author). Instead of trying to directly reach this “real” self, scholars turned to uncovering specific textual conventions that produce this or that model of the self, to discussing its peculiarities and its connection to a certain group of texts or culture, to practicing narratological analysis,¹² etc.

Finally, the third shift, tightly intertwined with the two mentioned above, is associated with the *anthropological turn* (or *cultural turn*). This shift set in about half a century ago, after a large group of historians became aware of the importance of an anthropologically interpreted concept of culture for understanding a given society. Cultural historians emphasized the study of the singularity of a given culture and thus supported the idea of discontinuity in cultural developments. From such a view on the human past, it follows that the concept of the self, elaborated in European scholarship as universal, should be treated as narrow, i.e. as one of many possible ones. Consequently, it is wrong to try and apply this concept to autobiographical texts that originated in other cultures, because the practice of such an application falsely pictures any non-Western autobiography and the self it represents as underdeveloped. In very general terms, the main impact of the anthropological/cultural turn on the historical study of autobiographical writings may be reduced to one straightforward argument: the very notions of “autobiography” and the

⁹ Parveen and Minson (1978, p. 52).

¹⁰ The notion has been coined by theorist Richard Rorty (*The linguistic Turn* 1967).

¹¹ Spiegel (2005, p. 5).

¹² Among the earliest historical studies of this kind: Vitz (1989).

“self” should be approached not as universal categories but as specific phenomena embedded in a given culture and shaped by its “codes.”

Not a few scholars of autobiography in the last decades either opposed the aforementioned challenges as alien to the humanistic notion of the self (understood as the basis for autobiographical research), or ignored them as useless for empirical studies. Nevertheless, some of these challenges have substantially influenced autobiographical studies.

Among examples of this influence, I would first mention the research program that was launched about ten years ago by the group *Self-Narratives in Transcultural Perspective* of the Department of History and Cultural Studies at the Free University of Berlin (directed by Claudia Ulbrich).¹³ The group combines the efforts of scholars from a variety of disciplines who study both Western and non-Western self-narratives that mostly belong to the Early Modern period. The major subject of its research is defined as “writings about the author’s own life that hold to specific narrative conventions.”¹⁴ Contrary to the widely accepted view on autobiography as a specifically Western genre, tightly bounded with the idea of the individual self that emerged in Europe as a by-product of modernization, the group aims at analyzing self-narratives “in the light of new questions and new methodologies.”¹⁵ The core of this new perspective constitutes a refusal of the dominant Eurocentric view on the development of self-testimonies in other cultures and “approaches to these source materials that take as their analytical focus the writing subject as active agent in the context of her or his own social and cultural relations.”¹⁶

The project *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self: Education, Introspection and Practices of Writing in the Netherlands 1750–1914* at the Faculty of History and Arts of the University of Rotterdam (directed by Arianne Baggerman)¹⁷ may be taken as the second example of new historical approaches in autobiographical studies. This project is mostly aimed at working out a new paradigm of the developments of the late eighteenth to early twentieth century egodocuments in the Netherlands (and tentatively

¹³ URL: <http://www.fu-berlin.de/dfg-fg/fg530>.

¹⁴ Idem. The major term used is “Selbstzeugnisse,” translated into English as “self-testimonies” or “self-narratives.”

¹⁵ Idem.

¹⁶ Idem. See the most important publications of the group: Gabriele Jancke and Claudia Ulbrich (Eds.) *Vom Individuum zur Person. Neue Konzepte im Spannungsfeld von Autobiographietheorie und Selbstzeugnisforschung*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005; Andreas Bähr, Peter Burschel, and Gabriele Jancke (Eds.) *Räume des Selbst. Selbstzeugnisforschung transkulturell*. Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 2007 (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit, Bd. 19); Hans Medick, Angelika Schaser, and Claudia Ulbrich (Eds.) *Selbstzeugnis und Person. Transkulturelle Perspektiven*. Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 2012 (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit, Bd. 20).

¹⁷ <http://www.egodocument.net/egodocument/controlling-time.html>.

in Western Europe as a whole) and to suggest new methodologies of their investigations¹⁸. Arianne Baggerman claims that traditionally the rise of production of egodocuments in the nineteenth century has been correlated with the growing introspection and self-questioning in European culture, though such observation “was based on a limited canon of great writers, including Rousseau and Goethe.”¹⁹ She argues that the recent studies of Dutch egodocuments written between 1814 and 1914 *en masse* strongly challenge this traditionally accepted perspective. Baggerman observes: “Contrary to expectations, the number of *factual* diaries and *impersonal* memoirs rose more sharply than the number of *intimate introspective* texts.”²⁰ To explain this discovery and to construct a new vision of the development of egodocuments in the “long nineteenth century,” she suggests using Reinhart Koselleck’s hypothesis of the unprecedented shift in the perception of temporality that took place in Europe around the mid-eighteenth century.²¹ According to Koselleck, this shift resulted in the emergence of new strategies of human behavior, such as the attempts “to master temporality” and to control individual experiences. Thus, the key task of Baggerman’s project is to investigate “to what extent and in what ways, the specific contents and forms of egodocuments, as well as the increase in their number in the long nineteenth century, were related to the emergence of a new sense of temporality.”²²

Turning back to the main point, it may be suggested that the recent insights of historians and literary scholars in the studies of first person writings may have considerable implications for the reading of Old Russian autobiographical texts. It is very likely that they might constitute a meaningful background for further questioning or even re-questioning these texts. Four directions for such re-questioning are proposed below.

1. Refusal of the holistic approach. Varieties of forms, contents, social and historical contexts and audiences of Old Russian autobiographical texts suggest that they barely allow asking unified questions, and thus could be more effectively approached not as an isolated formal unity proposed by the very notion of autobiography but in some other ways. First of all, as it is only *our* modern individualistic perspective that makes these texts autobiographical but not *theirs*, to avoid anachronistic misunderstanding, these texts need to be contextualized historically. They should be linked

¹⁸ The term “egodocument” is used here in a sense common for contemporary Dutch historiography. See: Dekker (2002, pp. 13–37).

¹⁹ <http://www.egodocument.net/egodocument/controlling-time.html>.

²⁰ Idem.

²¹ See: Koselleck (1979).

²² <http://www.egodocument.net/egodocument/controlling-time.html>.

with other texts and writing practices of their times and framed in view of these texts and practices.

2. *Tracing the patterns of early Russian autobiographical discourse and their historical changes.* At the same time, as the texts under discussion have such common formal characteristics as narration from the first-person singular and telling a life-story of the speaker, they might be also regarded as having a certain formal unity. In particular, they seem to be informative about specific modes and patterns of Old Russian biographical discourse, about historical development of these modes and patterns, about continuities and discontinuities between them, about their relation to major developments of early Russian culture, about parallels with Western European and Byzantine models, etc.

3. *Studying in comparative perspective.* Epistemological difficulties in making historical comparisons,²³ despite being theoretically and logically persuasive, do not eliminate our eagerness for comparisons. In our case, a general frame for comparative study may be provided by the fact that Early Russian autobiographical writings belong to the medieval Christian tradition and may be approached as a constituent part of it in parallel with Western and Eastern (Byzantine) texts.

4. *Grouping and reading.* The texts commonly called Old Russian autobiographies might be more easily grouped together on the basis of similarity of their social origin than of their attribution to a certain literary genre. Moreover, it seems that these texts might be more informative if read as a part of social and cultural practices than exclusively as a part of general literary process or genre development. This last assumption will be further discussed through analysis of a case study.

Most studies of early first-person writings suggest their contextualization. One way of doing this, especially common among historians of literature and culture, is putting them in connection with other works of the same kind – earlier, contemporary or later. Contextualization of this type presupposes the existence of a lucid continuity in both the development of first-person writings and the development of human self understood as their source. A remarkable example of such contextualization was recently presented in the form of a lecture entitled “Rousseau and the Autobiographical Revolution” by Philippe Lejeune, the renowned maître of autobiographical studies.²⁴ Analyzing two preambles of the

²³ Comparative history has been harshly questioned in the last decades, leading to strongly discouraging statements. See for example: Kelley (2000, pp. 6–13).

²⁴ IABA Europe 2011 Conference “Trajectories of (Be)longing: Europe in Life Writing” (Tallinn, May 18–20 – <http://iabaeurope2011.edicypages.com/keynotes/philippe-lejeune>).

Confessions, which Lejeune called the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Autobiographer,” he convincingly described the revolution Rousseau “brought about in the practice of autobiography.” The core of this revolution, according to Lejeune, is the appearance of a radically new concept of autobiographical narrative concurrent with the appearance of a radically new concept of the self. The scholar argues that these two concepts, first formulated in the *Confessions*, are the cornerstones both of modern autobiographical practice and of the modern individual self.

Another way of contextualizing early first-person writings, comparatively new and much less common, is to approach them in relation to the concrete socio-historical situations in which they appeared and functioned. This way has been developed by social historians and sociologists largely inspired by social constructionism. One of the most well-known advocates of this approach is Gabriele Jancke, who has thoroughly studied early modern autobiographical narratives in German-speaking Europe.²⁵ Jancke insists that “in order to uncover what was implied in autobiographical writing for early modern writers, it would be necessary to contextualize the sources – in their own times and settings.”²⁶ She emphasizes that “autobiographical writers were not isolated individuals but social beings, belonging to certain social, professional, religious and gender groups, moving in certain contexts and relationships,” and that the autobiographical texts they produced were the result of their “acting socially.”²⁷ Thus, Jancke suggests that emphasis be given not to the historical development – either of autobiographical narrative or the concept of the self – but on specific social circumstances that shape this or that concrete form of self-narrative. Reading early modern autobiographical narratives in this way allows her to make a strong argument that contradicts most traditional approaches to the field: “We cannot go on telling the story of the rise of Western individual, at least not in combination with autobiographical writing.”²⁸

In agreement with Gabrielle Jancke, the following analysis rests upon the premise that social contextualization is extremely helpful for understanding pre-modern first-person writings. By “helpful,” I mean not only that it allows for deeper comprehension of their meanings and compositional structures, but also that it suggests a variety of new heuristically provocative perspectives for autobiographical studies. To make this argument clear, I will offer a reading of one of the texts as a constituent part

²⁵ Jancke, *Autobiographie als soziale Praxis* (2002).

²⁶ Jancke “Autobiography as Social Practice in Early Modern German Speaking Areas.” (2007, p. 72).

²⁷ Idem., (p. 70).

²⁸ Idem., (p. 71).

of historically specific social reality. The text under investigation is the aforementioned *Life* (in Russian *Zhitie*, the meaning of the word is close to the Latin *vita*) of monk Epifanii written around 1675–1676.²⁹ The reading will focus on the author's representations of pain and healing, which occupy most of the text.

Zhitie is mostly an account of Epifanii's individual experience of physical and spiritual pain followed by healings, which are always of a miraculous nature. The larger part of the story comprises episodes in which the monk tells of the results of his punishments by persecutors who cut off his tongue (twice) and amputated four fingers of his right hand. We read here in detail about what the author felt during and after these punishments: about his bleeding truncated hand, about his touching it with the unharmed one to make sure that the fingers are really gone, about the difficulties of ingesting food and plentiful saliva after the removal of his tongue, etc. Other episodes of physical sufferings not related to his corporal punishments by persecutors are marked by the same naturalistic descriptions: of the pain caused by ants attacking his genitals, of Epifanii's eyes and lungs suffering from the smoke in his cell, etc. These narrations of physical pain are always accompanied with narrations of spiritual distress. The same detailed descriptions are typical for the monk's healing that follows his suffering. In all cases, healing comes after prayer: either the Blessed Virgin or another heavenly force interferes in the course of earthly events and brings immediate relief.

Let us look closer at one of central episodes of *Zhitie* – Epifanii's suffering and healing in his prison cell after amputation of four fingers on his right hand. This is how the author describes his pains:

“And my heart and all my innards were lit with great fire, and I fell on the ground sweating heavily and started to die and three times I was about to die but I survived and my soul did not leave my body” (*i vozgoresia serdtse moe vo mne i vsia vnutrenniaia moia ognem velikim, az zhe padokh na zemliu i byst'*

²⁹ On Epifanii and his *Zhitie* see: Zenkovsky, “The Confession of Epiphany a Moscovite Visionary.” In: Zbigniew Folejewski, Michael Karpovich, and Albert Kaspin (eds.) *Studies in Russian and Polish Literature in Honour of Waclaw Lednicki*. Gravenhage: Mouton, 1962, pp. 46–71; Idem. “Der Mönch Epifanij und die Entstehung der altrussischen Autobiographie.” In: *Die Welt der Slaven*. Wiesbaden 1956. Jahrgang I. Heft 3., pp. 276–92; Robinson, Andrei. “Avtobiografiia Epifaniia.” In: *Issledovaniia i materialy po drevnerusskoi literature*. Moscow: Nauka, 1961, pp. 101–32; Idem. *Zhizneopisaniia Avvakuma i Epifaniia: Issledovaniia i teksty*. Moscow: Nauka, 1963; Zaretskii, Iurii. “Telo i ego kazni (ob avtobiografizme Epifaniia Solovetskogo).” In: *Kazus. Individual'noe i unikal'noe v istorii 2000*. Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2000 pp. 319–44; Idem. “Tortured Body as the Location of the Self: A Seventeenth-Century Russian Case.” In: Andreas Bähr, Peter Burschel, and Gabriele Jancke (eds.) *Räume des Selbst. Selbstzeugnisforschung transkulturell*. Köln: Böhlau, 2007, pp. 187–96.

*ves' v potu, i nachal umirati, i tri nakona umiral, da ne umer, dusha moia iz tela moego ne vyshla).*³⁰

The physical pain was so intolerable that Epifanii makes an attempt to commit suicide. The “mechanics” of this attempt are given in striking detail:

“And risen from the ground, I lay down on a bench, put my truncated hand on the ground and thought to myself: ‘Let the blood flow out of me, this is how I will die.’ And much blood flowed out and it became wet in the pit and the guards covered the blood with hay and I was shedding blood for five days to cause death in this way.” (*I az vstav so zemli i na lavku leg nits, a ruku moiui secheniuii povestil na zemliu, pomyshliaia v sebe sitse: “Puskai krov-ta vydet iz mene vsia, tak ia i umru.” I mnogo krovi vyshlo, i v temnitse stalo mokro. I strazhi sena na krov’ naslali. I piat’ dnei tochil krov’ is tela moego, daby mi ot togo smert’ prishla.*)³¹

Despite these efforts, death did not come to Epifanii and spiritual unrest began to accompany his physical sufferings:

“And I, a sinner, was lying on the ground alone in the pit, rolling in every possible direction on my belly and on my back and on my sides, out of great anguish and bitter melancholy.” (*Az zhe, greshnyi, v temnitse edin valiaiasia po zemle na briukhe i na spine, i na bokakh, i vsiako prevrashchaiaasia ot velikiia bolezni i ot gorkiia toski.*)³²

Finally, in desperation, he passionately appealed to God, the Blessed Virgin and all saints to bring him death. Soon after this, a heaven-sent vision came to him in the image of the Blessed Virgin who started to cure the sufferer:

“[...] And I hear that the Blessed Virgin is touching my wounded hand with her hands [...] as if her hands are playing with my hand, and it seems to me as if the Blessed Virgin restored the fingers to my hand.” (*[...] I slyshu – Bogoroditsa rukami svoimi bol’nuii moiui ruku osiazaet, [...] rukami svoimi nad moeiu rukoiu iako igraet, i mnitmisia, kaby Bogoroditsa k ruke moei i persty prilozhila.*)³³

The pain immediately vanished and Epifanii’s mood dramatically changed to joy and admiration of the Almighty.

Two stories that follow Epifanii’s loss of his “tongues” after two amputations follow a similar narrative model and differ only in details. We notice that the narration regarding the first amputation is much shorter, that

³⁰ All citations of the text are taken from: Robinson, *Zhizneopisaniia Avvakuma i Epifaniiia* (1963) (<http://feb-web.ru/feb/avvakum/texts/rob/rob-179-.htm>). All translations are mine.

³¹ Idem., (p. 193).

³² Idem., (p. 194).

³³ Idem.

the first punishment resulted in severe pain while the second was almost painless, and that the healing from the second punishment was accompanied by a vision. This vision, described in detail, tells of how Epifanii put his amputated tongue back into his mouth and fixed it with his unharmed hand.

The descriptions of pain and healing not related to Epifanii's physical punishments are structured similarly. One of them tells a story that took place in the monk's early years, when he lived as a hermit in a wooden hut. After an unsuccessful attempt to burn his hut, the Devil decided to harm Epifanii in another way: by sending into it a swarm of ants that severely attacked the monk's genitals. Telling about his desperate attempts to rid himself of the attackers, Epifanii repeatedly points to the selectivity of the insects: "And they eat nothing – neither hands, nor legs, nor anything else, but the secret part of the body." (*A inovo nichevo ne iadiat – ni ruk, ni nog, ni inovo chevo, tokmo tainyia udy.*)³⁴ The pain caused by the ants was so intolerable that the monk was about to give himself up to despair. Finally, one day at the dinner table he received such a strong bite that he had to stop eating. Suffering from severe pain, he fell on his knees and addressed his passionate prayers to the icon of the Blessed Virgin. Very soon, the insects quit attacking his body and in a while disappeared never to return.

The second story took place much later in prison. It begins with a detailed description of new bodily sufferings Epifanii has experienced: his earthen cell became so full of smoke that he was close to death several times. In addition to his breathing, the smoke affected his eyes: they became filled with pus, and the monk began to lose his vision. He vainly attempted to tear the pus off his eyes with his hands and in the end he was unable to read his prayer book. This disability was especially difficult for Epifanii and drove him to despair. In such physical and moral conditions, he laid down on his bench and appealed to the Lord, the Blessed Virgin, his guardian angel, and all the saints for help. After this he had a dream in which he saw a warder approaching him and asking to make several wooden crosses. When Epifanii objects that he is no longer capable of doing this handicraft anymore due to the loss of eyesight and fingers of his right hand, the warder replies: "Do, for God's sake, do! Christ will help you." (*Delai, Boga radi, delai! Khristos tebe pomozhet.*) After these words the warder disappears.

Three days later, now in reality, he comes up to Epifanii with the same request as in the dream. After some hesitation, prayers, and obtaining his spiritual father's blessing, Epifanii decides to try to resume his handicraft. At this time a miracle occurs: his eyes immediately became free of

³⁴ Idem., (p. 186).

pain and able to see, and his truncated hand becomes able to manufacture crosses.³⁵

These examples of stories about pain and healing in *Zhitie* clearly show striking differences between Epifanii's self-narrative and conventional self-narratives of modern times. If asked about the reason (or reasons) for these differences, we would most likely agree that they are historical in nature. One may also add that they are the result of Epifanii's religiosity and his status as a monk. Questions about the meaning of the text would produce less unanimity.

If we take the first approach briefly sketched above, which suggests continuity in both the development of first-person writings and the development of human self understood as their source, we may easily come to a number of conclusions about the text and its author. For instance, that *Zhitie* mostly follows traditional medieval Christian patterns of spiritual autobiography, and thus does not offer revolutionary meanings; that in some cases, the stories about miracles which it tells, follow Russian sixteenth- and seventeenth-century hagiographical models; that it reveals clear traces of a medieval mentality (the author's strong belief in miracles in particular); that in search of relief from his pains, Epifanii relies on supernatural powers and not on medicine, etc. All these conclusions can be hardly argued from the standpoint of mainstream history of autobiography, which is based on the concept of development (either gradual or revolutionary) and thus looks at the early texts retrospectively.

Meanwhile, taking the second approach to Epifanii's narrative (i.e. autobiography as a social practice), our reading of the entire text and stories about pain and healing in particular brings quite different results. Contextualization of this type makes it clear that *Zhitie* was written not for us to discuss it as a part of literary or cultural tradition, but for other readers and for other historically specific aims.

Epifanii composed his life narrative in a dramatic period of Russian history associated with religious reforms made by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Nikon, and supported by Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich. The main idea behind these reforms was to correct "corrupted" Russian church service books in accordance with their original Greek counterparts, and to correct some of the rituals as well (e.g., the sign of the cross was to be made with three fingers instead of two; and "hallelujah" had to be pronounced three times instead of twice). Implementation of the reforms raised strong discontent in society and caused a split (*raskol*) in Russian Orthodoxy. Those who rebelled against the reforms became known as Old Believers. They viewed the reforms

³⁵ Idem., (pp. 198–200).

as evil to the extent that Patriarch Nikon himself was regarded as the Antichrist.³⁶ Monk Epifanii was among these rebellious Old Believers. In about 1665 he wrote a book portraying the tsar's support of reforms as a betrayal of the "true" faith. The following year he set out for Moscow to expose the ruler of all Rus. Soon he was arrested, excommunicated by the Church Council, physically punished (his tongue was cut out), and deported to the distant northern fort-town Pustozersk. While in exile, Epifanii endured a second punishment after he again refused to accept the reforms. Again his tongue (according to some evidence, the tongue had regenerated after being cut out the first time) and now the four fingers of his right hand were amputated. Epifanii remained imprisoned for the last 15 years of his life along with the leader of Old Believers protopope Avvakum and two other companions-in-arms. On April 14, 1682 he, together with other prisoners, was burned in a wooden hut in a common auto-da-fé.

Zhitie was written during this time in exile on the request of protopope Avvakum who had composed his own autobiography earlier. Both texts were produced in at least two copies each, and both were clearly addressed to "brothers and sisters in faith" at large. At the very end of his story, Epifanii identifies his desired audience as his "spiritual children, brothers and fathers," and also a wider group of "all servants of Christ, who read and hear this."³⁷ The text of *Zhitie* also gives us some hints as to the effect it was to produce on its readers. Thus, Epifanii asks his spiritual son Afonasiï who several times visited him in prison and was ordered to secretly pass on the manuscript "to accept the writing with love of Christ" and "to look at it as at me, who is a poor *starets*, and to respect it with love of Christ." In conclusion, the author adds: "And if you find something for

³⁶ See some basic general studies on Raskol: Makarii (Bulgakov), mitr., *Istoriia russkogo raskola, izvestnogo pod imenem staroobriadstva*. Saint-Petersburg: Korolev & Co, 1855; Schapov, Afanasii P. *Russkij raskol staroobriadstva*. Kazan': Ivan Dubrovin, 1859; Borozdin, Aleksandr K. *Protopop Avvakum. Ocherk iz istorii umstvennoi zhizni russkogo obshchestva v XVII v.* Saint-Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo A.S. Suvorina, 1898; Paskal, Pierre. *Avvakum et les débuts du Rascol. La crise religieuse au XVIIIe siècle en Russie*. Paris: Mouton & Co, 1938; Hauptmann, Peter. *Altrussischer Glaube. Der Kampf des Protopopen Avvakum gegen die Kirchenreformen des 17. Jahrhunderts*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963; Zenkovskii, Sergei A. *Russkoe staroobriadchestvo: Dukhovnye dvizheniia XVII veka*. Moscow: Kvadriga, 2009; Crummey, Robert O. *The Old Believers & The World Of Antichrist: The Vyg Community & The Russian State*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970; Crummey, Robert O. "Old Belief as Popular Religion: New Approaches." *Slavic Review* 52, 1993, pp. 700–13; Michels, Georg B. *At War With the Church: Religious Dissent in Seventeenth-Century Russia*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000; Hauptmann, Peter. *Russlands Altgläubige*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005.

³⁷ Robinson (1963 p. 202).

the good of your soul, you, son, glorify this God and do not forget me in your holy prayers.”³⁸

Even this brief socio-historical contextualization strongly suggests that Epifanii's stories about his pain and healing – and certainly his *Zhitie* as a whole – comprise strong propaganda messages. They are encouraging appeals to other Old Believers: one must be firm in the devotion to the old belief; those who remain firm are helped by God; devotion and prayers to the Blessed Virgin is the best way to obtain divine protection; one must be patient and try hard to avoid sin. Keeping these messages in mind, we may assume that both for the author and for his readers, the bodily suffering and miraculous healing so strikingly detailed in the *Zhitie* are of key importance not as manifestations of Epifanii's individual pains, but as a part of a larger story.

Contextualization of this second type gives answers to many questions about content and structure of the stories told by Epifanii otherwise left obscure. Let us take a look at the author's selection of objects in telling about his pain and healing. A careful reader of the *Life* would grasp that each of these objects has its own symbolical sacred meaning and each is related to the fight for the “true” faith. It becomes clear that the tongue is given to Epifanii to say prayers in the traditional pre-reform manner and to accuse his religious opponents; his fingers are destined to make the sign of the cross in the traditional way and also to manufacture wooden eight-pointed Old Believers' crosses; his eyes are for reading his pre-reform prayer book and, again, for manufacturing Old Believers' crosses. The same symbolic meaning is attributed to the monk's genitals, the weakest and most sinful part of the human body, which is most vulnerable to the temptations of the Devil. Not coincidentally, in this episode Epifanii metaphorically calls the ants “worms”³⁹; in Christian eschatology this word is directly associated with the death of the body and with Hell. The edifying general moral of the episode is clear: without Heavenly help all human efforts to defeat the Devil are doomed to failure.

This type of contextualization also leads to questioning the author's subjectivity in the text of *Zhitie* as such. On the one hand, there is little doubt that Epifanii's narrative is about himself: it follows (more or less) the events of his life, includes descriptions of the “inner” motions of his soul, begins (after a short introductory statement) with the traditional autobiographical formula (“I was born...”) ⁴⁰, and – last but

³⁸ Idem.

³⁹ Idem., (p. 186).

⁴⁰ Idem., (p. 179).

not least – the author himself labels this narrative as a “life” (*zhitie*)⁴¹. There is also little doubt that his explicit and graphic descriptions of pain are something that comes from his own individual experience as a martyr.

On the other hand, the story contains declarations that contradict such an individualistic interpretation. From the very beginning, Epifanii underlines that he himself is not the initiator of the work. He claims that it has been undertaken first in obedience to Christ, second at his confessor’s command and in expectation of his blessing, and finally in response to a request of one of Epifanii’s spiritual sons. Moreover, addressing his readers Epifanii announces that his story is not about himself at all but about things divine. He says: “I will not refuse telling you about Jesus Christ [...]” (*ne otrekusia skazati vam o Iisuse Khriste*).⁴² From this point of view his narrative may be read not as a story about his *self* but about something else, most likely about Almighty God and the divine miracles Epifanii witnessed in his fight for his faith. As for his own individual self and his life, they are of little importance. Rather they are the means for the implementation of God’s will.

The case study in the second part of this article that approaches Epifanii’s *Zhitie* as an individual act deeply embedded in concrete historical reality is primarily aimed at highlighting the importance of methodologies elaborated in the contemporary humanities for re-reading Russian pre-modern autobiographical texts. Regrettably, until now these new methodologies have been barely used in Russian studies, especially by Russian scholars. At the same time, this analysis is also aimed at emphasizing that social contextualization could be a useful tool for contemporary autobiographical studies in general⁴³. By advocating this approach I do not imply its superiority over or even rejection of the time-honored one that views autobiographical texts as elements of autobiographical tradition: we can hardly get rid of ourselves and of our retrospective view on pre-modern texts “from above.” It is likely that both approaches may go somehow hand in hand, and my suggestion implies only the change of emphasis. If we return to the example with Rousseau’s *Confessions* addressed above, this would mean to turn from the exploration of revolutionary semantic shifts in this self-representation to what may be called the “revolutionary situation” that made these shifts possible.

⁴¹ Idem., (p. 202).

⁴² Idem., (p. 179).

⁴³ I completely agree with Gabriele Jancke’s claim that socio-historical contextualization might be effective for better understanding not only early, but also modern autobiographical texts and “autobiography as a literary genre” as a whole (Jancke 2007, p. 71).

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