



The Self in Verse. Exploring Autobiographical Poetry. Editorial

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Abstract

This editorial introduces the four articles of the section “The Self in Verse. Exploring Autobiographical Poetry” and connects their specific findings to a variety of more general aspects in the study of life-writing. It sketches out preliminary considerations concerning the definition of autobiographical poetry and the relevance of paratexts and autofictionality for the genre. Furthermore, it outlines some of the most common recurring themes in poems dealing with autobiographical issues, such as writing (through) the body and exploring life’s crises, watersheds, and crossroads lyrically. We advocate for a more comprehensive study of autobiographical poetry as a form of life-writing that, in our view, has not yet been investigated systematically, neither by historical nor by theoretical approaches in literary and cultural studies.

Keywords: Autobiographical writing, Poetry, Life-writing theory, Life-writing history

The Self in Verse

Poetry, as a means of expressing the self in verse, has constantly fascinated writers. Very early cases include Catullus and Ovid, whose Latin poems *Carmina* and *Tristia* treat questions of lives faced with controversy and exile. In the Middle Ages, French and German troubadours, such as Chrétien de Troyes and Walther von der Vogelweide, sought to cultivate a courtly mode of self-fashioning in their songs. Likewise, ever since the Renaissance, some of the most eminent writers have penned important works in the form of autobiographical poems. Dante's *Vita Nuova*, Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, Matsuo Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Goethe's *Sesenheim Songs*, Wordsworth's *The Prelude. Growth of a Poet's Mind*, and Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* are only but a few crucial milestones of the genre. Autobiographical approaches to represent and narrate the self poetically are located at the very centre of lyrical expression: whether in love poems, religious poetry, historiographic or epic poems, to name but a few, the poet is often intertwined with the text in an approach to formulate selfhood. In the 20th and 21st centuries, autobiographical poetry has also been widely practised throughout literature, with Modernists and Postmodernists such as the German authors Bertolt Brecht (*Of Poor B.B.*) and Gottfried Benn (1886), the Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet (*Otobiyografi*), and the American writer Lyn Hejinian (*My Life*) stretching the boundaries of life-writing in verse. In the footsteps of writers like these, Robert Lowell's and Sylvia Plath's Confessional Poetry continues the constant stream of lyrical autobiography alongside the multi-layered lyrics of well-versed songwriters/poets, such as Leonard Cohen, to point out just one example. Thus, the significance of autobiographical poetry not only for life-writing, but for literature in general is beyond question.

Scholarly approaches to the art of autobiographical writing, however, are typically focused on prose instead of poetry. It is often overlooked that the long history of life-writing has spawned this equally rich corpus of self-portraits in versified, rhythmic, or otherwise deliberately bound language. Only one of many telling examples is Philippe Lejeune's influential definition in *The Autobiographical Pact*. Lejeune characterises 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' (Lejeune 1975, 14 [1989, 4], our emphasis; cf. Gill/Waters 2009, 2). In standard definitions like this, it is often ignored that the term 'autobiography' is *per se* neither limited to narrative nor to prose texts. But even though definitions in the style of Lejeune's have rightly and widely been contested and modified (e.g., by Paul de Man 1979, 920, and James Olney 1980, 249, who have

both used poetry extensively in their readings of autobiographical literature), the discussion about life-writing in the form of poetry in literary and cultural studies is still only in its beginnings.

By editing and publishing the following section of the EJLW, we naturally hope to incite more comprehensive scholarship into this fascinating and, in our view, hitherto quite undervalued topic in life-writing research. Even though the subject of depicting one's own life in literature, of course, results in a number of shared concerns in comparison to autobiographical writing in prose, the deliberate choice of poetry as a means of expression encompasses a range of capabilities that are, arguably, genuinely inherent to the lyrical subgenre. As the four case studies by Carmen Bonasera, Martin Kindermann, Stefan Kjerkegaard and Jutta Müller-Tamm show, these include, for example, the use of accompanying paratexts to poems; artistic stylisations of personal names and heteronyms; lyrical concepts of autofiction; writings through the body; and specifically poetic elaborations on crucial crossroads of life.

Lives

Autobiographical poetry, as a segment of life-writing, can be characterised by both a thematic and a formal component. Thematically, firstly, the analysed texts subscribe to the three quintessential etymological dimensions that Georg Misch's classical definition has spelled out: 'the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*auto*)' (Misch 1949 [1907], 7; 1950, 5). Hence, the texts contribute with thought-provoking insights to the millennia-long and worldwide tradition of autobiographical life-writing, here especially with regards to modern American, British, German, and Scandinavian authors from 19th-century Victorian England to the present day, i.e., W. Abdullah Quilliam, Elizabeth Bishop, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, Jan Wagner, and Yahya Hassan. The individual life circumstances of these writers are quite varied, as are their autobiographical topics, ranging from coming-of-age experiences and depictions of bodies to religious initiations and, of course, their respective careers and capacities as poets. The smallest common denominator of their textual approaches thus lies in the texts' constitutive acts of turning mundane 'life' into literary 'art', or, to use a distinction made by Lawrence Buell, of selecting, organising, and transforming 'worldscape' into 'wordscape' (Buell 2005, 39). This is by no means a one-directional process, but rather a reciprocal one, since these various acts of

writing not merely document but ultimately ‘make the self they find’ (Chiasson 2007, 170).

Poems

The formal component, secondly, lies in the fact that the texts studied in the following articles use poetry in particular as their medium of autobiographical expression. Therefore, they employ many of the standard devices of the lyric that set them apart from their epic counterparts, for example by brevity instead of lengthiness, verse instead of prose, and rhymes as well as meter. Overall, the texts in question thus substantially deviate from ‘everyday speech’, since they dedicate a heightened attention to the acoustic and the visual capacities of language, as demonstrated, for example, by sound devices and by the widespread insertion of metaphors, symbols, and further means of figurative speaking. In addition, they make use of defining features that usually put poetry in a position close to autobiographical writing per se, such as the self-reflexivity, directness, and structural simplicity that is often found in poems (for all the features mentioned Burdorf 1997 [1995], 21). Instead of the plurality of roles that is usually elaborated in drama, and the polyphony of voices that is typically developed in epic genres like the novel, the common default setting of the majority of poetry is arguably rather that of a single ‘I’ addressing the reader straightforwardly and is frequently assumed to be situated in relative closeness to the individual voice of its author. In this vein, critics like Susan S. Lanser have pointed out that poetry, by means of its ‘conventional singularity’ and ‘its likelihood of evoking aspects of its author’s identity’ stands out as *the* literary genre ‘primed for authorial attachment’ (Lanser 2005, 213), and, as such, naturally proves itself highly suitable for purposes of autobiographical writing. Given this background, it comes as no surprise that autobiographical poetry, as mentioned above, has spawned a historical tradition just as long-standing and fruitful as its textual counterparts in prose. All of this demonstrates that writing the self is by no means only a matter of prose; it can likewise be considered as one of the leitmotifs of poetry.

(Para-)Texts

In addition to these general traits (or tendencies) of the lyric genre, genuinely autobiographical poems usually also make use of more specific characteristics to invite their audience to read them as an artistic rendering of the poet’s life, as written

by her- or himself (cf. Abbs 2001, 83). Just as in autobiographies in prose, paratexts such as the main or the subtitles, references to certain times and places, or the partial as well as the full use of the author's proper name play a pivotal role also in the case of autobiographical poems. Obvious cases in point for titles are works such as Nâzım Hikmet's *Otobiyografi*, Hans Sachs' *Sum of my Poems to Date*, François Villon's *Le Testament*, and most of the texts already mentioned above. For time and place references, paratexts such as the brief notes 'Dornburg, Aug. 1828' and 'Dornburg, Septbr. 1828' in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Dornburg Poems*, or the more extensive description 'Herrn Pauli Flemingi der Med. Doct. Grabschrift / so er ihm selbst gemacht in Hamburg / den xxix. Tag des Mertzens m. dc. xl. auf seinem Todtbette drey Tage vor seinem seel. Absterben' ['Mr. Paul Fleming's, MD, Epitaph / made by himself in Hamburg / 28 March 1646 on his deathbed three days before his blessed death'] in Paul Fleming's *Epitaph* similarly orientate strongly towards autobiographical directions (for an interpretation of these and similar paratexts in German literature cf. Klimek 2019). Paratexts, like the aforementioned, function as strong signals to suggest that the following poems will focus explicitly on the individual lives of their authors, providing either the lyric quintessence of a whole biography (in Fleming's case, in the face of his approaching death), or a glimpse into a crucial moment or sequence in the poet's life that is considered worthy to be transformed into, and presented in a poem.

Names

Fleming's text also serves as a prominent case of the use of the author's own personal name in his poetry, for which, of course, plenty of other examples exist as well, such as (the even 'post mortal' title of) Jaime Gil de Biedma's *After the Death of Jaime Gil de Biedma*. Carolin Fischer has pointed out that textual strategies like these form part of an 'explicit poetic pact' of author-personas directly visible in the texts, as distinguished from an 'implicit poetic pact', put forward by a rather unspecified 'I' in poems (Fischer 2007, 300). However, as Jutta Müller-Tamm's article in the following section shows, poets can also employ more subtle or even paradoxical concepts of allographic naming that still allow for interpretations along the lines of autobiographical poetry. Taking the example of *The Owl Haters in the Hall Houses*, published by the German contemporary poet Jan Wagner, Müller-Tamm explores a 'poetry of heteronyms', of three imaginary poets that still 'is intimately linked with the personal' (Müller-Tamm 2021, 21). Thus, Wagner's poetry 'exploits and at the same time challenges the desire to read poetry as confession, as autobiographically

determined' (idem, 26). By inventing three fictional poets, Wagner aims to both 'disappear as a private individual' in his poetry and, by means of the fictional characters created by him, to emphasize certain facets both of his own artistic personality in order 'to become visible in literature' (idem, 29). Therefore, Wagner's 'heteronymic poetics of the self' exemplifies 'an "unholy" trinity of author, imagined poet, and poem' that fundamentally 'shows up the entanglements of life and literature' (idem, 28, 23) lying at the core of autobiographical poetry.

Autofictions

The case of Wagner also exemplifies the general point that autobiographical poetry, just as its counterparts in prose, typically endorses the autofictional paradigm that holds such a prevalent position in modern literature. This means that its literary ways of self-expression paradoxically set out to incorporate 'the best of two worlds' into its texts: on the one hand, the advantages of seemingly 'sincere' factual modes of writing with their serious claims of accountability, authenticity, truth; on the other, the benefits of fictional modes with their licences to more freely invent, imagine, and fashion the portrayals of their own lives. Thus, the authors manage to unfold a strong presence of their persona in their poems in two ways at once: first, by a 'referential pact' that allows them to retrace elements in their texts to their extra-textual vitae; second, by a 'fictional pact' that enables them to demonstrate their full literary potential as creative writers (cf. Zipfel 2009, 299). Hence, it lies in their key interest to not only operate in an external compositor's role, but also to actively inscribe their authorial presence into their poems (cf. Lindskov Hansen 2020, 38), to present them as aesthetic ego-documents. However, even though this poetic form, this constant interplay of fact and fiction allows for plenty of artfulness, masks and stylisations in the lyrical self-portraits of the respective writers, certain linkages to the 'referential world' still need to be present in order to make the poems identifiable as 'autobiographical' in the first place (cf. Tippner/Laferl 2016, 11). Christian Benne has emphasized this as being a process of '*Autobiopoesis*', in the context of which the artistic creation of one's own biography, despite all of its fictionality, can probably lead to an even 'higher' form of authenticity compared to the 'mere' recording of facts (cf. Benne 2006, 454). Thus, the characteristic rootedness of the genre in factuality remains, despite the large extent of fictionality that can be involved.

Bodies

Another form of invitation to an autobiographical reading is to focus especially on the body of the self, as is the case of the female ‘Confessional Poets’ that Carmen Bonasera’s article scrutinizes in the following section. Whereas paratexts and names arguably serve the purpose of individualizing a poem into the direction of concrete life circumstances of its author, body concepts more often pursue the opposite goal of linking the individual with the universal (cf. Lerro 2017, 176), or at least with a variety of gender-specific concepts of the human condition’s corporeal dimensions. As Bonasera shows, women writers in particular have used this opportunity to ‘write through their bodies’, a claim first formulated by French theorist and activist Hélène Cixous (1975). Following this notion, the Confessional Poets use depictions of bodies as a medium for the ‘negotiation of the self, challenging their readers to redefine the terms by which we understand poetry, life writing, and the female’ (Bonasera 2021, 52). They thus take autobiographical writing’s standard obligation to tell ‘the naked truth’ literally by exposing the body ‘in its raw and exhibitionist nudity’ and in ‘its multifaceted meanings’ as ‘biological entity, psycho-sexual construction’ and ‘cultural product’ (idem, 39, 41) in society. By ‘presenting femininity as both essence and performance’, including problematic aspects such as ‘violence’ and ‘trauma’ (idem 52), Confessional Poetry breaks pathways from the privacy of the body to the political sphere of empowering women and challenging predominantly ‘masculine cultural models’ (idem, 41). Artistically, this subgenre of autobiographical poetry furthermore embarks on the ambitious project to evoke sensual, physical, namely corporeal dimensions within the context of the basically mental, abstract, and intellectual realm of literature as such. Against this background, their poems stand out as a ‘test case’ for the capacities of autobiographical poetry to convey particularly ‘fleshly’ aspects of life within a rather ‘discarnate’ setting of black letters on white paper.

Crossroads

The case of the Confessional ‘body poem’ also already leads to another important dimension of autobiographical poetry. Rather than providing a full-fledged account of one’s own life, the relative brevity of the genre recurrently prompts authors to concentrate on a particular event, episode, or passage of their biographies. Oftentimes, poets choose an occurrence which stands out as one of the paramount crises, watersheds, or crossroads in their vitae. The articles of Martin Kindermann

and Stefan Kjerkegaard in the following section centre around two such examples. Kindermann focuses on the ‘intertwinement of autobiographic conversion experience and religious self-location’ (Kindermann 2021, 71) in the poems of the British authors Gerard Manley Hopkins and W. Abdullah Quilliam, who converted to Catholicism and Islam respectively. While Hopkins depicts his experience by means of ‘using force and violent intervention in an historic event’, Quilliam, in turn, illustrates it as ‘a slow processual transition in an artistic vision’ (idem, 72). Hence, both the individual project of constructing one’s own poetic identity and the link between the personal and the collective or even the universal recur again also in the case of these poems, this time more directed towards some decisive life events.

The same holds true for the texts of the recently deceased young Danish-Palestinian poet Yahya Hassan, who is, as Stefan Kjerkegaard’s article argues, mainly concerned with a difficult coming-of-age process within a conflict-laden multicultural situation. In addition, Kjerkegaard reads Hassan’s work as representative for a group of writers driven by the ‘very deliberate aesthetic and human choice’ of signalling ‘both responsibility for and resistance to the idea that it is possible to transform our identities, and narrate them coherently’ (Kjerkegaard 2021, 89). Poetry, in his view, possesses the power to offer ‘an adequate and responsible account of oneself’ in the sense of Judith Butler’s approach to life-writing (idem, 77; cf. Butler 2005). By including a ‘human stain’ into their life-writing, the poems by Hassan and other Scandinavian writers manage to create an ‘awareness of our incompleteness, rather than a coherent understanding of identity’, by which they explore ‘the grounds for ethical self-construction’ (idem, 89) in depth. Seen through this perspective, poetry’s typically concise and ‘intermittent narratives’ (Bode 2019, 476), which at first glance seem like a kind of limitation of the genre, actually appear to work in its favour.

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