Between *Genre* and *Gender*: The "Canon" of Autobiography

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Résumé: *En abordant l'autobiographie, la critique féministe américaine des années '80 dénonce souvent l'exclusion des textes écrits par les femmes d'un supposé «canon» qui serait la création des critiques-hommes. L'article se propose d'identifier la notion de canon qui est envisagée dans des pareils contextes. Il s'agirait d'un canon du genre, dont le critère de sélection est la conformité ou la non-conformité des textes par rapport à un modèle formel. Ce modèle est problématique, parce qu'on n'a pas réussi de donner jusqu'à présent une définition de l'autobiographie. D'autre part, la critique féministe dénonce les «limites du genre», mais ne précise jamais quelles sont ces limites, en superposant systématiquement «genre» et «gender». Cependant, elle propose une «poétique» de l'autobiographie des femmes, regroupe des textes et invoque une tradition féminine du genre. En analysant le débat sur le «canon», le présent article tente de discerner les normes et les critères utilisés par cette critique.*

Keywords: *autobiography, gender studies, canon, genre, tradition, self-consciousness, individualism*

Any volume of feminist literary criticism and/or theory dedicated to autobiography invokes the existence of a "canon" established by male critics from which women's texts are excluded. Domna C. Stanton, for instance, shows that, despite the huge bibliography piled up in the last two decades, "if a female reader were to take down the bulk of those critical volumes, she would be forced to conclude that women had written virtually no autobiographies"[1]. A representative of traditional criticism would expect such an accusation to be followed by the names of those women writers and the titles of those monographs which, in Stanton's opinion, should have been included in the incriminated books. He would expect suchlike names and titles to be associated, as an argument, with the idea of value. However, Stanton makes not such clarifications; after denouncing "this ghostly absence", she concludes that this matter points out to what extent "the collective repression of women"[2] still continues.

Puzzled, the traditional critic will wonder what the connection is between the exclusion of *certain* works from books written by *certain* critics and suchlike "collective repression". He will require examples of autobiographies which were discriminated against, he will look for the names of the critics who discriminated against them and for their value judgments. The only names Stanton mentions, in a different context, are "Laetitia Pilkington, Teresia Constantia Philips and Frances Ann Vanne", whose

"confessions of feeling" were labeled as "frigidly sentimental chronicles" written by "dishonest and libertine women"[3]. What the female author points out is not that the respective texts are valuable, but that they were written in the 17th century, being "contemporary with or even predating the earliest productions of men canonized by literary history"[4].

It goes without saying that our hypothetical traditional critic and Domna C. Stanton hold divergent views on what "canon" means. For the former, the canon is an order encompassing a range of *unique* works belonging to *individual* authors, works which were selected due to their value. For the representatives of feminism, on the other hand, canon is seen as a list of texts likely to mirror an equitable "representation" of authors according to *gender* criteria, the same as a proportional "representation" of women is required in an institution. Therefore, however strange it may be, what matters here is neither the name of the writers "canonized" nor the name of the authors excluded from the canon.

Although gender claims may seem absurd, in the case of autobiography they may be somehow granted legitimacy on the grounds that this literary genre does not belong to the *critical canon* whose main selection criterion is the aesthetic criterion. It is true that, starting with Rousseau, autobiography moved closer to "literature", but, despite all this, it has maintained so far its two-fold or intermediary status, in-between "document" and literary work. Along with memoirs, private diaries and correspondence, it is included by S. Iosifescu into a distinct category of writings called "borderline literature" so as to clearly distinguish them from the writings having "an aesthetic finality"[5]. Obviously, this "borderline" is not immovable, since the aesthetic value is not an intrinsic and invariable quality of texts, but it is meaningful that the most enthused supporters of autobiography raise objections whenever it is compared to the novel.

Given this, an alleged canon of autobiography should match the inner canon of a genre. The main selection criterion of such a canon is the compliance of the text with or deviation from a certain model or pattern of the genre. Although the feminist representatives do not make, as a rule, this clarification, the distinction between the two types of canon truly matters, since, according to Mircea Martin, even if a work can be seen as a "model" of a genre, that does not automatically mean that it belongs to the critical canon[6]. The most telling example in the case of autobiography is Rousseau's *Confessions*. In spite of the fact that it is an unmistakable model of the genre, with numberless imitations, this work could have belonged to the critical canon if only the autobiographical genre had been granted an equal status with the so-called "traditional genres". Of course, genre dynamics is open and this shift may occur in the future, but it is meaningful that Philippe Lejeune is cautious in this regard when he writes that today we witness "a canonisation of autobiography"[7].

Although the notion of genre canon is seldom explained in gender studies, requiring to be deduced from the context, it stands out because, from the latter's perspective, what matters is not the aesthetic value of autobiography, but rather its usefulness as "a conjunctural document of the self and the times"[8]. The premise of all critical schools which in the '80s promoted the autobiographies of various "minority" groups is that the

text mediates the access to a *collective* experience. From this angle, it is clear that "literarity" would reduce its referential strength and, implicitly, the effectiveness of its "message". The American feminism we shall deal with further on frequently emphasizes that the point is not "what autobiography is", but "what it can do", its pragmatic-type effects on women-readers. That is why, at the cost of a paradox, gender theorists often refuse to theorize autobiography and intently use it "as a strategic necessity at a particular time, rather than an end in itself"[9]. From this viewpoint, it is also meaningful that, contrary to the entire modern criticism striving to dissociate autobiography from its cognate species of biography, feminism reminds us quite imperatively at times that the autobiographies written by women are read by women mainly as biographies[10].

In this paper we shall discuss therefore the canonical claims in gender studies only from the perspective of genre canon. As I said before, the selection criterion operated by this canon is the compliance with or deviation from a genre model (pattern). Here we encounter the first obstacle. Being implicit, suchlike models as Rousseau's *Confessions* are disputed by feminist criticism as being enforced by male critics according to discriminatory criteria. The collective volume coordinated by Domna C. Stanton is titled *The Female Autograph. Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*. Despite this "signal" about autobiography, we are warned that its content will feature anthologies of and comments on not only "female autobiographies", but also "memoirs, letters and diaries"[11]. This is not an inconsistency, but rather a strategy "to undermine the generic boundaries that have plagued the study of autobiography", an option motivated by the fact that they have been frequently associated with "unconvincing criteria for differentiating various modes of self-inscription"[12]. It is clear that the rejection of the so-called "generic boundaries" implies a revision of the canon, likely to be done exclusively on gender criteria.

To overcome this deadlock, the genre canon should be related not to historical models but rather to a unanimously accepted definition of autobiography. In this respect, Lejeune gives the best known definition so far: "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality"[13]. Apparently rigor-bound, the definition mixes, at a closer look, several formal traits with a thematic trait: the accent the autobiographer should put on "the story of his personality". Is it truly "defining"? Lejeune himself admitted later on that it is not.

While the only thematic feature is restrictive, the formal features are too general. The narrative may be longer or shorter, the shortest version not exceeding a private diary page or a letter. "The retrospective" is also a variable unit of measurement, since, at long last, the private diary itself, often opposed to autobiography, is written at the end of a day. "The prose" is no less debatable; why should not autobiographies be written in verses? Suchlike attempts have been made and although their effect was laughable, definitions do not take into account the reading effects. Finally, the most intricate question is what exactly differentiates autobiography as such, which is a referential text, from the autobiographic novel, as a fictional text?

There are, naturally, various signals and "clues of fictionality", but they are not mandatory. As Genette said, there are devices that seem more truthful in a fictional story than in a factual account[14]. The consequence thereon is that, according to Lejeune, "on the level of analysis within the text, there is no difference. All the methods that autobiography uses to convince us of the authenticity of its narrative can be imitated by the novel and often have been"[15]. In other words, however strange it may seem, the same text, with no alterations whatsoever, may be an autobiography as such or an autobiographic novel. Lejeune tried to exit this dilemma through the theory of the so-called "autobiographic pact", which starts from the premise that autobiography works on the basis of "a reading contract" concluded between the author and the reader. It is a solution which moves the problem beyond the limits of the text and for this reason we shall not discuss it here.

In agreement with the opinion held by most critics, the only conclusion to be drawn is that autobiography cannot be defined, since there is no set of formal traits likely to determine a corresponding class of texts[16]. Nonetheless, on the other hand, even if such a definition were available, it is unlikely that gender studies representatives would accept it. Domna C. Stanton suggests to the theorists who tried to codify the genre through "a set of stable conventions" that "the whole project of defining autobiography generically is what needs to be abandoned"[17]. Is this the expression of a purely theoretical skepticism or is it an interested stand? This is a question we shall have the opportunity to deal with all along this paper.

To determine the genre canon of autobiography, one last solution would be for feminist criticism to reach a consensus as to what authors belong to it. Even incomplete, an inventory of these authors would be helpful to approximate, if not the formal pattern of the genre, at least the "generic boundaries" Stanton does not trace out. In the gender studies we have read, we have never come upon such a list. The word "canon" is rarely associated with the name of writers. The name repertoire varies from one case to another and significantly, this variation is never foreign to a tacit extension of genre borders. Linda Anderson, for instance, denounces "the absence of women's texts from an accepted canon of autobiographical writing, a canon which […] placed the 'confessional' texts of Saint Augustine and Rousseau at its centre"[18].

The "autobiographical writing" syntagm may cover not only private diaries, memoirs, personal essays, but also novels and poetry. Under such an encompassing concept, St. Augustine and Rousseau could be, at first sight, easily accommodated. These are the most cited names by the autobiography exegesis, "canonical" writers beyond any doubt, but still the question is: do they belong to the *same* canon? I do not know why Anderson put the word "confessional" between inverted commas, but, in spite of the identical title, it is St. Augustine alone who wrote "confessions" as such. Nonetheless, it means that he did not write an *autobiography* as such, the way Rousseau did, not even in the broad sense of an "autobiographical writing". Aside from the fact that most exegetes see them to be diametrically opposed in this respect, their text structure is likewise different. Anderson places them in a "centre" of the canon encompassing,

as a rule, the "classical authors" making the genre models, but which formal pattern do these models correspond to?

St. Augustine's *Confessions* are, unmistakably, the model imitated by many religious autobiographies. But we must emphasize that they were private writings for a limited audience. Gusdorf, the first theorist of autobiography in the 20th century, rightfully says that it is Rousseau who makes the passage to autobiography as a "literary genre", thanks not only to his literary performance, but also for a quite simple reason: The *Confessions* were *published*. It is an indispensible condition for a work to have a meaningful influence on other writers. The editorial success of *Confessions* triggered the fashion of Romantic autobiographies, which accounted for the institutionalization of the genre in the 19th century[19]. Strange as it may seem, if we take it into account, modern Rousseau alone can be called a "classic of the genre".

Let us quote again Domna C. Stanton, for a second example; "The 'autobiographical' constituted a positive term when applied to Montaigne, Rousseau, Goethe, Henry Adams and Henry Miller, but it had negative connotations when imposed on women's texts. It has been used to affirm that women could not transcend, but only record, the concerns of the private self; thus, it has effectively served to devalue their writing" (p. 4). The phrase "the autobiographical" may be written between inverted commas to include also Montaigne's *Essays*, which, as known, are not an autobiography, since they are not a narrative. For this reason, some critics programmatically counterpoised them to an autobiography, as a "literary self-portrait"[20]. As Stanton would almost certainly reject such "generic boundaries", let us tackle this issue from the angle of literary history. Rousseau and Goethe could be placed, from this point of view, at the centre of the canon, while Henry Adams and Henry Miller in the outskirts reserved for "the moderns", but we have to say that while "the classics" overcame the borders of national literature, *The Education of Henry Adams* can be included at most in a canon of American autobiography, a canon which it is not certain that Henry Miller's autobiography would fit into.

We shall discuss further on about Sidonie Smith's book: *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography. Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*. The word "autobiography" informs the reader that the book will be about autobiography, and not about memoirs, private diaries or forms of evasive "autobiographical writing", while the word "poetics" does not seem to be strange to this genre problematic; to this end, the author calls forth in the very first lines: "Ironically, or inevitably, as more and more critics talk about autobiography, the sense of its generic conventions, even its very definition, has begun to blur, until some now question whether autobiography exists at all"[21]. Like Stanton, Smith does not seem to regret this situation. She does not directly recommend that genre-related concerns be abandoned, instead she dashingly salutes the fact that Lejeune gave up his faith in "normative or essentialist definitions" (p. 6).

Indeed, the definitions on autobiography often proved to be "normative", and Lejeune's definition matches, in fact, only the type of text whose model is Rousseau's *Confessions*. On the other hand, apart from the first section on "Theoretical Considerations", Sidonie Smith's book has a second applicative section which deals with five

autobiographies written by women. In the absence of a definition, however relative, presented as a working hypothesis, how can the author justify the fact that the respective texts are "autobiographies"? It is not a pedantic question, because at stake is "the genre" of "the canonical battle", as the author sees it: "The quarrel with the canon has motivated literary critics whose focus of inquiry is women's autobiography to deconstruct the patriarchal hegemony of literary history, poetics and aesthetics, and to reconstruct histories, criticism, and theories from a different perspective. […] Piece by piece, there is being written a literary history of women's self-representation that explores the relationship between women's text and the *development of the genre*" (p. 16).

As a programmatic introduction to her critical essays, Smith outlines "a poetics of women's autobiography" which begins as follows: "An androcentric genre, autobiography demands the public story of a public life" (p. 46). Literally, an "androcentric genre" is a genre at whose centre are men, not their autobiographies. Moreover, the determinant would better match the "canon" of the genre, but the context says that, in a way, the genre brings about a first discrimination through its exigencies. The word "public" sends both to publication, audience, to the presentation of "private life" in public and also to the autobiographer's quality of public person. As Lejeune underlined, the latter is an indispensible condition for the publication of an autobiography, since, obviously, no reader is interested in the life of an "anonymous person". Hence, Smith seems to be right when she interprets this condition in a "gender" key, showing that the stereotypes about the "woman's nature" have narrowed down women's access not only to the public life but also to "the pen as an instrument of power" (*idem*).

A second discrimination looms on the horizon of "generic expectations" when, exceeding her status, the woman decides to write up her autobiography. Inevitably, she will have to make compromises with the conventions imposed by "the ideology of gender". To please the taste of the masculine public, she will have to take up either various "heroic" postures or various "phallic woman" postures. It is an aspect Smith insists upon in several critical essays, underlining that women implicitly falsify in this way the "gender" difference.

The pressure exerted by the dominant ideology equally motivates a non-transgressive attitude. The female writer can interiorize genre stereotypes, reenacting various models of "appropriate female speech and behavior" (p. 54). Behaviorally, the character portrayed will have to be kind, virtuous, discreet and having many other "qualities" inscribed in the robot-portrait of an "ideal woman" (*idem*). Speech-wise, the woman autobiographer will be forced to take a typical "self-effacing speaking posture", consenting to that "erasure of female sexuality" by which men keep women to the condition of simple sexual objects (p. 55).

In terms of style and theme, assuming the "authority to speak" in order to write an autobiography proves to be for a woman "both infectious and threatening" (p. 54). Everything leads to the conclusion that such an autobiography cannot be successful unless it perpetuates the discrimination of women, implicitly relegitimizing men's authority. The author claims that this holds true for all the autobiographies written by women until the 20th century. In this century, the woman has become aware of "her

problematic relationship to language and the narratives she has been taught to speak by the power of phallogocentric discourse" (*idem*). Once she realizes that, within this discourse, the "woman remains 'unrepresentable'", she becomes aware that the only possibility of "self-representation" is "by shifting generic boundaries": "the autobiographer may struggle to liberate herself from the ideology of traditional autobiography and to liberate autobiography from the ideology of essentialist selfhood through which it has historically been constituted" (p. 58).

Hence, the solution is identical to Stanton's approach, but Smith, in her turn, does not say what the "generic boundaries" are. On the contrary, she seems to mistake them for the limits of "ideology" or the dominant "discourse". We have to say that this outcome was foreseeable, since, defined only from the angle of its alleged "androcentrism", "the genre" has no connection whatsoever with the formal model. Although the word "poetics" would have implied minimal clarifications in this regard, the demonstration turned from the onset toward the so-called "generic expectations" and maintained this course to the very end. The notion of "generic expectations" is borrowed from the aesthetics of reception, but while for Jauss "the horizon of expectation" is related to the form and the theme of a literary work, for Smith it is exclusively reduced to what we might call, by paraphrasing it, "gender expectations".

If we have in mind that formal traits cannot be approached through a "gender-type scale, the omission is not accidental. Let us give one example. Confined by "life" convention to compress big time intervals, the autobiographer puts together several similar events by means of the so-called iterative narration: "During those months, I often went to church". Can such a device be explained by the recourse to "the ideology of gender"? As long as she did not specify the genre, Smith demonstrated that autobiography was an "androcentric" genre, but no less "androcentric" that any other genre.

As regards "generic expectations", let us first speak about the argument on the social discrimination autobiography imposes through the "public person" convention. Suchlike discrimination must be nuanced in keeping with the different types of society, culture, epoch, etc. Smith herself shows in her essays that four out of the five female authors under study do not confirm this rule. They enjoyed respect and even notoriety not only thanks to their social position but also as female writers, philosophers or scientists. Therefore, we have to distinguish between the access to public life and the quality of "public person". As Lejeune says, with regard to writers, this quality may be granted only with reference to the list of volumes written "by the same author".

James Tradewell surveyed how autobiographies were received in early 19th-century England, a period when the discrimination of women took considerably sharper forms than today. Notwithstanding this, he enters into polemics with Smith, showing that the status of a public person did not have a social or professional equivalent, identifying the persons talked about in society. Women's presence was no longer a novelty on this cultural market replete with workers and also with colored slaves from the United States, whose autobiographies played a major role in the abolitionist campaign[22].

Likewise nuanced should be the idea of the "compromises" women are called to make with "the ideology of gender". According to the same Tradewell, in the reviews

published by British newspapers, the commentators' assessment criteria were not "gender" or "class" oriented. The main disquieting motifs were the indiscriminate consumption of autobiographies, the uncensored sincerity or profit-biased writing. As "generic expectations", all this can be summed up into the formula "The writing self is expected to behave properly"[23].

In the same line, we must not forget that a basic premise of Smith's "poetics" was that of a successful autobiography. From the angle of "success", nothing can be said about a certain genre, only how performant it is. Smith herself gives us a good example in the essay on the autobiography of Charlotte Charke, an 18th-century actress who told her life full of spicy details to turn it into a best-seller. If she faked her image, it is obvious that she did not do it only under the pressure of male ideology. All the more so as, to become a best-seller, any text, belonging to any genre, must be conventional. Consequently, it must resort to *all* the stereotypes to please the common reader, not only the "gender" ones. Furthermore, it will resort to such stereotypes, irrespective of whether it is written by a woman or a man, because, if necessary, a man will also be forced to make compromises if he wants to write a "successful" autobiography. I do not make this statement to polemicize with Smith's feminism, but no ideology can force an author to wish to be successful.

Moving over to the "Readings" section, we wonder how the author will be able to highlight women's contribution to "the development of the genre" on the basis of this "poetics". It is not at all accidental that this exigency is no longer reminded when she writes to justify as an "approach" the demarche oriented toward "the process of engendered representations" (60). If we extract from the neologism "engendered", the term "gender", we grasp the reason why "genre" is omitted. Symptomatically, in the same passage "autobiography" considerably widens up its limits. "Engendered representations" include "the way in which cultural fictions of male and female selfhood thread their way through *the self-writing* of women" (59-60).

We fully understand Smith's motivations when she places "the process of engendered representations" amidst "different cultural moments in the English tradition", referring to a feminine tradition covering – *nota bene* – "the past six centuries" (59). The only clarifications she makes are that, although the book does not aspire to be a literary history, she opted for a chronological presentation, out of the multitude of autobiographies written in these centuries, "I have chosen five I particularly like" (*idem*). Such a long tradition seems, therefore, quite understandable. That it will be exclusively grasped as a "self-representation" we can concede to Smith, but on one condition. For Gusdorf, St. Augustine, Rousseau and Goethe are the "models of the genre" not by a relation with a formal pattern, but on an analogous plane, as "types ou prototypes d'une certaine expression et presentation de soi"[24]. We shall put in brackets "expression", remindful of the numerous models of the genre a multi-secular tradition may provide us with.

The first autobiography reviewed is *The Book of Margery Kempe*, written in 1436. Smith's neutral tone when mentioning "its historical location as the first extant woman's autobiography written in English" (p. 64) suggests a consensus on the fact that we are

dealing with an autobiography. Indeed, the book is included in the corpus of Domna C. Stanton's volume, the second in chronological order, after *A Shewing of God's Love* (ca. 1300) by Julian of Norwich. About the latter, the author mentions only that "the first English Woman to speak about herself", while about the former we are told that she would be "the first full autobiography in English by anyone male or female"[25].

These chronological landmarks seem to prove the feminist thesis that male literary historians and critics ignore the autobiographies written by women. If they had not ignored them, Lejeune, for instance, would not have probably extended until Rousseau a "prehistory" of the autobiography which, in his monograph *L'Autobiographie en France*, begins with Gilbert de Nogent (1154)[26]. In 1436, Margery Kempe could only write a "spiritual autobiography", but Gusdorf, who places religious autobiographies only in the 17th century, at the time of Protestantism, surely did not read it[27]. Not even Mediaevalist Paul Zumthor had heard about Margery Kempe, since he says so firmly that that there were no "autobiographies" in the Middle Ages[28]. The exegetes also ignored *A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life* (1675) by Margaret Cavendish, duchess of Newcastle, who, although according to Smith was but "one of the earliest secular autobiographies written in English" (p. 60), foreshadows by at least one century what they consider to be the first modern autobiographies.

Are these chronological landmarks enough to make a tradition? We have not read *The Book of Margery Kempe*, but even from Smith's essay we learn that she did not tell her life, instead she *confessed her sins* and made this *confession* with one goal in mind: she wanted to be a nun, but her status of married woman and mother of 14 offsprings prevented her from it. The book she wrote was her way of asking permission from church authorities. The character is fascinating through several details; the quotations are extraordinary, while the narrative is written in the third person, which raises questions about the introspection techniques of autobiography.

The other autobiographies are also debatable. That of the duchess of Newcastle is labeled by other critics as "autobiographical memoirs", which seems to be more appropriate, given the aristocratic position of the duchess, the historical period, and mainly the fact that, as Smith writes, it tells the lives of all her family members. *A Narrative of the Life of Charlotte Charke* (1755) fits into standard periodisations, if we have in mind the "romancing" inherent to a best-seller and also the fact that the woman author was a successful novelist; therefore, it is closer to what we would call autofiction. *Autobiography* (1876) by Harriet Martineau is, of course, what the title says, but with one thing to add – it is an intellectual autobiography, a "story of the development of a mind" (p. 112). Although it best fits into the genre pattern, far from recommending it as a model, Smith underlines its conventional, impersonal tone, and the typical pedantic style of the Victorian age. Finally, *The Woman Warrior* (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston raised several dilemmas as to where it belonged. It is an autobiographical text, of course, but closer to the novel not only because it "fictionalizes", inserting myths and *old Chinese folktales* into the narrative, but mainly because it alternates the narrative perspectives.

There is no point in emphasizing any longer how these "generic boundaries" were trespassed. What is of interest to us with regard to the canon is the alleged tradition of feminine autobiography, since tradition does not mean the formal purity of the genre, as it would result from "protochronistic" exaggerations. Tradition, we would say, quoting T.S. Eliot from memory – so "anti-canonical" in his days – means first and foremost an order, i.e. a sum of relations in-between texts. Only integrated into such an order do the genre models become relevant. However, Smith does not raise the question of models and she comments almost exclusively upon gender-type relations.

The order of chronological presentation is motivated by her wish to highlight "the range of women's autobiography from its first voluble outpourings to its most recent self-reflexive meditations on women and autobiographical storytelling" (p. 59). The sense of tradition would have been given, therefore, by an increased reflexivity, like in the poetics of modernism; this reflexivity alone fully certifies the scenario according to which women's real autobiography begins in the 20th century Smith shows that, although they were strong personalities, who wrote against taboos imposed by men, the first four women writers display in their texts a certain "ambivalence" which points to "the damages to woman of seeking to appropriate the story of man" (p. 62). The 20th-century woman representative is the only exception to this rule, since "she takes the problematic and makes it the matter and the medium of her text" (*idem*). Maxine Hong Kingston, the only "model" of the genre, is an outstanding woman writer, and also an authority in the American *gender studies*. The alleged "tradition" is, in other words, nothing else but a teleological narrative on the "progress" of feminist ideas in autobiographies. We shall not deny the women's contribution to the "the development of the genre", but we shall add that it is a contribution to the development of all the genres.

Our paper should have started with Smith's theoretical section. We have postponed its presentation on purpose so as not to spoil the "suspense". We showed, at first, that in the conception of gender studies, canon is defined only negatively, by the absence/exclusion by male literary critics of the autobiographies written by women. The time has finally come to learn *why* this exclusion takes place. Because – "Literary forefathers rendered the genre an androcentric contract dependent on the erasure of women's texts. Male writing about the self thereby assumed a privileged place in the canon; female writing about the self, a devalued position at the margins of the canon" (p. 16).

So far, our argument has been that we should commence with "the genre" in order to reach the canon. Smith says the same, but she does it in the reversed form of a myth wherefrom she deduces the canon of the genre: some mysterious "literary forefathers" created *illo tempore* the genre on the basis of an "androcentric contract". The fiction of this contract explains the "androcentric" character of the genre as a premise underlying Smith's "poetics". In a study on autobiography, the word "contract" can be nothing else but a reference to the "reading contract" derived from the theory on the "autobiographic pact". There is no point in citing Lejeune, since he speaks about an individual contract the autobiographer makes with the reader.

The "mythical" version we cited above matches the following theoretical thesis: as a "genre", autobiography comes from "the ideology of gender". If so far we have had

the impression that Smith sometimes confused the two terms, we now have the certainty that she does not, instead she overlaps them purposefully, since in her opinion, this "ideology of gender has always constituted *a*, if not *the*, fundamental ideological system for interpreting and understanding individual identity and social dynamics (p. 48). This thesis invalidates the "mythical" hypothesis of a contract concluded *illo tempore*.

Quoting Gusdorf, Smith says that between the 16th and the 17th centuries, a new "notion of man" would have emerged, which later on gave birth to autobiography. If we bear in mind that Margery Kempe wrote in 1463, we would signal a serious inadequacy, but we have to take into account the fact that the statement concerns men's autobiographies. In Gusdorf's outlook, autobiography is associated with self-consciousness. The philosopher shows that this self-consciousness evolves throughout history. Smith, on the other hand, shows that history bifurcates and that all the positive moments in the history of men are matched by discriminative moments in the parallel history of women. At the end of this argument, "the notion of man" becomes "the autobiographical subject", but this is synonymous to man, so that "the very definition of this new man reaffirms a fundamentally conservative definition of woman" (p. 39).

Gusdorf reports, indeed, that the Renaissance and the Reformation gave rise to a new "notion of man", but we have to underline that he did not intend to write a history of autobiography. If we read "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (1956), the essay Smith makes reference to, we shall see that although it is about Christianity, Renaissance and Enlightenment, he does not say that autobiography began with St. Augustine, Montaigne or Rousseau. Gusdorf wants to demonstrate that autobiography is "a solidly established literary genre" through a series of "conditions" of cultural possibility. Starting from the premise that autobiography expresses human self-consciousness which undergoes changes as a result of historical evolution, the question he raises is: what are the conditions making it *possible*? Since it is a gradual evolution, whose "beginnings cannot be dated, its historical arguments should be seen as *cultural* and not *chronological* landmarks.

On the contrary, Smith insists that autobiography began five hundred years ago, and the reason why she insists on that landmark becomes clear when she resumes the idea of the original "contract": "During the past five hundred years, autobiography has assumed a central position in the personal and literary life of the West precisely because it serves as one of the generic contracts that reproduces the patrilineage and its ideologies of gender" (p. 44). It is self-evident that such an explanation runs counter to chronology, since this "patrilineage" exists only in the West, not in the East, and did not emerge five centuries ago. Hence, why this insistence on chronology?

The reason seems to be that for most exegetes, the Renaissance and the Reformation are landmarks acknowledged by the history of autobiography. Referring to them, Smith wants to impose the idea of a deterministic relationship wherein "the ideology of gender" is the cause and "autobiography" is the effect. Such a different demarche is explained by the interpretation Smith gives to the notion of "self-consciousness". Gusdorf gives it the meaning of "the conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life"[29]. This consciousness is however associated with an outlook on

historicity, more concretely, on the fact there is no universal "human nature", but only specific individualities, this specificity implying their link with a certain place and a certain period in time.

Initially, Smith makes use of this feature to speak about the importance Gusdorf gives "to the emergence during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of a 'historical consciousness' governed by the sense of progress and infused with an awareness of individual differences" (p. 21). After these lines, the tone becomes ironical and the accent shifts from historicity to individuality. Gusdorf is reprimanded for "such a cultural fascination with the unfolding or the development, the reenactment or the discovery, of an individual unique historical identity" (*idem*). At the end of the chapter where Smith demonstrates that women's history was the "negative" of men's history, when she formulates the thesis on that exclusively male "autobiographical subject", individuality turns into "the ideology of individualism" and is defined as "a conception of 'man' as a metaphysical entity, a 'self' existing independently" (p. 26).

Obviously, this "individualism" looks more like an "essentialism", but along the way it gets negative moral connotations of voluntarism, subjectivism, egotism etc., while the final wording sounds like this: "In privileging the autonomous or metaphysical self as the agent of its own achievement and in frequently situating that self in an adversial stance toward the world, 'autobiography' promotes a conception of the human being that valorizes individual integrity and separateness and devalues personal and communal interdependency" (p. 39). Smith does not mention here Gusdorf, and it is clear why: without the necessary nuances, it would be hard to believe that a 20th-century critic could "promote" an ideology dating back to the 16th century. The word "autobiography" is written between inverted commas to mark the fact that it is not the autobiography as such that promotes this conception, but instead the autobiography as Gusdorf defines it.

It is no need to come to Gusdorf's defense, but a few clarifications still have to be made, on the grounds that he does not use the word "individualism", instead, he uses self-consciousness. Individualism is just one of the many possible manifestations of self-consciousness, the same as the openness toward the other, solidarity or altruism Smith reserves for women. To over-color this label with shades of „essentialism" or "metaphysics" is at best a serious misunderstanding, since, as mentioned above, self-consciousness is not inborn, but the outcome of a slow historical development, climaxing with Western modernity.

Unlike Smith, who locates "the ideology of individualism" in the 15th century, Gusdorf perceives the first significant moment to be "a cultural revolution" humankind undergoes from the mythical to the historical thinking. The philosopher emphasizes that autobiography is possible only within the cultures in which the conception of a linear and irreversible time prevails. Only against the background of such a conception can historiography, then biography, and eventually autobiography emerge, motivated by the human wish to leave to posterity a certain image of one's self. The outlook on such a *historical time* is the first landmark toward discovering historicity. Where it is absent, in the cultures where "theories of eternal recurrence" prevail, the self-consciousness of

man as an individuality is not possible: "Community life unfolds like a great drama, with its climatic moments originally fixed by the gods being repeated from age to age. Each man thus appears as the possessor of a role, already performed by the ancestors and to be performed again by descendants"[30].

It is crystal-clear: in suchlike cultures man cannot be defined as an individual, but only as the updated universal and normative human archetype or ideal. This is, in fact, an "essentialist" conception, which demonstrates, if still necessary, that "essentialism" and "individualism" are not historically overlapping. The respective cultures, says Gusdorf, are not only the "primitive" cultures, but they also include a large section of Ancient cultures. Their common denominator is the fact that they exercise an authoritarian control over man, they grant it no *autonomy* as an individual.

Historian Karl J. Weintraub, Gusdorf's disciple and follower, stresses that the meaning of the word "individualism" corresponding to the idea of the individual's autonomy is theoretically rigorous: "the social theory which advocates the free and independent action of the individual"[31]. A society may function in keeping with the principles of individualism, understood as such, despite the fact that its individual members see themselves as individualities. As a social theory contrary to *collectivism*, individualism refers to the degree of control exerted by society on the individual, which it wishes to be as low as possible. It says nothing about individuality as a type of personality or a conception of personality. It is therefore the only meaning of the word Gusdorf uses in his essay.

The philosopher's nuanced historical description runs counter to Smith's ahistoricism and determinism, which explains autobiography via an ideology emerged in the 16th century and propagated almost unchanged until the 20th century. It is significant, from this point of view, that she does not mention classicism, which, anti-individualistic by excellence, marks a "break" denying such a propagation in vacuum. Smith invokes in exchange… the Oedipus complex, which suggests conveying at the level of the subconscious an "ideology of gender" renamed in these contexts a "patriarchal ideology".

The psychoanalytical argument begins in a classical Freudian note: at the outset of the Oedipal stage, the boy identifies with the father figure and builds "an impermeable sense of self" so as to be able to join "the phallic realm of power inhabited and therefore valued by men" (p. 39). The vulgate of Freudism turns toward the theses of feminist psychoanalysis: the identification with the father implies the affective separation from the mother and consequently, the repression of everything the boy valorizes as "feminine".

Let us briefly say that this thesis would suffice to explain the "resistance" of male critics against female autobiographies. To this, we shall add that, in the case of the girl, the identification with the father figure takes place only "by denying her difference as a woman" or "the trace of sexual difference and desire" (p. 53). As we saw before, in the context of Smith's "poetics", the same phenomenon was attributed to the "androcentric genre" of autobiography. The "canon", we may say, begins with the Oedipus complex.

Henceforth we turn back to Freudism, but in a Lacanian key, to show that the different Oedipal storylines generate different relations with language. Through language we reach the issue of the surname and patriliniarity. Citing in the subtext Lejeune's "autobiographical pact", Smith shows that "the father legitimizes the authority of the autobiographer as he gives a name to the child; but, according to the liberal notion of selfhood that motivates autobiography, only the autobiographer can invest his name with new potentiality and then interpret it for the public" (p. 40).

Following this last explanation, the patriliniary transmission of autobiography does nothing else but reenact the mythic "contract" on whose grounds "the literary forefathers" bestowed autobiography as a gift to men. Equipped with "the ideology of gender", Smith can only denounce the unfair character of the "canon" in order to get even with all male literary critics whatever their generation and theoretical orientation: "When applied to texts by men, the 'autobiographical' signals the positively valued side of a binary opposition – the self-consciously 'crafted' and 'aesthetic'. When applied to texts by women, it announces the negative side of opposition – the 'spontaneous', 'natural'" (p. 16).

Since most conclusions have already been drawn, I shall content myself to signal that the psychoanalytical explanation runs violently counter to the historical approach. If autobiography is "patriliniary", then why did it appear only five hundred years ago? If its roots are in the Oedipus complex, should it not be universal and ahistorical, like the Oedipus complex? Besides being reductionist, the theoretical grid is much too wide. A "gender ideology" defined in this terms should pervade all literary genres, when they are cultivated by men writers, autobiography included.

The alleged genre of autobiography vanishes, thus, from view. The existence of the "canon" invoked by gender studies, like many other types of "studies", seems to be purely nominal. It is the name given to a tradition from which their representatives consider themselves, nobody knows why, excluded.

NOTES

1 Domna C. Stanton, "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?", In Domna C. Stanton (ed.), *The Female Autograph. Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the tenth to the twentieth Century*, The U. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1987, pp. 3-21, p. 4.

2 Idem.

3 *Ibidem*, p. 6.

4 *Idem*.

5 *Cf*. Silvian Iosifescu, *Literatura de frontieră* [Borderline Literature], Ed. Enciclopedică, Bucharest, 1971.

6 Mircea Martin, "Despre canon într-o epocă postcanonică" (About the Canon in a Post-canonical Age), in Oana Fotache and Anca Băicoianu (coord.) *Teoria literaturii. Orientări în teoria şi critica literară contemporană* [Theory of Literature. Trends in Contemporary Literary Theory and Criticism], E.U.B., 2005, pp. 304-323, p.310.

7 Phillippe Lejeune, *Pactul autobiografic* [The Autobiographic Pact], translated by Irina Margareta Nistor, Ed. Univers, Bucharest, 2000, p. 381.

8 Elspeth Probyn, *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993. p 98.

[9] Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en abyme*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 65.

[10] Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: the Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, Manchester U.P., Manchester, 1992, p. 120.

[11] Domna C. Stanton, "Preface", in Domna C. Stanton, *op cit*., p. VII.

[12] *idem*.

[13] Phillippe Lejeune, *op. cit*., p. 12. I translated in English the quotations from Lejeune.

[14] Gerard Genette, "Povestire ficţională, povestire factuală" [Fictional Story, Factual Story], in *Introducere în arhitext. Ficţiune şi dicţiune* [Introduction into the Architext. Fiction and Diction], translated and preface by Ion Pop, Ed. Univers, Bucharest, 1994, p. 126.

[15] Phillippe Lejeune, *op. cit*., p.15.

[16] It is the conclusion also drawn by Avrom Fleishman, after systematically studying the various entreprises to codify the genre *Cf.* Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography. The Language of Self-Writing in Victorian and Modern England*, U. of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1983, pp. 22, 35.

[17] Domna C. Stanton, "Autogynography", in *The Female Autograph*. *op. cit*., p. 8.

[18] Linda Anderson, *Autobiography*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p. 86.

[19] Georges Gusdorf, "De l'autobiographie initiatique à l'autobiographie genre litteraire", in *Revue d'histoire litteraire de la France*, no. 1/1975, pp. 957-994, p. 960.

[20] *Cf*. for example Michel Beaujour, *Mirroirs d'encre. Rhétorique de l'autoportrait littéraire*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1980.

[21] Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography. Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*, Indiana U.P., Bloomington and Indiana, 1987, p. 3. The references to this volume will be made, further on, in the text.

[22] James Treadwell, *Autobiographical Writing and British Literature* (1783-1834), Oxford U.P., Oxford, 2005, pp. 72 şi 82-83.

[23] *Ibidem*, p. 74.

[24] Georges Gusdorf, « De l'autobiographie initiatique à l'autobiographie genre littéraire", in *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, no. 1/1975, pp. 957-994, p. 962.

[25] Domna C. Stanton, in Stanton, *op. cit*., p. 6.

[26] Phillippe Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1971, p. 106.

[27] Georges Gusdorf, *op. cit*., p. 979 urm.

[28] Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale*, Seuil, Paris, 1972, pp. 172-174.

[29] Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", translated by James Olney, in James Olney (editor) *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton U.P., Princeton, New Jersey, 1980, pp. 28-49, p. 30.

[30] *Idem*.

[31] Karl J. Weintraub, "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness", *Critical Inquiriy* 1:4 (1975: June), p. 839.

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