FEMINIST GAMES WITH AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Although female literature of a personal document is a major part of autobiographical production, for many years the theoretical reflection has been focused around male autobiographies. Also, the autobiographical subject quite fast invalidated illusions as to its own neutrality, as it appeared to be a male subject, and in the best case universal (so also male, as it was a product of patriarchal culture)\(^1\).

Philippe Lejeune, father of autobiography theory\(^2\), published in 1993 a work where he discussed 19\(^\text{th}\) century diaries of maidens in France\(^3\). The first diary read by Lejeune was the one by Claire Pic, provided as a research material by her granddaughter. The researcher admits: *Then I experienced something like an enlightenment. Maybe in my head there were still wandering some residues of superstitions regarding shallow, meaningless writing of young girls.* [...] *What I read was witty, full of sensitivity and tragic at the same time*\(^4\). This finding seems to be significant and touches on what I consider an extremely important topic – superstitions about a worse (as compared to male) female writing. Unfortunately, they do not regard only intimist records of young girls, but often generally literature created by women\(^5\).

An example of such reception, a bit superstitious, of female autobiographies, may be findings of Mr. and Mrs. Lecarme, quoted by Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska\(^6\). It appears that according to those researchers, women, being a part of the world of culture and nature at the same time, show instability of identity (the autobiographer-man of course has no such problems, being permanently located on the
side of culture) that has an impact on their writing. What is more, because of their roles as wives, mothers, daughters, they more often write about others, less frequently perform self-analysis and focus more on describing daily life. They also dedicate more attention to their gender and corporality (mostly in the context of their physical attractiveness for men, although sex seems to be a taboo for them anyway) and show a larger awareness of the hindering conventions. It is worth noticing that these lists regarding female autobiographies by a pair of researchers, that are to prove weaker craftsmanship of female writing, became for the feminists of the second and third wave a starting point for appreciating women-autobiographers and determining their role in an oppressive discourse. Before, however, I will go on to a more detailed description of the position of feminist critics, I shall return to Lejeune and his reception of the diaries of the French maidens. The peculiar shock he experienced when reading the diaries of Claire Pic urged him to dedicate more attention to personal records by women. It resulted in the following reader’s position of the researcher:

When I open the diary I ask myself how will a young girl write it? I check if she will manage to reveal her personal voice, I take a close look how she structures her identity. If I do not find it, I try to discover the code of not outspoken, omitted things... If that fails as well, I have to capitulate in the face of that obviousness: there were such young girls who accepted the existing model of writing diaries without any reservations?

Philippe Lejeune mentions also the need for sympathy, being open to the textual-me fighting for its identity by means of keeping records, or listening to the ‘voice of diaries’. He also notices that during talks on the subject of his research he encountered disregard for such kind of writing – both from men and fierce feminists. He also suggests that no interest in such diaries on the side of feminists of the ‘French movement’ resulted from the fact that young
authors were rather victims, often with no writing talent, not activists or women-icons who could guarantee historical identity to that movement. It seems that such an opinion is quite unfair. Especially because all the postulates expressed here by Lejeune find their reflection in the critical works of feminists regarding the strategies of reading texts (both artistic and useful) written by women (without valuation or separation, as each voice is important), which I will prove further in my work.

In 1980 there was published a collection of essays titled Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism. This date is considered to be a symbolic beginning of the increased interest of female researchers in the topic of women’s autobiographies, which resulted in further scientific publications. The first such works, strongly related to the most important findings of the second wave of feminism (both philosophically and in terms of literary criticism) assumed the difference of the female experience and women’s inability to express themselves through the ‘masculine’ language in a patriarchal society and the culture systems modelled by this society. Extracted from literary oblivion, and frequently from dusty storages and attics, numerous female autobiographies, that are now subject to research, seemed to confirm that thesis. This literature, against the initial expectations of the researchers, was not a set of revolutionary postulates of being freed from conventions, nor transgressive gestures, neither an attempt to articulate the oppression in which women found themselves for ages. However, as noticed by Arleta Galant, the very fact of ‘regaining’ personal texts (autobiographies, diaries, journals, letters) allowed to restructure and describe the tradition and community of the specific experience of alienation shared by all women. It had importance of settling down, it was about reproducing the line of culture, the line which would help to seek similarity of experiences, bring closer the fates of women, create for women the space for cultural and existential agreement.
Those similarities, found in the way objectiveness is represented in a language, in the topics raised, in the specific moments of remaining silent or the very structure of the text, allowed the researchers to distinguish peculiar poetics with immanent auto-gynography, as female autobiographies were started to be called, to strongly mark their difference from male autobiographies.

According to these, it would be characteristic of auto-gynography to draw attention to details and the private area, a frequent description and definition of oneself through one’s relations with other people – spouses, friends, relatives – and in particular with the mother – focusing on one’s physicality and gender, sometimes blending in fictitious elements for the demonstration. From the point of view of composition, such texts are defined as incoherent, amorphous and fragmented\(^\text{10}\). A female autobiography was to be a mimetic record of experience, in radical approaches there was almost a sign of equality put between the life of a woman and the text she wrote in a transparent language. A system continuum, or maybe a community of all women similarly experiencing the patriarchal oppression, which found its reflection in such writing (similar findings regarded also novels written by women) was quite fast criticised by female researchers, distancing themselves from such approach, perceived as strongly rooted in essentialism and empiricism. The main accusation of the opponents of such understanding of female autobiographies and methods of their research was that they reduce all women to a common ‘us’, not taking into account sexual, racial or class differences. This approach did not stress historical and cultural differences, treating femininity in this stereotypical manner, but also treating patriarchy as a constant unchanging substance. It also questioned the assumption that experience may be fully ‘worked out’ by the subject in the recognition process and described thereby. As noticed by Agnieszka Zębala, in that new constructivist look [...] experience is
not something that happens to an individual, rather subjectivity is constituted by experience which is discursively made indirect. Therefore, one started to seek cultural conditions of autobiography [...]11.

In the new approaches the term ‘auto-gynography’, as non-operational and full of essentialist features, is frequently replaced with another term, specifically targeted at the previously ignored subject of research. An example here may be métissage, autographies and autobiographics12.

The first of them are autobiographies of women from the colonized countries, this theory refers, therefore, to the previously ignored aspect of women’s ethnic roots. What is postulated here is the complexity of the identity of the subject, who blends into her stories various historical, cultural and linguistic contexts, both of her country and the country of her colonizers. This concept, by Françoise Lionnet, taken from the Michail Bachtin’s thought on dialogism, emphasizes the fact of complex and heterogeneous identity of the subject. Shaped by its origins, this subject appears in the text.

Autographies are autobiographies of feminists who associate strongly with this movement. Research on this kind of personal documents points to a particular attention to the way the individuality of the author relates to the ideological society through the act of writing and is expressed in it. The triad: subject – feminism – text moves to the first row, and the topics mentioned in the autobiography or the described events are not so important as in the case of auto-gynography. Attempts to unify and subordinate numerous micro-narrations to one idea of femininity or female community are perceived by researchers of autography as oppressive actions and actions similar to the male methods of totalism and attempts at appropriation of the discourse, as in the case of the classical research on autobiography.

Leigh Gilmore, in her research concept of the female autobiographics, inspired by the thought of Michael Foucault, postulates
focussing on the relation between the actual identity of the authoress and the strategy, selected by her, to create identity in the process of autobiographical writing. These strategies are, in the opinion of Leigh Gilmore, historically and culturally shaped discourses of gender and truth. It is not experience but autobiography that structures the autobiographic subject, which is the representation chosen by the actual authoress. Autobiographics, as a writing technique, would be a conscious positioning towards autobiographical strategies, and would show itself, among others, in its game with them (for example, intentional disturbing the autobiographical pact), exposure of the act of writing, intermingling of the language and the body in the structure of gender identity, refusal to reproduce contents expected from a female autobiographical subject and unmasking mechanisms of social pressure regarding acceptable female attitudes. The reading practice in the frame of autobiographics would then focus on tracking these cracks and hypocrisies, made by discourse autobiographical strategies, and which the subject created by the author opposes (although it may happen that ironically it submits to them, emphasizing the degree of oppression of women).

Sidonie Smith goes even further in her constructivist assumptions, inspired by the concept of Leigh Gilmore and the theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler; she rejects the existence of any coherent, essentially perceived identity before the existence of autobiographical narration. According to the researcher only a told autobiographical story creates an ‘ego’ which is only an impression of the inside of a person, and the person is created by the reader in the process of reading. Sidonie Smith, together with Julia Watson, willing to reflect the complexity of the autobiography’s subject and highlight its constructive nature, differentiated four subject instances shown in autobiographical narration. It would be, respectively: actual, relating, related and ideological ‘ego’. As noticed by Anna Pekaniec:
Researchers started with a statement that differentiation of the writing EGO (presence at the moment of writing the autobiography) and the related EGO (mentioned, restructured) [...] is not sufficient [...]. It is not difficult to see that this is categorization [four differentiated instances – E. J.] similar to the one of Lejeune’s, supplemented with the ideological EGO, performed with taking into account gender of the female autobiographers.

The ideological ‘EGO’ connected with the context (political, historical, cultural, social), so significant for the female researchers, is shown here as an integral part of both production of female autobiographical narration, and its later readings and interpretations. It is the ideological ‘ego’ that is a strategy, available culturally and historically, for telling your own story (here you can see inspiration from the Gilmore theory), but it shows at the same time the fact of creating an autobiographical subject, being an effect and somehow a result of historically available model and its development (performativeness).

A special attention should be drawn, in my opinion, to a research proposal included by Brigitte Gautier in Zaklecia czarodziejki Vivien, czyli o autobiografii kobiecej. Let me recapitulate this text briefly, as besides presenting her concept, the researcher compares also female and male autobiographical tests and describes the complex nature of the relation: autobiography – feminist criticism.

Sorceress Vivien, the legendary figure of the Arthurian series, impersonates two attitudes characteristic of female autobiographers, which make them write and which may be seen, in the opinion of Brigitte Gautier, in each of such texts. These are, correspondingly, anger and desire for control over your own life. Rebellion is an additional aspect here, as Vivien, according to the original version, convinced Merlin, who was in love with her, to give her the knowledge. Then, she used it against the donor and imprisoned the sorcerer, enslaving the stronger opponent and winning. Three elements: knowledge, rebellion and dominion are used for the analysis of the
autobiographical texts by Mary McCarthy, Hanna Malewska and Simone de Beauvoir, emphasizing that the highlighted moments of the legend of sorceress Vivien become a handy tool to research also other female autobiographies. The knowledge that each authoress must gain, is connected with getting to know oneself, discovering one’s own identity. Each autobiographical project assumes in its beginnings a discovery of one’s own ‘ego’, which will be later expressed in the narration process. It is worth noticing that Brigitte Gautier assumes the existence of the pre-text ‘ego’ which achieves its representation in an autobiography and is not only created by it as a result.

Rebellion is another stage towards liberation; it is not enough only to seek one’s identity and deepen the knowledge. To be able to express oneself one should face the surroundings and the world. It is most often connected with a transgressive gesture of rejecting the externally imposed manner of representing the subject or generally acceptable attitudes. Therefore, here we have, using the terms by Leigh Gilmore, a recognition of historical-cultural models and strategies as well as their deliberate exceedance. Dominion, the last of the stages, is an expression of the ‘new one’, thus the discovered and defined identity in the narration. Paradoxically, as noticed by Brigitte Gautier, it is easier to rebuild the world and create a new axiology for it in the novel narration; the next and the most difficult, as it may seem, step is dominion in autobiographical narration. It requires a large act of courage and a kind of self-exposure, it is, however, necessary, as thanks to it we reach integration of the three, distinguished by the sociologist Nathalie Heinich, elements necessary to constitute a human being, and those are: image of yourself, so self-perception, image given to others, so representation, and image given by others, so definition.

Brigitte Gautier notices that female and male autobiographies have a lot in common, however, the substantial difference between
them is the fact that auto-gynographies possess features of a fight. A woman-autobiographer fights for her recognition of both as a writer, and as a human being, she fights for freedom and peculiar rescue. A male autobiographer does not have to take up such fight, as the patriarchal culture guarantees his subjectivity and related capacities. As further noticed by the researcher, feminist criticism and female autobiography owe a lot to each other. It is, as it may seem, mutual creation and enrichment. Feminist criticism, as represented for example at the end of 1970s by Elaine Showalter\textsuperscript{16}, through posing its own questions to female literature and seeking its own path for development stops defining itself against the Other, against Merlin and all sorcerers\textsuperscript{17}, noticing its own voice of female authors. However, on the other hand, the new way of seeing literature with an emphasis on the importance of the act of writing as a method of fighting, which is shown in modern auto-gynographies, created in a way the very feminist criticism and allowed it to find its own research ‘ego’.

One of more interesting (not only in the field of Polish literary science) research proposals that I would like to refer to for the purposes of this article, is the theory by Anna Pekaniec. It is, at the same time, the theoretical canvas of the book titled Czy w tej autobiografii jest kobieta? Kobieca literatura dokumentu osobistego od początku XIX wieku do wybuchu II wojny światowej\textsuperscript{18}.

Pekaniec, while analysing numerous female autobiographies, tries to combine seemingly opposing, or contrasting, methodologies. The approaches and rephrases of the researcher make these ‘oppositional’ assumptions become functional tools. Here I mean mainly her concept of a femino-autobiographical pact and an attempt to refer syllepsis to autobiography. The femino-autobiographical pact is taken from the theory of autobiographical pact by Philippe Lejeune and the concept of Ewa Kraskowska, who treats femininity as an inter-genre literary convention. Such convention would be a set of opportunities
and limitations, thanks to which there is a clear pact established among participants of literary communication. It assumes a certain silent agreement as to selection of the topic, manner of its problematizing and artistic presentation. Therefore, it occurs that when reading female autobiography, we-readers would enter into two pacts with the author: the autobiographical one, with her as the author and the other, which would refer to her gender, therefore with her as with a woman-who-wrote-autobiography. Is that duality justified? Necessary? It seems that it is, as entering into the second pact would be a certain obligation undertaken by the reader, so that he or she sees otherness of the female voice and autobiographical subject and starts a different – more conscious – mode of reading, considering these specificities.

Ryszard Nycz in his text on the traces of ‘ego’, almost canonical for Polish literature, characterizes the syllepsis subject as follows:

*The syllepsis ‘ego’ – putting it simple – is an ‘ego’ which must be understood in two different ways at the same time: namely as true and as imaginary, as empirical and as textual, as authentic and fictitious-novel. The most symptomatic signal of otherness of this group of texts is certainly the identity of the author’s surname and the protagonist or narrator of the work, resulting in, as to say, bold entries of the author into the text in the role of a character of the story, which no longer is so fictitious.*

Pekaniec, being aware of possible accusations regarding the usage of Nycz’s findings to research autobiographies, being non-fictitious texts by assumption (even if through entering into the autobiographical pact between the author and the reader), emphasizes that there are autobiographies with introvert structures, where you can see this characteristic line, or such ones which resemble novels in their shape.

It is worth, however, comparing constructivist theories describing female autobiographic subject by Leigh Gilmore or the duet Sido-nie Smith-Julia Watson with further findings of Nycz regarding the
syllepsis and change of the subject identity, in order to see significant parallels here:

*The old model, by assumption hierarchical and vertical, based on opposition of depth and surface, is pushed away by the horizontal, interactive and interreferential model, where the real ‘ego’ and literary ‘ego’ mutually affect each other and exchange their attributes; where the subject accepts its own fragmentation [...]22.*

Syllepsis could, therefore, successfully describe the assumed relation of autobiographical narration towards the split, interrupted and full of internal fractures female autobiographic subject, as well as towards the real world – ‘non-textual’, with the historical-cultural background, so significant for female researchers. Moreover, the syllepsis model of subjectivity may be summarized in the simplest way in the formula of ‘writing with yourself’23, which automatically brings the concept of *écriture féminine* by Hélène Cixous, namely female writing *with the body and from the body*24. Affinities between the assumptions regarding syllepsis and the findings of feminist female researchers do not end at emanations of the identity of the subject in novels or autobiographies, thus texts, generally speaking, that are artistic. As noticed by Katarzyna Majbroda: *the syllepsis ‘ego’ addresses also the structure of critical subjects of feminist study of literature*25, one could therefore find its traces in scientific texts.

However, let us go back to Pekaniec and the autobiography. She admits that the notion of syllepsis and classical autobiographies are at totally opposite ends, at two opposite poles. Between them, as she postulates, *there is space for negotiations on the shape of the female autobiography pact*26. Therefore, it may be assumed that when entering into a femino-autobiographical pact, readers would thus agree to entering a not fully recognized area. They would agree to duality and non-coherence. They would allow the possibility to commune with a female autobiographical subject, forming almost in front of their
eyes, in the reading mode, being a specific invariant of the syllepsis subject. When reading auto-gynographies (here understood widely, as autobiographic texts by women) they would have to take on the challenge of a specific text which does not stop at the surface, goes deep into the text, detangles sometimes very tangled plots, to see why, but also how and of what, for whom it was woven.

The given examples of the reception of the female autobiographies allow, in a wider perspective, to see the transformations of the whole feminist discourse, not only in the context of literary criticism. As it appears, going from the essentially perceived female identity and attempts to define femininity, through the constructivist negation of the existence of any pre-text ‘ego’, to the inclination towards the concept of putting experience in a more narrative form, shows the way made by female researchers and philosophers with feminist orientation. Forming a language from a marriage of feminist theories and literary criticism seems exceptionally interesting. It should be remembered that, although three waves of feminism, gender studies and queer theory had a significant impact on the way we perceive such social-historical-cultural structures like a woman (and man!), sex or norm, the first, gynocritical takes at female autobiographies are still worth attention. Their purpose was not only to describe the truths governing intimist records of women, but rather an attempt to rebuild female genealogy and reintroducing a usually ignored (ordinary, everyday) voice to history and culture.
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2 Lejeune differentiates four categories that must appear in a text in order to classify it as an autobiography. These are: linguistic form (story, novel), topic (life of a person, history of his/her personality), situation of the author (identification of the author with the narrator, proven by the same surname), status of the narrator (identical with the main character and retrospective vision of the story he/she tells). The most important and almost constitutive conditions, differentiating autobiography from biography or a personal novel is identity of the author, narrator and main character. The signature confirming unity and identity of those three subjects becomes a sign of the so called ‘autobiographic pact’. See P. Lejeune, *Pakt autobiograficzny*, [in:] Ibid, *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii*, ed. R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska, Cracow 2001.


17 B. Gautier, Zaklęcia..., op. cit., p. 156.
21 A. Pekaniec, Czy w tej autobiografii jest kobieta?..., op. cit., p. 108.
22 R. Nycz, Język modernizmu..., op. cit., p. 111.
23 Ibid, p. 111.
26 A. Pekaniec, Czy w tej autobiografii jest kobieta?..., op. cit., p. 114.
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The Feminist Games with Autobiography

The aim of the article is showing diverse ways of reception and description of female autobiographies in the critical literary research. The author devotes exceptional attention to the feminist researchers’ approach to these texts and the reading strategies proposed by them. Tracing the feminism – female autobiography relation makes it possible to perceive mutual influences and observe evolution of the emerging discourse of the feminist literary criticism.

KEYWORDS:
LITERATURE, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, FEMINISM, READING STRATEGY, FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM, FEMALE AUTOBIOGRAPHY
Zbigniew Tomaszczuk
the Welcome home series, 1987