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# **NEW QUESTIONING STRATEGIES FOR EARLY RUSSIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

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## **NEW QUESTIONING STRATEGIES FOR EARLY RUSSIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

Why question Early Russian autobiographical writings anew? Generally speaking, such revisions are suggested by recent changes in the humanities that challenge many commonly accepted concepts and notions. In particular, they complicate the prevailing vision of the side-by-side growth of the autobiography and individualism in the progressive development of humankind, the Eurocentric view “from above” on “underdeveloped” autobiographical traditions in non-Western cultures, and the very notion of the integral self that exists outside of a given text. As for the studies of pre-modern Russian autobiographical writings, the use of new theoretical insights and methodologies has been scarcely noticed hitherto. It may be suggested that recent insights of historians and literary scholars in the studies of autobiographies may have considerable implications for the reading of Early Russian autobiographical texts.

Keywords: autobiographical studies, theoretical approaches, medieval Russia, individualism, contemporary humanities.

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What I intend to do in this paper<sup>2</sup> is to shape some possible new approaches to the reading of Early Russian autobiographical writings. To reach this aim I will:

1. Review some of the traditional approaches to the study of these writings;
2. Briefly sketch a number of recent theoretical developments in the humanities and social sciences that, in my opinion, in recent decades impact scholarship on first-person writings the most;
3. Give two examples of this contemporary scholarship;
4. Suggest some perspectives for further study of Early Russian autobiographies.

## I

Though the practice of labeling some Early Russian writings as autobiographies originated more than a century ago,<sup>3</sup> the distinction and separation of autobiography as a specific cluster in the body of Russian culture began only in late 1950's. Since then, the dominant interpretation strategy has been shaped by scholars who treated "autobiography" as a specific constituent part of Old Russian literature (though some paid considerable attention to "historical reality," i.e. to links of autobiographical texts with concrete social, cultural, religious, and political circumstances). The basic focus of this scholarship is on such quests as genre attribution (autobiography or not); uncovering principles of composition (or "authorial design" – *avtorskiy zamysel*); detection of narrative structure (constituent parts, episodes and the ways they are connected to each other) and narrative order (chronological, thematic or mixed); on literary/hagiographical clichés used by authors; and on specific features contributing to the integrity of the texts (*tselostnost' proizvedeniya*).

This scholarship is mostly concerned with the issue of genre<sup>4</sup>. Where does the "autobiography" fit within the structure of genres of Old Russian literature? Is it possible to identify the autobiography (or put more delicately: the "autobiographical tradition") within it? If yes, where does this tradition start and what text should be considered "the first Russian autobiography"?

Literary historians have also approached the Early Russian autobiographical writings from the aesthetical perspective, in particular, by discussing such characteristics as poetics and style. In their studies these characteristics are most often viewed as means by which authors managed to create works of certain "artistic value" (*khudozhestvennaya tsennost'*). According to this

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<sup>2</sup> The paper was delivered at the conference of the International Auto/Biography Association, Europe 2011 "Trajectories of (Be)longing: Europe in Life Writing" (Tallinn University, May 18-20, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Specifically referring to Avvakum's *Life* – see Alexandr Pypin, *Istoriya russkoy literatury* [A history of Russian literature] 2 (Saint-Petersburg: Tipogr. M.M. Stasiulevicha, 1898), p. 315. It should be noted that the brief overview below does not cover textual criticism.

<sup>4</sup> See more recently: Andrey Ranchin, "Avtobiograficheskie povestvovaniya v russkoy literature vtoroy poloviny XVI-XVII vv.: problema zhanra [Autobiographical narratives in Russian literature of the second half of sixteenth – seventeenth centuries: the genre problem]," Idem, *Stat'yi o drevnerusskoy literature* [Articles on Old Russian literature] (Moscow: Dialog-MGU, 1999), pp. 158-177.

approach, the autobiographical text is treated as a product of “literary creation” (*literaturnoe tvorchestvo*) of its author and, correspondingly, a source for the reconstruction of the “author’s design” (*avtorskiy zamysel*), of “artistic design” (*khudozhestvennyi zamysel*) and of “artistic devices” the author used (*khudozhestvennye priemy*). The ultimate aim of this type of studies is to uncover peculiarities of the “artistic nature” (*khudozhestvennaya priroda*) of this or that autobiographical writing, and to portray the autobiographical style as a “certain set of literary means for representation of human life and the human inner world.”<sup>5</sup>

What is common in all of the approaches of literary historians and critics discussed above, are their efforts to trace continuity, i.e. to uncover what they call “the ways of formation and development” of autobiography and its “genetic connections.”<sup>6</sup>

Besides literary historians and critics, autobiographical writings have attracted substantial attention from historians of culture and religion, and to some extent, from political historians of pre-modern Russia. This group of scholars has mostly used first person narratives as sources for biographical studies of concrete historical figures, especially in cases when other documentary data on their lives were not accessible.

Generally, most studies that use this kind of approach take an autobiographical story as a documentary record not only of biographical and political facts, but also of such “realities” as the author’s unique personality or his “inner self” (*vnutrennee ‘ya’*)<sup>7</sup>. Accordingly, these studies are mostly directed at portraying this unique personality and its development, at describing the author/hero’s individual feelings and emotions, his psychological collisions, his mental turmoil, etc.

The above-mentioned approaches have a number of common characteristics that are rooted in some fundamental conventions of European nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship. Two of these conventions are most vivid: the understanding of the relationship between text and reality in the way that every autobiographical writing represents the “objective world” and the understanding of the author of an autobiographical text as a concrete “historical figure” who generates all meanings of his text. Such understandings dictate the task of deciphering an autobiographical text in order to uncover its author’s inner world (*vnutrenniy mir*), or less ambitiously, his ideology (*ideynaya pozitsiya avtora*) imprinted in the writing. From two other fundamental conventions of this scholarship – the general vision of the past as a progressive

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<sup>5</sup> Andrey Robinson, “Zhitie Epifaniya kak pamyatnik didakticheskoy avtobiografii [Epifaniy’s Life as a record of didactic autobiography],” *Trudy Otdela drevnerusskoy literatury* 15 (Moscow-Leningrad, 1958), p. 205.

<sup>6</sup> Tat’yana Kopreeva, “K voprosu o zhanrovoy prirode ‘Poucheniya’ Vladimira Monomakha [Revisiting the genre nature of Vladimir Monomakh’s *Instruction*],” *Trudy Otdela drevnerusskoy literatury* [Proceedings of the Department of the Old Russian literature] 27 (Moscow-Leningrad, 1972), pp. 102–104, 107.

<sup>7</sup> Tat’yana Kopreeva, *K voprosu o zhanrovoy prirode ‘Poucheniya’*, pp. 94–98, 102. See also: Ekaterina Krushel’nitskaya, *Avtobiografiya i zhitie v drevnerusskoy literature* [Autobiography and hagiography in the Old Russian literature] (Saint-Petersburg, 1996), p.164: “authorial inner source” (*avtorskoe lichnostnoe nachalo*), “authorial self” (*avtorskoe ‘ya’*).

continuity (the earlier textual forms have gradually transformed into modern ones) and understanding the progress of human history as a progress of individualism (development of “autobiographical forms” indicates this progress and vice versa) – comes a view “from above”, considering the first Russian autobiography as the first manifestation of the individualistic self in Russian culture.

## II

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

Probably the most significant one is *social constructionism* (or *social constructivism*)<sup>8</sup>. According to this approach various basic concepts and notions that seemed firm and obvious, as if directly coming from nature or from historical reality (state, nation, madness, the Orient, Europe, the self, etc.), in fact are flexible, historically changeable constructions of a given society and culture. In other words, they are not “objective” categories but variable by-products of the interplay between different social forces and the outcome (“inventions” or “artifacts”) of different human activities. The growing power of constructionism resulted in undermining the very basis of the traditional model of what is called “the history of subjectivity” or “the history of the self.”<sup>9</sup> The key constitutive element of this model, the concept of the integral human self as a part of reality and a producer of evidence about itself, has little by little lost its incontrovertibility and has been replaced by other concepts and frames<sup>10</sup>. The very notions of the self, the individual, and the person have been often substituted by an even more ambiguous notion of the “subject,” generally understood as something that is “produced” or “made”. According to this perspective it is not the subject that produces discourses but, on the contrary, it is socially and culturally established discourses that produce the subject. As Joan Scott formulates this shifted view on subjectivity with regard to the notion of “experience”: “being a subject means being subject to definite conditions of existence, conditions of endowment of agents and conditions of exercise.”<sup>11</sup> The constructionist approach to the notion of the subject and, correspondingly, to the “history of subjectivity” has made a strong

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<sup>8</sup> On constructionism and deconstructionism in history see: *The Nature of History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow (London - New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004), pp. 61-240.

<sup>9</sup> See as an example: <http://www.historians.org/annual/2003/AHA2.HTM>

<sup>10</sup> *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986); *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Middle Ages to Present*, ed. Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 793.

impact on autobiographical studies and, in particular, on the attempts of working out new visions of the history of autobiography.

The second shift that strongly affected autobiographical studies – concurrent and in many ways linked to constructionism – is the so-called *linguistic turn*.<sup>12</sup> If “‘things’ as such have no social reality apart from their linguistic construction,” if “they are not objective givens in themselves, but rather a product of a linguistic process of ‘objectification,’”<sup>13</sup> then this is also true for such “reality” as the individual self. Correspondingly, autobiographical texts are, first and foremost, evidences of how this “reality” is “objectified” in language and speech. Influenced by these language limitations, many recent historical studies of autobiographical writings drifted far away from the traditional readings that approached them as “sources”, created to inform us about the “real” self of a “real” person (the Author). Instead of trying to directly reach this “real” self, scholars turned to uncovering specific textual conventions that produce this or that model of the self, to discussing its peculiarities and its connection to a certain group of texts or culture, to practicing narratological analysis<sup>14</sup>, etc.

Finally, the third shift, tightly intertwined with the two mentioned above, is associated with the *anthropological turn* (or *cultural turn*). This shift set in about half a century ago, after a large group of historians became aware of the importance of an anthropologically interpreted concept of culture for understanding a given society. Cultural historians emphasized the study of the singularity of a given culture and thus supported the idea of discontinuity in cultural developments. From such a view on the human past, it follows that the concept of the self, elaborated in European scholarship as “universal”, should be treated as “narrow”, i.e. as one of many possible ones. Consequently, it is wrong to try and apply this concept to autobiographical texts that originated in other cultures, because the practice of such an application falsely pictures any non-Western autobiography and the self as “underdeveloped.” In very general terms, the main impact of the anthropological/cultural turn on the historical study of autobiographical writings may be reduced to one straightforward argument: the very notions of “autobiography” and the “self” should be approached not as universal categories but as specific phenomena imbedded in a given culture and shaped by its “codes”.

### III

Not a few scholars of autobiography in the last decades either opposed the aforementioned challenges as alien to the humanistic notion of the self (understood as the basis for

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<sup>12</sup> The notion has been coined by theorist Richard Rorty: *The linguistic turn; recent essays in philosophical method*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967).

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Among the earliest historical studies of this kind: Evelyn B. Vitz, *Medieval Narrative and Modern Narratology: Subjects and Objects of Desire* (New York: New York University Press, 1989).

autobiographical research), or ignored them as useless for empirical studies. Nevertheless, some of these challenges have substantially influenced approaches to pre-modern and early-modern autobiographical writings.

Among examples of this influence, I would first mention the research program that was launched about ten years ago by the group *Self-Narratives in Transcultural Perspective* of the Department of History and Cultural Studies at the Free University of Berlin (directed by Gabriele Jancke and Claudia Ulbrich)<sup>15</sup>. The group combines the efforts of scholars from a variety of disciplines who study both Western and non-Western self-narratives that mostly belong to the Early Modern period. The major subject of its research is defined as “writings about the author’s own life that hold to specific narrative conventions.”<sup>16</sup> Contrary to the widely accepted view on autobiography as a specifically western genre, tightly bounded with the idea of the individual self that emerged in Europe as a by-product of modernization, the group aims at analyzing self-narratives “in the light of new questions and new methodologies.”<sup>17</sup> The core of this new perspective constitutes a refusal of the dominant Eurocentric view on the development of self-testimonies in other cultures and “approaches to these source materials that take as their analytical focus the writing subject as active agent in the context of her or his own social and cultural relations.”<sup>18</sup>

The project *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self: Education, Introspection and Practices of Writing in the Netherlands 1750-1914* at the Faculty of History and Arts of the University of Rotterdam (directed by Arianne Baggerman)<sup>19</sup> may be taken as the second example of new approaches in autobiographical studies practiced by historians. This project is mostly aimed at working out a new paradigm of the developments of the late 18th – early 20th century egodocuments<sup>20</sup> in the Netherlands (and tentatively in Western Europe as a whole) and to suggest new methodologies of their investigations. Arianne Baggerman claims that traditionally the rise of production of egodocuments in the nineteenth century has been correlated with the growing introspection and self-questioning in European culture, though such observation “was based on a limited canon of great writers, including Rousseau and Goethe.”<sup>21</sup> She argues that the recent studies of Dutch egodocuments written between 1814 and 1914 *en masse* strongly challenge this traditionally accepted perspective. Baggerman observes: “Contrary to expectations the number of *factual* diaries and *impersonal* memoirs rose more sharply than the

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<sup>15</sup> URL: <http://www.fu-berlin.de/dfg-fg/fg530/en/index.html>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. The major term used is “Selbstzeugnisse,” translated into English as “self-narratives.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.egodocument.net/Arianne.htm>

<sup>20</sup> The term “egodocument” is used here in a sense common for contemporary Dutch historiography (see: Rudolf M. Dekker, “Jacques Presser’s heritage. Egodocuments in the study of history,” *Memoria y Civilización. Anuario de Historia* 5 (2002): 13-37.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.egodocument.net/Arianne.htm>

number of *intimate introspective* texts.”<sup>22</sup> To explain this discovery and to construct a new vision of the development of egodocuments in the “long nineteenth century”, she suggests using Reinhart Koselleck’s hypothesis of the unprecedented shift in the perception of temporality that took place in Europe around the mid-eighteenth century<sup>23</sup>. According to Koselleck, this shift resulted in the emergence of new strategies of human behaviour, such as the attempts “to master temporality” and to control individual experiences. Thus, the key task of Baggerman’s project is to investigate “to what extent and in what ways, the specific contents and forms of egodocuments, as well as the increase in their number in the long nineteenth century, were related to the emergence of a new sense of temporality.”<sup>24</sup>

#### IV

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

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

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

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> See: Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.egodocument.net/Arianne.htm>



3. Grouping and reading. The texts commonly called Old Russian autobiographies might be more easily grouped together on the basis of similarity of their social origin than of their attribution to a certain literary genre. On the whole, it seems that these texts might become more informative about Early Russian culture if read as a part of social and cultural practices<sup>25</sup> than as a part of literary process and genre development.

4. Studying in comparative perspective. Epistemological difficulties in making historical comparisons<sup>26</sup>, despite being theoretically and logically persuasive, do not eliminate our eagerness for comparisons. In our case, a general frame for comparative study may be provided by the fact that Early Russian autobiographical writings belong to the Medieval Christian tradition and may be approached in parallel with Western and Eastern (Byzantine) as a constituent part of it.

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<sup>25</sup> Similar to Gabriele Jancke's reading of Early Modern German texts: Gabriele Jancke, *Autobiographie als soziale Praxis. Beziehungskonzepte in Selbstzeugnissen des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts im deutschsprachigen Raum* (Cologne-Weimar-Vienna: Böhlau, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Comparative history has been harshly questioned in the last decades, which allows making strong discouraging statements. See for example: Donald Kelley, "Grounds for comparison," *19th International Congress of Historical Sciences* (Oslo, 2000), pp. 6-13 – <http://www.oslo2000.uio.no/program/papers/r3/r3-kelley.pdf> .