

## Women's Biography Writing – Repeatedly Banished Discourse

The here relevant aspects of the theory of feminism can be summarised in a few simplified theorems: According to Freud, a woman is a castrated man, a man with a defect, a deficient man; left with little libido after the insulting revelation, the "normal" woman personality is characterised by personal passivity, masochism and compensatory narcissism. Additionally Freud deprives a woman of her own sexuality, while Lacan maintains that a woman is always defined through another person. She lacks subjectivity, and since she has no language of her own she is an embodied lust/desire of another person. Following this aspect and radicalising it almost to the absurdity, Luc Irigaray attempts to establish woman's ilusiveness and subjectivity. In a patriarchal society, where the authority of the father figure attempts to discharge the woman's ability to (re)produce life and wishes to establish itself as the origin of the being, a woman is imposed the role of a mirror, a servant with no identity supporting male subjectivity by accepting everything that is undesired and sunk into collective oblivion which could threaten him.

If a woman is null inside this symbolical order, she is deprived of a place where she could speak or write – she can only use the language defined by the name of the father. "(Auto)biographic writing is thus twice "impossible"; a woman cannot become part of history since she has no existence as a subject and she has no position as an author since she possesses no place where she could speak from.

The author uses this cliché-summary to clearly express the thesis discussed. Similarly to the female discourse, the (auto)biographic discourse is "hysterical" too. This courageous and perhaps a provocative thought came to me when I was reading *Mad Women*, a collection of biographies of famous women who all ended up in mental institutions or isolation. Taking into account Foucault's study on madness in thoughts, their destiny is a perfect implementation of a society outcasting all those who are disturbing because they refuse to "go by the book" or possess the authority and power desired by others (the example in the book is that of Joan the Mad). Woman's madness is, according to the book's preface by Sibylle Duda, a statement of protest against the role imposed on her. Madness reflects the creativity of their own incapacity. A hysterical woman is a prototype of a creative mad woman.

Foucault drives attention also to another characteristic of the Western culture and the truth about sex, to the duty to confess, to all those mechanisms and

institutions created by the western world in its attempt to obtain the intimate truth in this way – by means of prohibition and revelation – and create the torn desire: confession, education, interrogation, discussions between children and their parents, doctors and patients, and finally – psychoanalysis. This desire, in a milder form but nonetheless intensive, is known to us as a pleasure derived from listening to or telling one's life adventures. The desire for exciting news, inquisitiveness and numerous other drives keep the media industry busy with "revealing the truth" about famous people. Familiar faces from jet-set or show-business smile at us from the covers of magazines and television sets, inviting us to buy things by skilfully formulated promises to reveal that which is most intimate. What was once an ethical-didactic function of biography writing (to provide role models) has become the domain of media showing second- or third-hand life stories which are swallowed by the voyeuristic public regardless of their factitiousness.

Consequently the genres of biography writing have substantially lost their social relevance but by no means their popularity. A brief glance at bookshops, book fairs or recensions in newspapers prove how persistently and firmly have biographies been rooted in the book market and in the readers' consciousness, despite the fact that they have been pushed to the very marge of relevant literature by professions, particularly by creative and historical writing. (This marginalization is not entirely comparable with that of women since the first is permanent and the other historically restricted.) Reading *Mad Women* I made a self-experiment on what I had been researching for a longer period: the "indiscreet charm" of a biography, attractive also if written in a cliché-like, manipulative or dilettantish manner, revealing our desires, projections and fears. The charm of an (auto)biographical story lies in the variety of perception possibilities: a reader is able to simultaneously (not only consecutively or hierarchically) realise the contradictive functions of the language – in this case the belief in the truthfulness of a narrated or written story and the awareness that life stories are constructed. My second thesis on two- or multi-way reading of a story is based on the ambivalent structure of genres as well as on contradictive needs of the public.

Returning to the "hysterical" discourse: the rules and the principles of the symbolical order are sharply confirmed by the so called "traditional (auto)biographical paradigm", while a hysterical woman confirms the order by exaggeratedly and pathologically showing the signs of her disease and suffering trying to punish herself for wanting to crush the symbolic order. Sticking to the strict principles of unifying the contingent, the heterogeneous and the unequal, that is a disunited variety of elements composing life, a traditional (auto)biography creates a concrete, interrelated logical unity, it creates "personal identity". Interchanging the linguistic category of succesiveness with that of logical consecutiveness, makes an (auto)biography appear to be following natural laws. A life story, basically always retrospective, is based on eliminating all the "disturbing". It chiefly attempts to patch over the crack between "history" and "fiction" in the same way as a "hysterical woman" tries to patch over the crack in the reality revealing her "madness".

Surprisingly how the women in the 19th century and again even more inten-

sively in the time of emancipation and feministic movements have took to a wide variety of biographical genres, including letters and diaries – simply because they had no access to traditional literary modes of expression. They carried out the search for their self-consciousness and subjectivity by expressing themselves through those modes of wording and structures which clearly expresses homogeneity, uniformity and the impermeability of the phallic in a form of an invariable individuality. These genres were of lower artistic value (being principally referential and not polyvalent) and consequently banished from the literary genre canon (chiefly in German speaking areas which are characterised by a disturbed relation to “realism”). Despite the prototypical rigidity brought about by the above mentioned structural and functional ambivalence of the (auto)biographical, and specific receptiveness witnessing the origin of the so called “alternative” and later “postmodernist paradigm”, flexibility is a great advantage of the (auto)biographic. In addition to the faults in the concept of subjectivity and identity revealing also its own constructionism, the biography writing discourse is undoubtedly decomposable in the form of the hysterical discourse. The question, however, remains whether it can endure the changes conceived by Luce Irigaray concerning the creation of woman subjectivity and imaginary, since it understands a woman as permeable and fluid, as a being deriving joy in changing from the first to the second and not in identifying herself through person.

One should not forget also the meaning of “autobiography” within the Derridaen deconstructionist theory. To simplify the thought: the theory claims that all literary works are autobiographic, since by creating a meaningful whole coherently a writer acts as the “author” that is as the source and the owner of the text. However, the attempt always fails since s/he finds her/himself in an estranged language net and intersubjective mirroring. All writing is “autobiographic” with the author figure lost, disappeared. With the language comprehended as the place of eternal circulation of signs producing senses and the place where they change, the notion of autobiographic and female writing intermix.

The final question is how to change the biography writing discourse by taking into account (or co-creating) the place from where a woman can speak for herself. For the time being there has been no binding solutions (and cannot be), but the direction and possibilities have been suggested by prominent (and less prominent) women writers and poets such as Virginia Woolf, Ingeborg Bachmann, Marguerite Duras, Sylvia Plath, Helene Cixous and many others.

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