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FUNCTIONS OF THE POPULAR AUTOBIOGRAPHIES
FROM THE REGION OF GHEORGHENI (HARGHITA COUNTY)

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Keywords: *popular autobiography, popular writing, orality, life stories, folclor of Gheorgheni, regional identity, narrative identity, author, context, functions, language*

Arguments

Topic of research

This work interprets five popular autobiographies from the Gheorgheni area. Four of these authors are from Ciumani: Köllő Teréz, she was born in 1909 and passed away in the year 2008, a part of her life she spent being a nun, then as a housewife. Huszár András, born in 1931 in a working-class family, worked on agricultural machines, now he is retired. Czirják Gergely, born in 1913, was an famous blacksmith of the commune, he died in Cluj-Napoca in the year 1993. Köllő Vilma was born in 1933, her husband worked as a mason and carpenter, herself was a dressmaker, in the present she is a pensioner and she is taking care of her grandchild. Antal János, born in the village of Valea-Strâmbă, the primary part of his life was deeply marked by the second World War, likewise by captivity long after the war. Now he is living in Gheorgheni.

Czirják Gergely was the first to write his autobiography, starting from the year 1976, a part from the manuscript was published by Salamon Anikó in 1979. Köllő Teréz started to write her autobiography in 1980, never managed to publish it, in spite of her efforts. Antal János wrote a large number of notes in his lifetime and sketches(marks) about the main events of his life , gathering them in 5 writing books, in the year 1994. A summary of this manuscript turned up in 2008. Huszár András started writing in 2003, since that year he has been writing continuously. Köllő Vilma wrote a poem in 1982 doesn't have a prepared manuscript; she is writing and collects her autobiographical notes without a rest.

These five manuscripts tell us the story of their lives, thus this fact they fit in family of texts we name *popular autobiographies*. As *autobiography* being a literary genre, and *popular autobiography* which can be mentioned as an element of ethnographic category named *popular writing*, is marked by a huge bibliography, which has multiplied in the recent three decades,

causing different debates, litigies in specialized discourses, as well as in literature and ethnography as in other sciences, like psychology and sociology. That's why the present analyze cannot make an abstraction not even from those scientific results what various researches produced outside the ethnographical domain.

The analysis of these popular autobiographies begins from the next preliminary, explanatory questions:

a. *Era, identity, age, gender.* Writing popular autobiographies became common or more widespread in the Gheorgheni-area in the '70s. The authors of the analyzed autobiographies by this work were born in the primary decades of the 20. century, and learnt in the period of pre-communist schools. The founding of a family, the upbringing of their children was heavily influenced by decades following the second World War, by the dictatorship of Ceausescu, while the economic scene could be described as the consequence of the collectivization. The interval of time when the autobiographies were written, were the decades before and following the 1989 Revolution. A significant question rises : why the writers of autobiographies chose this time interval, what was or were the motivating factors, and in what context do the authors speak about their life, their fate. Another question refers to the bond between the authors and manuscripts with local and social environment, relations what regards the writing of the autobiographies with authorities, intellectuals, press, local community, family, individual, as well as with the male or female gender of the authors.

b. *Relationship between individual and popular writing.* Besides other functions, the context which characterizes writing, like communication, interaction, exchange of information and attitudes, records for personal or literary purpose, a relevant issue is the relation of the individual with all that involves writing, a relation, what in our case resulted in the emergence of popular autobiographies. Hence, the present analysis refers to the finalities, motives, autobiographical strategies. Naming these individuals as authors has as its consequence the fact through written autobiographies history is appealed to a conversation, dialogue with the assumed roles in the community, the individual writing with literary and ethnographical genders, written communication employed by the community with individual intentions of the authors.

c. As a consequence, we can ask: how can the relationship between *writing* and *orality*, colloquial speech be characterized? Indeed, can a written history of a life replace the real oral

story? What are the relations between the word of the author about his or her life and what the community speaks about him or her?

d. *Regional identity*. We may also ask, in what means does it make sense to talk about an “autobiography from Gheorgheni”. This refers to the way the authors represent their regional identity in the text.

e. *The importance of research on popular writings*. The research also refers to the way in which the ethnographic speeches have developed at the same time when they started to investigate the popular writing. The discovery of this type of folklore generated a change in the way in which science perceives and sees the creation of folklore.

Methodology, terminology

a. *The choice of manuscripts* was conceived in a way that the five texts to be known in the local community. These autobiographies were written in a spontaneous way which means without the request, the motivation of the researcher or other people.

b. *Research in the local community*. Being curious on what the local community thinks about the authors of the autobiographies, I have recorded more interviews with the members of their families, neighbors or other people who know the author.

c. *The reproduction of texts*. In the analysis there are more quotations from the manuscripts, each of them as accurately as possible, to represent the style of the author and the way in which he knows the conventions of writing.

d. The work deals in detail with the *methodology of analysis* along the different chapters, but first of all we should mention that the analysis is based especially on the statements of David G. Mandelbaum, the one who phrased the methodology on the interpretation of career and biography. The research joins two big paradigms: to the traditions of research in popular individuality as well as other researches that regard the traditions and the use of popular writing.

e. *Terminology*. The development of writing research terminology is strictly linked to the history of ethnological research. That’s why the work is based on the latest elements of terminology, taking into consideration the summary of the above mentioned development.

The structure of the work

This work is made up, next to the chapters of introduction and consequences, of four big chapters. The first one presents the important results and statements that were conceived in the previous researches, the second one describes the personal research, the third one new lines of research and the fourth makes the analysis of the autobiographies in the context of regional identity.

The definition of popular autobiography

This work defines the popular autobiography as something else than a genre of folklore. The French researcher, Roger Chartier says on the autobiography that this is a part of *prosaic writings (écritures ordinaires)*. The author of the popular autobiography is not a formal writer, he doesn't do writing in a professional way. In concordance with the statements of Philippe Lejeune, the popular autobiography is characterised by the following aspects.: 1. The text is written in the first person and in a retrospective language. 2. The author (narrator) and the main character are identical. 3. The accent lies on the development of the personality.

The autobiography, as conceived in the method of Giovanni Levi, must be interpreted by the research in the context of the career of the author. These contexts are: the visual context, the cognitive and the linguistic ones. As Keszeg Vilmos states, the biographies and autobiographies fit into the popular registers meaning that each community uses biographies through the process of accomodation of a person in society.

Popular autobiographies from Gheorgheni

The autobiography of Teréz Köllő

The autobiography of this woman born in Ciumani has three considerable chapters: the first of them tells childhood-stories, the second one describes her life as a nun, while the third chapter is about founding a family and educating children.

The first part of the life of Teréz Köllő - her childhood - has been marked by the First World War. Her family impoverished by the events of the War has a really hard life. The parents are desperately fighting for survival day by day. Under the circumstances, the author creates her

self-image as being a developing personality, modest and diligent, helping her parents with everything she possibly can. One of her strong ambitions is to study, but this wish of hers cannot come true in the actual context. That is why her parents decide to have their daughter matriculated to the nun school from Gheorgheni.

At the beginning Teréz Köllő has to work in the kitchen. Gradually, she learns all the aspects of this trade, yet she does not have enough time to learn as much as she wanted at the same time. This fact is described as the first great tragedy of her life. A few years later, she is moved to Satu Mare, then to Alba Iulia in order to continue her activity as a cook at the Theological High school. During these years, the life of the nun is characterized by the conflicts which drift her apart from her vocation. She is an adult already when the Second World War reaches the boundaries of the state, and when the monastery of Satu Mare is destroyed, she returns home, to Ciumani.

In the native village, she is forced to marry a widower with two kids. This part of her life is described as a fight in order to reintegrate into society.

The person described by the text is an idealized character, which can face each and every hardship met. She is an extremely religious person, modest, loving and diligent. As against this person shown in the autobiography, the local community remembers a character with an opposing personality. During the interviews people were talking about a doleful, stubborn person, which has not loved her stepchildren.

The autobiography of András Huszár

This is an autobiography written with the intention of the author to show his children an exceptional life that is worth to follow. The author creates the idealized image of a person who has always loved his job, family and children.

The autobiography, written in three notebooks, begins with the years of childhood, his parents teaching the main character all the values he is to follow during his whole life. So he learns agriculture, works in forests, does woodcutting. A great part of the autobiography refers to the years spent at the Army, at the firefighter division. The main character learns here how to work with utility machines, so that after the discharge he can make the most of this knowledge working on agricultural machinery. A serious conflict in the life of András Huszár comes in the years of collectivisation, on account of which the life of the family founded gets hard.

András Huszár is an open person; he knows and is known by most of the people of the community and from the surroundings. He plays an important part in the religious life of the village. After 1989, he becomes even more known due to his presence and activity in the political and cultural events going on in the region, which makes him appreciated by the local intellectuals also.

One of these appreciations is presented in the present essay, after an interview taken with an intellectual from Ciumani. In conclusion, the person described in the autobiography, in contrast with the character described in the previous case, resembles the personality known by the community.

The autobiography of Gergely Czirják

Gergely Czirják has a real literary work, because he has written not only autobiography, but numerous other texts also, such as the history and monograph of his native village, Ciumani. This autobiography speaks about a person who has fought a lot in order to change his life, but could not make his dreams come true in the end. Although, he is an optimistic character, with a special sense of humor and an extremely interesting view of life, for as he affirms, he has attended all schools of life.

The character starts to develop during his apprenticeship at a blacksmith's. He travels a lot, at first to Braşov, where he learns smith craft and works as an apprentice, yet his work is not appreciated. After a while he decides to try his luck in Hungary, but his plans are destroyed by the enlistment. He attempts to desert, but after facing several dangers, finally he still has to fight in the Second World War along with the Hungarian Army. During the war he becomes invalid and gets to several countries in Europe as a war prisoner. After the war he lives in Hungary for a while, then moves home, founds his own family and becomes a renowned blacksmith in the village and the surroundings. He loses an eye in an accident during work.

He becomes a relatively known author thanks to the publishing of one part of his autobiography in 1979. Yet, during the interviews made in the community, I have discovered that in the local community this publication did not have an impact strong enough to keeping him in the public mind as an author. They remember so much the more the renowned blacksmith. His face remained in the memory of the locals as being ambivalent, as people remember good and bad features as well. Local intellectuals have not kept him among the memories and they do

not consider Gergely Czirják a characteristic personality, one that would be worth to keep in mind.

The “chronicle” of János Antal

This author from Gheorgheni, started to write his autobiography with the aim of giving new information to the public on the history of the Second World War. His life is determined by the events that happened during the war, fighting on different battlefields from the country and from abroad. As a youth he lived in Siberia for a few years as a war prisoner, where he got to know many different cultures, and most of his autobiography consists of these events.

The five notebooks of the manuscript are actually five variants of the autobiography. The first notebook, started in 1994 is a first synthesis on everything that the author considered to be important happening in his life. From some memories from his childhood the writing gets quickly to the first events on the battlefield, and most of the manuscript refers to the years of captivity. The last part of the autobiography describes the circumstances after the war, and ends with the founding of the family, on which he doesn't give details on. So, what is sure is that the author doesn't have as goal the narrating of his entire life. The main reason is mostly historical this fact is repeated in the next notebooks too. The second notebook also presents the same events he presented in the first one, but here the poetry has a main role as well as the history of these poems written by the author during his lifetime. The third notebook is actually the history of captivity of the author, the fourth one is telling more about the happenings of the war in the area of Gheorgheni, presenting different documents. A serious investigation is made into a massacre at the borderline of the town, where lots of Hungarian, Romanian, German and Russian soldiers died. Even more documents are inserted in the last notebook named “The secret notebook” which contains uncountable sketches written during his lifetime.

A newspaper from Gheorgheni published periodically parts of the autobiography, so that János Antal became known in the area. A synthesis of the autobiography was recently published, in 2008.

The autobiography of Köllő Vilma

The author doesn't own a finalized autobiography, she writes her memories on pieces of paper and collects them in a notebook. In the case of the woman from Ciumani we can speak about an actual process of writing. The memories are both in prose and poetry.

The author, during the interviews, has formulated an interesting attitude towards her creation. An important aspect of this is that she has to memorize through writing any event from her life which she considers to be important. These events can be small happenings in life, but they can also be the important events she has been taking part in lately, especially at the meetings of the Association of the pensioners from Ciumani. At these meetings it is already a habit to the reading of poetry by the author herself. Each feast is honored by the author with a poem.

The topics of memories are: old popular habits, known especially in the period of childhood and youth, school memories, attitudes towards sexuality, events and conflicts in the family, events linked to writing poetry.

The question rises: does the author have an autobiography or not? To this problem we can give two answers at the same time. A. The author doesn't have an autobiography because writing is not finalized. B. The author has an autobiography if we consider this to be a process of folkloristic creation.

Conclusions regarding the analysis of autobiographies

The structure of time. Because of the fact that the authors start writing at an older age the texts are retrospective and they analyze the memories, events from the past and the development of the personality from the point of view of the present. Out of this reason the justification of some attitudes, decisions from the past is a permanent aspect in autobiographies.

The structure of space. The writer of the autobiography and the main character are often far from each other not only in time but also in space because lots of important events and memories are linked to traveling or staying abroad. These trips have a serious impact on the development of the personality and attitude towards the own personality.

Interpersonal relationships, characters. Among the characters in the focus, the characters can be grouped as it follows: periodical characters, occasional characters, permanent characters.

The structure of the career. The main periods of life are contextualized in the following way: childhood, youth, maturity and the period of elder age. The memories from the childhood are often idealized. The events from youth are much more important because these have an

impact on the faith of the character. The memories from the period of maturity have in context the family, and the period of elder age is the period when the autobiography is written, so it's the retrospective period.

Evoking events. The autobiographies follow a chronological structure and they accentuate the important episodes of the career.

The intentions of the writer. The authors express their motivations of writing in different ways. Most often they speak about their intention of teaching, of drawing conclusions on the events from their life. The pleasure of writing, remembering is less accentuated.

"The workshop" of the author. Sometimes the authors own a real "workshop", a ritual space where they spend the time of writing.

The career of texts. The authors promote their texts, send them to some intellectuals, acquaintances, so the autobiographies have an own career, which is sometimes followed by the publication of these texts.

Final conclusions

a. Apparition of popular autobiography in Gheorgheni in 1970

When the autobiography of Czirják Gergely appeared in 1979, this genre became most known in this region. But the fact is that the other authors did not mention these publications.

b. Who and why writes his autobiography? These texts are written by old people, with personal motifs. The local reception of these texts is relative to the status of the author in the local community.

c. Relations between the author and the local community. This relation is characterized also by the status of the author in the local community. For example, the family talks about the person in other ways than the neighbors. Sometimes the self-image realized in the text is in conflict with the local opinion.

d. Finality, motifs, strategies. A popular autobiography is never finished because the author finds every time new memories, or sometimes he finds some parts of his writing no more acceptable. These parts are often added or removed later. This is caused by the fact that the popular autobiography is a document of self identity which is in continuous change.

The author is not in contact with professional writers, so he doesn't know about scientific discourses, and does not accept the terms of fiction. Every popular autobiography pretends to be as truer as it's possible.

e. *Between orality and writing.* By the writing the author speaks to a larger audience than in case of telling the story. Writing also is for to tell much larger texts. This is why the popular autobiographies are not following the logics of the oral speech acts.

f. *Regional identity* is a subordinate to the other aspects of personal identity which is composed by the author in his work. The regional identity appears in many different ways in the different texts.

g. *The benefit of the research* of these texts is a better understanding of how the attributes, norms, structures of the folklore change during the 20th century.