

## NAIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHERS

There is, at first glance, nothing easier than to summarize the history of one's life. Every human life, as the cliché puts it, is a true story, and everyone should be capable of writing the story of his own life. We are obviously not thinking of the resumés which are sometimes requested of us for professional or administrative reasons, in which we only mention major and even spectacular events; here we are referring to longer and more detailed descriptions, to writings in which the author tells the story of his life, to autobiographies. Is it difficult to compose them? In any case it is easier than writing a sonnet; to do that, one must know at least the rules for poetry, the construction of rhymes and the form for sonnets. The same is true for writing odes, epigrams and tragedies. Certain norms must be learned which codify the literary genre being used. Apparently there is nothing similar in the case of autobiographies. For who is not capable of recounting the important events of his existence to an attentive listener, events which he remembers and among which he can choose, leaving aside what is not important and speaking only of the essential? One need only have a certain gift for story-telling and know how to write. And even this second condition, in fact, is not essential, since an oral

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description can be transcribed by someone else, an author or an ethnographer, who respects the descriptions given by the autobiographer more or less faithfully.

But is the matter really as simple as all that? Is it possible for each of us to write the story of our existence? We know of many autobiographers who are not at all professional writers. From Cellini to Berlioz, there are abundant examples. Taking only the most outstanding successes of the last two decades in Hungarian autobiographical literature, we must mention Aurél Bernáth, painter; Miklós Borsos, sculptor; Pál Granasztói and Máté Major, architects. All are non-writers, but creators, and they each possess a solid literary culture. Moreover, it is extremely characteristic that each one admits to having requested frequent advice of writer friends both before and during the writing of their texts. Consciously or not, then, they respect the codes for the autobiographical genre, which means that by writing they have become authors themselves.

But there are other authors who have never achieved this degree of consciousness. And borrowing an expression from art criticism, we will call them naive autobiographers. We are thinking here of autobiographers who have had no systematic education and who have been inspired either by still living forms of popular poetry or by certain quite partial notions of great literature which have come down to them.<sup>1</sup> We can find these naive autobiographers in many countries, on many continents, and their appearance is obviously associated with sociological facts. Two conditions seem to allow the development of this autobiographical literature. First of all is the simultaneous existence of two forms of life, that is the persistence of an autonomous rural culture, partially independent from the dominant culture; and secondly a certain stimulation coming from outside, that is the possibility of publication and distribution. In addition to Central and Eastern Europe, where the impermeability of these two cultures has given birth to an entire series of naive autobiographical texts, we would also point to similar attempts in North America where representatives of ethnic minorities (blacks, Indians, Hispanic Americans) often find themselves in

<sup>1</sup> See certain passages in *Nagy Rozália a nevem* by Madame Berényi (Budapest, 1975) and in *Emlékül hagyom* (Budapest, 1976).

an analogous situation.<sup>2</sup> The corpus is too vast and difficult to assemble, and so we will limit ourselves here to Hungarian examples, to texts which appeared during the Seventies. These are two rather lengthy autobiographies, that of Gáspár Tamási (*Vadon nőtt gyöngyvirág*—*Flower of the Fields*) and that of Madame András Berényi (*Nagy Rozália a nevem*—*My Name is Rosalie Nagy*), and an anthology which contains shorter texts (by Pál Gyovai, Mihály Bujdosó, György Kristóf, Madame András Berényi, Madame Van-

kó née Juli Dudás, etc.) and which bears the eloquent title: *Emlékkül hagyom az unokáknak, dédunokáknak, lássák, hogyan éltünk, s hogy az ő életük szebb legyen egyszer*—*I will leave this as a souvenir for my children and grandchildren so that they can see how we lived and so that their lives can be more beautiful.*

#### DOCUMENTARY VALUE

It is an interest in certain kinds of information which has brought on the birth of these texts; the autobiographer believes that it is important, and even essential, that he fix these ephemeral experiences by bequeathing them to his descendants. Or sometimes researchers and ethnographers ask certain elderly peasants to describe their past. In this case, philologists are obviously responsible, at least partially, for arranging the material. These autobiographies provide us with information of an underground world, of a world in which neither ethnography nor literature has yet sufficiently enlightened. Moreover, it is a world which has been condemned, which is in danger of becoming extinct, which will probably disappear completely with the death of these its final representatives. And this makes these documents even more valuable. But even though ethnography or great literature has already discovered and described the phenomena concerned, the importance of these naive autobiographies remains intact because of their point of view. For they provide a view from within, a naive view, naive in

<sup>2</sup> Our work is thus hypothetical, and we are in fact supposing an analogy with other literatures which we do not know sufficiently well.

relation to the viewpoint of ethnographers and novelists. These texts thus contain new information, both because of their contents and because of their point of view.

Gáspár Tamási, for example, describes for us the customs of a Sicilian village: the internal family hierarchy, the difficulty and necessity of work, the code for requesting a marriage, popular ceremonies which precede military induction, and so on. Pál Gyovai explains the life of itinerant diggers. Mihály Bujdosó speaks of war from the point of view of a foot soldier, Juli Vankó draws up an inventory of still lively popular arts, Madame Berényi describes the activities of a peasant healer, the ways of life of village youth, the wave of amorality which occurred during World War I, the life of sharecroppers, the maid's life that she lived, and cooking and eating at the various levels of society. Often these are unknown or little known facts, and they are told from an extremely unusual point of view, which is the crucial aspect. Consequently this is new information for the ordinary reader, accustomed to the point of view of writers from the dominant culture. It is tempting to compare, for example, the autobiography of Madame András Berényi to literary works which deal with the life of a maid. One might believe that the novel by Dezső Kosztolanyi, *Anna la Douce*,<sup>3</sup> describes all the dimensions of the servant's condition; but upon reading *My Name is Rosalie Nagy*, we are forced to note that this is not so. Madame Berényi, who had lived this life, is ever capable of surprising us anew, not only with concrete details, but especially by constantly emphasizing the contrasts, at every level, between servants and those served.

It is precisely at that point that she goes beyond the level of pure information to reach a literary level; in other words, it is there that her text goes beyond monosemy to become polysemous. The real question lies precisely therein. Are these autobiographical texts capable of going beyond the level of simple information? Are autobiographers capable of making the distinction between the essential and the anecdotal, the characteristic and the superficial, the important and the unessential? Do they know how to show, as Goethe would say, the general in the particular? In other words,

<sup>3</sup> *Édes Anna*. Budapest, 1926.

can they transform their souvenirs, confessions and reports into literature? In order to be able to answer all these questions, we must first of all examine the means which they have available.

#### THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FORM

An autobiography is a narrative genre which, like every genre, possesses a code for its writing; and the possession—conscious or unconscious—of this code is certainly essential to the autobiographer,<sup>4</sup> even if only to refuse it or to violate it. But does the naive autobiographer have the code for his genre? This depends, no doubt, on the models available to him or to the stimuli which have set the narrative process in motion.

However, the models for the autobiographers mentioned above are primarily products of popular oral literature.<sup>5</sup> It is obvious that popular poetry has created very complex forms, frequently of great value, hardly inferior to forms of learned poetry. To the contrary these forms have often been the inspiration behind those of learned poetry: songs, ballads, tales, and so on. The language of popular poetry is most often metaphorical, full of concrete images and, precisely for this reason, highly expressive. It is, therefore, completely natural that the best naive autobiographers use this native language. And so, for example, Gáspár Tamási,<sup>6</sup> using expressions frequently found in his region of Transylvania and images inspired by popular poetry, has succeeded in creating his own individual style. But he is practically the only one to have done so, for with the others we find only traces of the influence of popular poetic language; Gyovai, Vankó and the others use instead the everyday

<sup>4</sup> For our theory see Szávai in “La place et le rôle de l’autobiographie dans la littérature”, in *Acta Litteraria* No. 18, Budapest, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> In several of these texts we can read descriptions of rural life at the beginning of the century where the story-teller still had a place. On winter evenings, when the peasants came together for shared tasks, he was the one who entertained them.

<sup>6</sup> The lot of Gáspár Tamási was a strange one; his brother, Aron Tamási, the only one in a poor family who was able to go to school, became a well-known novelist and dramatist, while Gáspár remained a peasant all his life. There was very little contact between the two brothers since Aron married the daughter of a lawyer and did not want to present his original family to his new one. It was only after the novelist’s death that Gáspár began to write his autobiography.

language of the villagers.

But since an autobiography is a narrative genre, naive autobiographers naturally turn to the popular narrative genre which they know best: the popular tale. They have patently been trained at the school of oral story-telling, the practice of which was still alive at the time of their youth. It is also quite easy to see the influence of several characteristic traits of popular tales in their texts. There is first of all the marked presence of the narrator; the motivating force of the drama is nothing other than the omnipresence of two poles: the designation of duty and the accomplishment of this duty. Finally there is the juxtaposition in very loose organization of sequences and narrative episodes.<sup>7</sup>

The popular story-teller has the habit of interrupting his narrative rather often in order to address his listeners directly and to personalize one or another episode in his story. Although the narrator is often barely visible in literary autobiographies (in Goethe or Gorky, for example, one could say with a bit of exaggeration that the story tells itself), there are, nevertheless, cases, as in Rousseau, or to take a contemporary example in *Les Mots* by Jean-Paul Sartre, where the narrator plays an important role. From this point of view, the naive autobiography is like a tale with commentaries, but the difference becomes clear precisely in the tone of these interventions. Although some interventions could find a place in literary autobiographies, most commentaries seem to us quite naive or summary. When compared to the scholarly analyses of certain writers, the commentaries of Madame Berényi, which may be short but which are not void of wisdom nor of irony, seem to us simple! "Much is said in our days of the bad behaviour of youth", she writes for example. Then, still following the model of popular language, she continues with the sentence: "However, in the past as in the present, it is from the parents that the child learns the most. Both for the good and for the bad." We could give a great deal of other similar examples.

For the formation of their episodes, naive autobiographers almost always follow the model of popular tales. Like the latter, their texts are made up of well-structured sequences. One can even say

<sup>7</sup> See note 4.

that it is precisely the formation of these sequences (or episodes) which shows the true narrative talent of the naive masters. Take for example Pál Gyovai, who is also a naive painter. The first chapter of his autobiography (*Souvenirs of My Childhood Days*) could quite easily appear in any literary autobiography. This highly suggestive chapter speaks only of what is essential when describing the childhood moments which determined, or strongly influenced, the development of the personality of the author, who became a digger, but who was strongly attracted from the beginning by the arts and who wanted to become a creator. And so, like every good autobiographer, he succeeds in showing us the lines of force which appear quite early as if in prefiguration of his entire future life.

It is true that the evocation of childhood is relatively easier than that of youth or of adulthood, since childhood forms a whole and appears in retrospect as a well-structured period. Therefore it is not astonishing that naive autobiographers are excellent in this. But we can find in our authors other equally excellent sequences, the passage where Madame Berényi tells of her marriage, for example, a chapter full of litotes but at the same time quite dramatic; or the description of military service in the book by Gáspár Tamási, where the comic is closely harmonized with the tragic, a chapter which is reminiscent of the *Sveik* by Jaroslav Hasek.

#### LACK OF PERSPECTIVE

But often the tone is lowered; the epic flow is broken, the sequences remain simply juxtaposed instead of being organized into a whole. In short, the naive autobiographer is not able to achieve what should be his truly original characteristic: going beyond curiosities, a description of an authentic and autonomous way of life, thereby proclaiming universal truths. If many sequences do achieve the status of literature, the whole, on the other hand, never forms a true work. The cause of this, in our opinion, is a lack of a global vision.

The autobiographer's vision should cover all past experiences, and more importantly this vision should be extremely conscious.



This is what allows the author to choose between the most characteristic and the most determining memories, to place at the center of his account a description of the major break-offs (or crises) of his life, and to organize into a coherent series—both from a logical and from a formal point of view—the episodes which he has chosen.

It is precisely this cohesion which is always lacking in naive autobiographers.

And what might be the cause of this? There are probably several. First of all there is the lack of a valid model in popular poetry. Among the anonymous epic forms of our time,<sup>8</sup> there is none which has a structure as vast and as rich as that of autobiography, with the popular tale being an epic genre of less importance. Moreover, both the book by Tamási and that of Madame Berényi, to mention only the better ones, seem to us to be a series of tales (or else an anthology of *novellas*) whose protagonist is of course always the same, but whose elements follow in a very loose chronology, without that internal coherence which characterizes works of art. But this is but one of the aspects of our problem. For even if naive autobiographies could find a valid epic model in popular poetry, they would not necessarily have found a solution.

The second cause, the essential cause of this incoherence, is the lack of a point of view which can fully embrace and organize the past, the lack of a principle which can assemble all the sequences into a unified narrative, the lack of a central idea which would encourage the naive autobiographer to select only the essential elements from his past, those which have motivated the formation of his personality. This is the obstacle which naive autobiographers are never able to overcome.

We would not say that sequences without a function occupy a large place in these texts, for in the most gifted naive authors, in Tamási or in Madame Berényi, every sequence has its importance. The major problem, rather, is on the one hand the breaking up of the narrative, and on the other the failure to evoke certain events. We are not thinking of the elliptical narrative technique which is

<sup>8</sup> We are also thinking of genres which were still living up until the 1940's.



an extremely powerful literary device. With the naive authors, it is another matter altogether. They avoid or barely mention certain phenomena which are, it is true, quite difficult to describe, but which they should have absolutely discussed in their texts. In Gáspár Tamási, for example, who had never left his little village in Transylvania, there is a serious lack of reference to two major historical events. There was the Treaty of Versailles which annexed this territory to Romania in 1920; and there was the arrival of the socialist regime after 1945 which completely overturned the social hierarchy. Obviously we are not talking of a recounting of the historical facts, but rather a description of the direct or indirect influence of these external events on the lives of individuals, on their way of thinking and of feeling. Although Tamási is capable of describing certain phenomena quite well, here, however, even though his silence is significant, he leaves us hungry for more.

With Madame Berényi, on the other hand, traces of a strong conception are quite visible, even though it is a rather simplistic conception. What interests her above all is the contrast between the rich and the poor. Consequently she generally avoids discussing a topic which she had begun to deal with in the style of a great novelist: the relationship between the protagonist, Rosalie Nagy, and her husband, András Berényi. In an extremely fascinating chapter entitled "The Day of the Wedding", the autobiographer tells us that she had refused a number of suitors, that she despised the idea of marriage, and that finally Berényi won her only by wearing her down. The wedding night was a nightmare for her, carnal contacts disgusted her and this feeling was amplified with the arrival of children. During World War I, her husband was sent to the front, and by chance he spent several days in a city near their village as his contingent was being posted to their assignment. Madame Berényi, not without hesitation, visited him, and, faced with her husband's insistence at taking her off with him, she instead offered him money, "that he go wherever he wanted to as long as he would leave her alone". Between the two evils—the expense involved and the disgust for sex—she preferred the former. And knowing the peasant's loathing of any expenditure, it is quite easy to see just to what degree this still young woman was repelled by physical love.

Here she is telling her own story first of all, but at the same time it is the story of many women, and therefore a general problem. What a shame that she does not say another word about it in the rest of her narrative! For although she sometimes mentions her husband, she says nothing further about their relationship (we can also note that she says nothing about her relationship with her children either). What interests her above all are the masters and mistresses of the houses where she had served as a maid.

The problem with commentaries—and analyses—is obviously associated with the problem of a lack of perspective. Autobiographical authors quite frequently use this device. There are even texts, as for example *Les Mots* by Sartre, where the analyses take up almost as much space as the narrative itself. In the naive autobiographers, the commentaries are most frequently summaries in sentence form, generally too brief or too simplistic. In Madame Berényi, for example, although the narrative is rich and well articulated, the analyses are without interest or even in contradiction to the description.

#### THE TRAGEDY OF THE NAIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHERS

And so, despite episodes of great quality, despite the polysemous value of certain details, these texts are condemned to remain outside of literature. If we read them it is rather in order to have access to certain information. But the cause of this phenomenon is not a lack of talent, but rather, we are convinced, the nature of the type of narrative chosen by the naive authors.

The naive autobiography is a transitory phenomenon, a genre which lies half-way between the almost lost forms of oral literature and the fully developed forms of contemporary literature. It is the product of a period of transition, an era which is witnessing major changes in living conditions. The naive autobiography could not have occurred earlier because the authors in question would have then been absorbed by the still living genres of popular poetry. But it could not have occurred any later either, for in that case these naive authors would have certainly become professional authors. We should not overlook the fact that many of these naive autobiographers possess a true creative talent: Gáspár Tamási, Pál Gy-

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vai and Madame Berényi are no doubt the spiritual descendants of those anonymous authors who created the masterpieces of popular poetry, tales, songs and ballads. The tragedy of these naive authors is that they were born too late to be able to remain anonymous, and too early to be able to become what they should have become, true authors.

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