

Aesthetics of the Self

Thinking and Writing the Auto/Biographical in Modern and Contemporary Literature

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I. General Tendencies in Auto/biography Around the Year 2000

At the turn of the millennium in the Western world the literary genres of autobiography and biography are flourishing. Some of the world's bestsellers in recent years are autobiographies or at least strongly autobiographically influenced texts (e.g. Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims*, or the works of Annie Ernaux in France). The same is true for biographies. Although Roland Barthes and others declared the author to be dead (Barthes 1968/1977) the biography of authors and other people is a very popular genre – both on the book market, in literary criticism and in literary science. And finally, the research in literary and cultural studies on auto/biographical works is quite productive too (DiBattista/Wittmann 2014; Wagner-Egelhaaf 2019), underscoring the fact that often general tendencies in the cultural discourse are reflected by focuses and preferences in the scientific discourse in the humanities.

Why is that so? Why are autobiographies and biographies nowadays and in recent years so popular in the Western world? What are the deeper reasons for this popularity?

One possible answer is that both the autobiography and the biography are immersive text types. Like novels, autobiographies and biographies formulate the promise of an intensive immersion in a strange life, a strange world. But unlike the novel, the immersive reading experience of an autobiography is based on a factual, empirical core. Like hardly any other literary genre, autobiography and biography refer to the historicity, worldliness and temporality of existence. Just to cite one example, in Bruce Springsteen's successful and also literary remarkable autobiography *Born to Run* (2016) the general cultural upheavals of the 1960s is mirrored by the individual experience of Doo-Wop and Rock 'n' Roll at that time. Paradoxically, these general historical and time-bound experiences lend the subject its very individual and incommensurable contours. For it is still this one, special life that makes the historical experiences. In the perception of both the autobiographical subject and the reader biographical experience appears as something unique, irretrievable and thus valuable for identity.

Obviously behind the success of modern autobiographies lies a form of individual incommensurability that finds expression in this literary form. So what this is all about is the individualization of experience and its transformation into autobiographical and biographical texts. This process has much to do with changes in the history of the subject in modernity. To put these complex transformations very brief: when general ideas and concepts are collapsing individual concepts, also called life resp. biography, become essential. Of course this is a process that goes for the whole modern period. It was Michel de Montaigne who already in the 16th century wrote: "Le monde n'est qu'une branloire perenne. Toutes choses y branlent sans cesse" ("The world is a constant wavering; all things in it waver without ceasing"; Montaigne 1927, p. 38). So also the subject – the ego is not something fixed,

but a contingent, a fluctuating something.

Later the period around 1800 in German literature and philosophy is characterized by a crisis of the general and a kind of explosion of individualism. Werther for instance doubts the general concepts of god and religion. But he believes in himself as a free and loving being. The experience of freedom is central to many biographies of this time. But in a way the general is still valid and forceful. In a way the general is merely transferred to the individual. For love, freedom, and other entities that are replacing religion are conceived as general ideas for mankind as a whole, not only for the single person. That's the meaning of compounds like 'Liebesreligion', love religion – it is a concept that shall redeem mankind and end alienation all over the world.¹

Compared to 1800 the situation of the period around 2000 seems to be different. The crisis of over-individual concepts is not balanced by any generalized individual entity. The process of individualization has progressed in a dimension that there is nothing else but all these different lives of different persons. There may be some ideas and ideals how to lead one's life, role models, idols etc. But none of these guiding principles have the force of the emphatic concepts of former times. In a way contingency – for a long time a rather sophisticated philosophical notion – has become a normal and widespread conception, a mass phenomenon.² The main problem of modernity, from Montaigne up to the present, is how to deal with contingency, with openness – anything is possible (Parks 2016). Autobiographical literature, by dealing with the structure of a person's lifetime, mirrors this problem more directly than other literary genres and works of art. And by doing so both autobiography and biography at the same time are fulfilling important functions in society. These literary forms have a strong relation to concrete, practical life. They process knowledge that is generated, when people face certain problems, and when they try to cope with and control the turbulences and contingencies of life. Biographies and autobiographies articulate models, narratives of the self – they provide schemes for the aesthetics of the self. And that is still true today, despite the fact that in the course of modernity this socio-ethical function has become problematic, because fixed patterns of identity melt away.

This becomes particularly clear when one takes another look at autobiographical writing in modernity, and that along the leading category of truth. The history of modern autobiography usually starts with Rousseau and his *Confessions* (1782/88). It is interesting to compare his autobiography with the canonical example of autobiographical writing in antiquity respectively in Christian tradition, Augustine's *Confessiones* (397-401). A mere look at the first sentences of their reports of life will clearly mark the basic difference. Augustine writes: "Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy power, and infinite is thy wisdom." ("Magnus es, domine, et laudabilis valde. magna virtus tua et sapientiae tuae non est numerus"; Augustinus 2004, p. 8) Whereas Rousseau begins his autobiography with the following words: "I have entered upon a performance which is without example, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a

¹ On this process, see Klinger, Cornelia. *Flucht, Trost, Revolte. Die Moderne und ihre ästhetischen Gegenwelten*. München/Wien: Hanser, 1996.

² One of the main promoters of contingency as a conception for life in general in the Western world is the philosopher Richard Rorty. See Rorty, Richard: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself.” (“Je forme une entreprise qui n’eut jamais d’exemple, et don’t l’exécution n’aura point d’imitateur. Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature; et cet homme, ce sera moi.” Rousseau 1959, p. 5) Actually, these initial sentences are about which instances can give life security and stability. And one can also call this instance ‘truth’ – not only Goethe wrote his autobiography under the title “Dichtung und Wahrheit” (*Poetry and Truth*, 1811-1833) and spoke of the symbolic basic truth of his life. For Augustine this basic truth is God respectively the “Lord”. And for Rousseau it is the ego respectively “myself”.

But it is no coincidence that Rousseau’s autobiography has become a popular plaything of poststructuralist text exegesis.³ For the ego that Rousseau so emphatically asserts and focuses on proves to be an unreliable quantity on closer inspection. The ego is not, as with Augustine God, an objectively given powerful entity that gives security and orientation to the individual life. The Rousseau ego, the ego of modernity in general, leads time and again into abysses, it is full of contradictions and it is contingent. In the history of modern autobiographical writing, prominent names such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka and Roland Barthes are exemplary for this process of disempowering truth and, in addition, for the process of fragmentation of the subject. They all say the same thing: there is nothing about truth. For Nietzsche, truth, also biographical truth, is only a “mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms” (“bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen”; Nietzsche 1988, p. 880), a disguise and masquerade, a game without a solid ground. For Kafka, the real truth – especially in a biographical, existential sense – is his “dreamlike inner life” (“traumhafte[s] innere[s] Leben”; Kafka 1994, p. 167), which has nothing to do with conventional ideas, which is rather highly paradoxical, surreal, fantastically contoured.⁴ And for Roland Barthes, spiritus rector of the modernist and postmodernist autobiographical discourse, the imaginary is a central category with regard to the truth of autobiographical writing. The ego, as it is called at one point, is “condemned to the imaginary” (“condamné à l’imaginaire”; Barthes 1975, p. 40) from the outset; it cannot escape it, neither in the construction of the ego and the world nor, and certainly not, in the narration of one’s own life. Metaphors, dreams, the imaginary – all these modes of representation create ambiguity and by doing so they obstruct the direct, straight-forward path to truth. So also with regard to these truth politics in modern autobiographical writing, we are ultimately dealing with an erosion of the general and an individualization of experience. Today, truth is still a relevant category. But it is more and more also a problematic and elusive category. And that’s why it is so important to narrate one’s life, to model and form the individual in a narrative way, because the notion of truth cannot be translated anymore (or: lesser than ever) with clear and distinctive means (*clare et distincte*).

This process is reflected on a different level when one takes a closer look at a term that is

³ See for example Bellou, Thea: *Derrida’s Deconstruction of the Subject. Writing, Self and Other*. Bern/Berlin/Bruxelles et al.: Peter Lang, 2013, pp. 99-138.

⁴ Truth is always only negative or conceivable as distorted: “Our art is one of being blinded by the truth: the light on the receding grimace face is true, nothing else.” („Unsere Kunst ist ein von der Wahrheit Geblendet-Sein: das Licht auf dem zurückweichenden Fratzensgesicht ist wahr, sonst nichts.“ Kafka, Franz. *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlaß*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1953, p. 46.)

particularly important in the German tradition. The concept of “coherence” (‘Zusammenhang’) was essentially coined by Wilhelm Dilthey and the German intellectual history (‘Geistesgeschichte’) around 1900 (Dilthey 1906–11/1998). According to this tradition, the life of the individual, both in reality and in biographical reconstruction, is emphatically oriented towards the experience of coherence or inter-connectedness. Meaning emerges and is produced by the different stages of life and biographical stations building on each other and connecting with each other. The hermeneutic circle can also be applied to human biography: the individual (the parts of life) and the whole (the whole of life) are indissolubly connected; it is necessary to see and understand the whole in the individual and the individual in the whole.

Today, there is widespread skepticism towards such emphatic categories of understanding and constructions of coherence. From a biographical point of view, one already has difficulties with precise remembering – especially with finding a coherent whole of life. It is almost a recurring topos in the more recent autobiographical discourse that one refers to the pitfalls and gaps of autobiographical memory. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, for example, says in his autobiographical report about the time of 68: “My memory resembles a sieve in which little gets stuck.” His “interest in an autobiography,” he continues, “leaves much to be desired. I don’t want to remember everything that concerns me. With reluctance I leaf through the memoirs of my contemporaries. I don’t trust them over the way.” („Mein Gedächtnis gleicht einem Sieb, in dem wenig hängenbleibt. [...] Allerdings läßt mein Interesse an einer Autobiographie zu wünschen übrig. Ich will mir gar nicht alles merken, was mich betrifft. Mit Widerwillen blättere ich in den Memoiren meiner Zeitgenossen. Ich traue ihnen nicht über den Weg.“ Enzensberger 2014, p. 105)

The life remembered, however, proves to be not only for reasons of mnemonic inadequacy as a little connected, fragmentary matter. Also the general impression of the whole of life is that of a less linear, more discontinuous entity. Life resembles a colorful patchwork carpet. And this is why the category of coherence or inter-connectedness, which was still at the center of Wilhelm Dilthey’s work, is met with great skepticism. Neither the existence in general nor the individual biography in particular seem to be able to redeem the claim to an emphatic experience of coherence. Typical is a note as the author Michael Rutschky records in his autobiographical biography of his father: during the Nazi era, his father’s antipathies were spread equally between his hereditary enemy France and Hitler’s Nazism. Rutschky comments: “Again and again one must renounce the expectation that a consciousness with its opinions and convictions forms a meaningful, contradiction-free ordered whole.” („Immer wieder muss man auf die Erwartung verzichten, dass ein Bewusstsein mit seinen Meinungen und Überzeugungen ein sinnvoll, ein widerspruchsfrei geordnetes Ganzes bildet.“ Rutschky 2012, p. 43)

Also because of this contradiction, biographical truth in recent autobiographical literature can only be caught up approximately. For one is the outer framework of a life that can be reconstructed approximately with the help of data and realities. But something completely different is the inner core of this described life, which resembles a black box. Dilthey’s “coherence” is ultimately a utopian idea, typical of the time, grown out of the late Hegelian need for a universal narrative of meaning. “Coherence” is another name for “poetry of the heart” („Poesie des Herzens“; Hegel 1970, p. 393), to quote a well-known formulation from Hegel’s definition of the novel of formation.

But this is deep 19th century. Typical of the 20th and 21st century is when Michael Rutschky characterizes his method with the words that it is a “collage of heterogeneous elements” (“Collage heterogener Elemente”; Rutschky 2012, p. 250). Modernity is collage, construction, it is not interconnectedness, at most the construction and deliberate exhibition of connectedness, as can be observed in some recent autofictional texts, as a fantastic game with coherences, the fictional character of which, however, is apparent to every reader at first glance. One example is a novel by Büchner Prize winner Felicitas Hoppe, her book is simply called *Hoppe* (2012) and plays a virtuoso game with itself and the autobiographical form.

II. Karl Ove Knausgaard: My Struggle (2009-2011)

In addition to general developments, individual autobiographical works continue to play a decisive role in guiding the discourse on autobiographical works. It is not yet possible to say anything conclusive about the effect of the two autobiographically strongly influenced narrations of Karl Ove Knausgaard and Rachel Cusk, since both works were only published at the beginning of the 2010s. What is certain, however, is that they are among the most remarkable works of recent autobiographical literature in terms of both aesthetic narrative and semantic content. And they also exemplify the changes in the history of the modern subject and its autobiographical discourse.

The six volumes of autobiographical novel prose by Karl Ove Knausgaard, published between 2009 and 2011 first in Norwegian and then in countless translations, are among the most astonishing book successes of the recent past. Amazing because someone has captivated many readers, critics and researchers alike with his literature. One hears again and again how people tell of their reading of Knausgaard as of a great experience, meaning, in other words, the very special and lasting impression left by reading these books. Many authors are successful, however, there are bestsellers all over the world every year – the special thing about Knausgaard is that this prose under the title *Min kamp* (English: *My Struggle*) represents something completely new, both in terms of content and aesthetics.

What is meant by this? On the one hand – and one can read this again and again in the comments of readers and critics – this work presents everyday life in great detail. And that is the everyday life of its author, Karl Ove Knausgaard. It is thus undoubtedly autobiographical prose that depicts the life of a Western or Northern European person, born and raised in the last third of the 20th century, in an exemplary manner and that accentuates everyday life in particular: family, friends, school, job, without all too dramatic plot structures. At the same time, however, this autobiographical prose is in the tradition of a certain direction of autobiography in modernism, which begins with Rousseau and leads via Baudelaire to Michel Leiris and others. What is meant is a poetics of the ‘exposed heart’, a poetics of radical authenticity.⁵ In other words, Knausgaard combines the everyday with the scandalous, often reporting on humanly intimate, offensive things. He exposes to the reader his inner self, with all its psychological distortions, with all its abysses – for instance in terms of sexuality. At

⁵ On this tradition, see Bohrer, Karl Heinz. *Der romantische Brief. Die Entstehung ästhetischer Subjektivität*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989, pp. 11-24.

one point he also calls this side of his life and existence in general “the difficult and painful” (“das Schwierige und Schmerzhaftes”; Knausgård 2017, p. 67). It is this will to authenticity that endows Knausgaard’s autobiographical prose with a highly emphatic tone with respect to the category of truth. Here someone really wants to tell the truth about himself and his life once again, relentlessly and comprehensively. This truth also includes the in a way crazy but at the same time ingenious idea of comparing himself and his biography in the last part of the autobiographical cycle with no one less than Adolf Hitler. The last part of the series, which comprises over a thousand pages, describes and analyses Adolf Hitler’s life, especially his youth and his years as a young man, over hundreds of book pages. What is the point of this digression, which at first glance has nothing at all to do with the author and his life?

I think Knausgaard wants to tell us that anyone who writes an autobiography in the second half of the 20th century cannot avoid Adolf Hitler, in the sense of an anthropological phenomenon; he embodies the human possible, a human possible extreme that has become real. And if I, Karl Ove Knausgaard, want to say something about myself and my life in a truly sincere, authentic way, then I have to consider this anthropological option of modernity – in which basically anything is possible. Then it is, so to speak, a part of me, I have to face this human possibility that once was real and as a result is possible again and again. That does not mean, of course, that Karl Ove Knausgaard sees himself as Adolf Hitler and compares his life with the biography of Hitler. But the radical will to authenticity leads us to bring these dark, hidden sides of everyone’s life into autobiographical writing. “Mein Kampf” is therefore not only Hitler’s struggle, but the struggle of every person who has grown up with the monstrous anthropological options of modernity and is forced to model the ego by challenging all these contingencies, to decide for one life among many possible ones.

So Knausgaard is on the one hand an emphaticist of truth. He writes at one point: “The basic idea of my series of novels was, after all, to describe reality as it was.” („Die Grundidee meiner Romanreihe lautete schließlich, die Wirklichkeit zu schildern, wie sie war.“ Knausgård 2017, p. 447) On the other hand, contrary to what the quoted passage suggests, he is not naïve. Rather, his prose is reflected to a great extent, and that’s why it’s true for him as well as for almost every serious author in the modern age: reality and truth have become problematic entities. One cannot simply depict them one-to-one in literature or art. Or to put it another way, authenticity, especially in literature, automatically stands in tension with fictionality or constructiveness. Truth is always something made and therefore relative, conditional. Knausgaard is aware of this, he names all his books, which on the one hand are so obviously autobiographies and represent an emphatic model of the search for truth, he expressly names these autobiographical books in the subtitle “novels”. And in the books themselves he also repeatedly marks his perspective and constructivist limitations as narrator and person. He does not represent an objectivist concept of truth. In this great autobiography of a life at the turn of the second millennium, truthfulness and romance ultimately stand side by side without connection. Perhaps, however, this is also a permanent core of this autobiographical writing model, that the individual, in his attempt to give his life an autobiographical form, is necessarily confronted with the inextricable conflict between the search for truth and fictionality, in other words the necessary shallows into which this search for the ego and its truth leads.

III. Rachel Cusk: *Outline* (2014) / *Transit* (2016) / *Kudos* (2018)

Rachel Cusk's narrative cycle consists of three novels of about two hundred pages each, and was published between 2014 and 2018. These books also quickly developed into an international success, albeit to a lesser extent than Knausgaard. But especially among professional readers – critics, writers, scholars – the books of the British author seem to meet with an extraordinarily great response.⁶ What is this trilogy about? The structure of these novels is quite simple: a female central character – a writer by profession and the first-person narrator of the story – has, in the course of some days or weeks, several encounters with persons she meets due to professional obligations or by mere chance, in England and in different places across Western Europe. Two novels, *Outline* and *Kudos*, open with a chance meeting in an airplane. In *Outline* the narrator is on her way to Athens where she teaches a writing course. Next to her in the plane is sitting a Greek who stays anonymous and is just always called “neighbour”. During her stay the narrator has several encounters with him and other familiar and non-familiar people. The central content of all three books are the life stories told during these encounters, partly narrated in direct speech, partly in free indirect speech. Now and then the first-person narrator is commenting on the stories – giving some insight and detail about her own life and personal circumstances. But most of the time she remains in the background. She remains passive, and by doing so she is a kind of recording machine for life stories of others, a medium through which the reader can get an insight into personal depths and intimacies of one's fellow human beings that would otherwise, in reality, be hidden.

Although strictly speaking and measured in literary terms, Cusk's trilogy neither is an autobiographical nor a biographical text, there are some obvious autobiographical and biographical elements in this prose. As for the autobiographical dimension it is with no doubt that the first-person narrator shows some striking similarities with the author (age, gender, profession, family status, personal circumstances). Secondly and as far as the biographical dimension is concerned one can state that large parts of the three books consist of biographical reports of people the first-person narrator encounters. These reports may contain some realistic features, but as a whole they are obviously fictitious. At the same time they are true in a symbolic Goethean sense, insofar as the series of biographical reports together constitute a sort of representative panorama of what it means to have a life and to think about one's life in the Western world.

There is no action, no plot in the conventional sense. Just two or three people – most of them middle aged or a little bit older, but some also younger –, just two people sitting together and exchanging their experiences, narrating episodes of their life. So the basic situation of the novels is both quite hermeneutical and therapeutic. People talk and narrate in order to find meaning and relief. The conversations are often about turning points in life and about the core issues of our existence: identity, family, profession, social relations, intimate relations, gender roles. In short, they are about the question how to live one's life, how to lead a good or somehow satisfying life. Very often the main focus of the biographical narratives is on social relations: relations to family members, loved ones,

⁶ See for instance in Germany Wagner, David. „Um zu erzählen. Rachel Cusks Lebensromane“. *Merkur: Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken* 73 (2019), No. 836, pp. 60-64.

friends, colleagues. How does it come that these relations change? That sometimes they change from love to hate? In other words, these stories are often about the processes of contingency. Not by chance one novel has the title “Transit”, giving our modern existence a catchy and at the same time suggestive headline. Our lives are constantly on the move, there is no such thing as a fixed and reliable entity or identity. The word “transit” comes across in an episode in the second half of the novel when the first-person narrator is on her way to meet a friend in a café in London. She passes a junction, and the description of it clearly contains a deeper symbolic or allegorical meaning that is referring to life in general and the life of a person in particular: “The Tube station stood at a junction where five roads converged like the spokes of a wheel. The traffic sat at the lights, each lane waiting for its turn. Sometimes it seemed that the junction was a place of confluence; at other times, when the traffic thundered constantly over the intersection in a chaotic river of buses and bicycles and cars, it felt like a mere passageway, a place of transit.” (Cusk 2016, p. 160) Even more symbolical and quite philosophical is the beginning of the novel. Here too, the main focus is on the notion of “transit”. The protagonist receives an email by a female astrologer who says that “a major transit” is “due to occur shortly in my sky” (Cusk 2016, p. 1). In view of this shift in the sky the astrologer offers her help and guidance, and she insists on the fact that “the movements of the planets” represent “a zone of infinite reverberation to human destiny” (Cusk 2016, p. 1). Reading this sentence one might think of Georg Lukács and his famous *Theory of the Novel* (1916) that starts with the phrase: “Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths — ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars” (“Selig sind die Zeiten, für die der Sternenhimmel die Landkarte der gangbaren und zu gehenden Wege ist und deren Wege das Licht der Sterne erhellt”; Lukács 1994, p. 21). But exactly this is what is in question. That is what the modern world and its philosophical foundations deeply deny. There is no outer source of truth for one’s life, no general order that provides solid coordinates for a human being to lead one’s life. What is in question here is the “significance”, the “value” (Cusk 2016, p. 2) of one’s life. Where does it come from? From an outer natural order, symbolized or in former times even embodied by the cosmic order of the stars? Actually the astrologer’s email is an advertising email, knowing about the deep desire in the Western world for significance, for guidance and direction in a time that is determined by permanent transit, i.e. contingency. “She could sense – the email continued – that I lost my way in life, that I sometimes struggled to find meaning in my present circumstances and to feel hope for what was to come” (Cusk 2016, p. 1). In other words, therapy is the answer to contingency, to the cosmic void. But not for Cusk. The punch line is, it is not unlikely that the email and even the astrologer was generated by “computer algorithms” (Cusk 2016, p. 2). So the care for existence would have been a fake. The world has long been beyond “meaning” or “significance” in a traditional, metaphysical sense. In our modern world there is only the individual, its loneliness, and the cool, grey logic of technical, social and economic processes.

IV. The German Situation

Apart from general developments in the history of modern subjectivity and outstanding individual works, it is important to keep an eye on the breadth of literature in autobiographical discourse. Every national literature also has its own literary traditions and characteristic features. In addition to the

national contexts, autobiographical literature in the age of globalization stands in so many different contexts, both in terms of content and aesthetics, that an overview is hardly possible (Rippl 2019). If these points are considered together, another, new perspective on the discourse of autobiographical writing around the year 2000 emerges. German literature is an example of this. The scene is extraordinarily diverse and broad. There are many autobiographical works. And there are many different approaches to autobiographically modelling the aesthetics of the self. The spectrum ranges from more traditional models, biographical retrospectives in conventional forms, to more experimental approaches, often very individual and original poetics of autobiographical writing. Among them is Peter Kurzeck, who since the 1990s has been writing a multi-part autobiographical work entitled *Das alte Jahrhundert* (*The Old Century*), developing a language of his own and illuminating in detail a limited cosmos of life in Frankfurt in the 1970s and 1980s. This also includes someone like Rainald Goetz, who in 2015 received the most renowned award in contemporary German literature, the Büchner Prize. Large parts of his work are autobiographical; they consist of an idiosyncratic form of diary, which on the one hand works through the present and reality in a postheroic way, and on the other hand is highly artificial and reflects this reality, commenting on and supplementing it. In addition, there are a large number of authors who operate in the field of tension between novel and autobiography. In other words, they write autobiographical novels or autofiction, a term that has become one of the most frequently used terms in the scientific and critical discourse on autobiographical writing over the past twenty years (Gronemann 2019). Felicitas Hoppe's aforementioned book *Hoppe* (2012) is an example for this new type of autobiography in German literature.

A characteristic feature of autobiographical writing in German literature around 2000, however, is an element that determines the course of literature in general after 1945 in a fundamental way. What is meant is the confrontation with history, with the German past of the 20th century, with the "age of extremes", as the British historian Eric Hobsbawm called it (Hobsbawm 1994). In particular, the autobiographical prose of the generation of those born in the first half of the 20th century is inevitably confronted with these themes, with war, genocide, expulsion, life in totalitarian dictatorships, and questions of guilt and responsibility for committed crimes and offences. In the West and East German literary scene after 1945, two names stand for these themes in particular: Günter Grass and Christa Wolf. Both wrote extensive autobiographical works at the beginning of the 21st century in which they tell of the self in the field of tension between subjectivity and history.⁷ Both autobiographical works are equally characterized by a will to truth, this time with a Protestant penitential gesture. Telling the truth is synonymous with admitting and naming guilt, which is to be cathartically purified through autobiographical awareness and transmission. This is, so to speak, the official meaning of these autobiographical writing enterprises. They narrate of the responsibility and accountability of the individual life in the face of political-historical developments, which are out to extinguish the individual, to quote a formulation of the Hungarian Nobel Prize winner in literature Imre Kertész. At the same time, these books on the totalitarian German 20th century also deal with

⁷ See Grass, Günter. *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2006; *Die Box. Dunkelkammergeschichten*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2008; *Grimms Wörter. Eine Liebeserklärung*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2010. Wolf, Christa. *Ein Tag im Jahr. 1960-2000*. München: Luchterhand, 2003; *Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010.

the assertion and preservation of the human, at least the attempt to preserve it. And they refer – this applies especially to Christa Wolf’s *Stadt der Engel* (*City of Angels*) – in a broader perspective to a basic condition of modern existence. *Stadt der Engel* plays during the author’s stay in Los Angeles at the beginning of the 1990s and uses this exile situation of a formerly celebrated GDR writer to reflect on the distortions of artistic and political identity in the 20th century. The author writes about the German exiles in California during the Nazi era. She reflects herself on them and marks these existences as exemplary for a century that is deeply marked by groundlessness and homelessness both biographically and ideologically.

V. Conclusion: Truth – Coherence – Therapy

All in all, autobiographical writing around the year 2000 is characterized by a great diversity – particularly with respect to the poetic dimension, the way in which one writes and aesthetically conceives one’s own or other life stories. Despite this diversity, three categories can be highlighted which are particularly striking in the autobiographical discourse of modernity as well as the more recent present: truth – coherence – therapy. These categories cover different aspects of autobiographical discourse and of human existence in general: “truth” leads to questions of epistemology (*What can I know?*, the old Kantian question), “coherence” to ontology (*What is being?*), and “therapy” to psychology (*Who am I?*).⁸ These terms and the contents and problems associated with them are still of great importance, even though two of them – truth and coherence or inter-connectedness – seem outdated. But the questions of truth and coherence in autobiography have by no means disappeared, they have transformed themselves. Truth is more than ever bound to its opposite, fictionality. But someone like Knausgaard still strives for truth, not to mention Günter Grass and Christa Wolf. And the protagonists in Rachel Cusk’s life novels are still searching for something overarching, for a kind of connectedness that gives meaning to their existence.

Only the concept of therapy seems new; yet it merely indicates in a new guise a function of autobiographical writing that is ancient, the function of confession. Characteristic of the period around 2000 is at best that autobiographical writing has adapted certain characteristics of the late modern psychotherapeutic society, e.g. a certain form of emotional narcissism and a natural inclination towards psychic-intimate exhibitionism.

In any case, this much can be said in the end, it is evident in all this how lively and important autobiographical discourse still is for society. Literature does not simply depict life – it produces it as an interface, as seen, between biographical experience and over-individual developments in aesthetics and subject history.

⁸ I owe this dimension of the three terms thankfully to a hint from Professor Toshihiko Miura from the Institute of Aesthetics at the University of Tokyo.

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