

M. BAKHTIN'S BIOGRAPHY THEORY AND MODERN BIOGRAPHICAL STRATEGIES IN HUMANITIES

Golubovych Inna (Odessa National University)

In my presentation I am going to describe briefly three points.

1. “Biographical turn” or “Biographical turns” in Humanities.
2. Fundamentals of the M. Bakhtin’s theory of biography: “new biographism”.
3. Biography theory and methodology of Jewish studies in the modern Ukrainian philosophy.

1. “Biographical turn” or “Biographical turns” in Humanities

I support position of the American philosopher prof. Simon Critchley (New School, New York) and Ukrainian philosopher prof. Vadim Menzhulin (Kyiv Mohyla Academy) that have offered the title of “biographical turn” that has approximately the same meaning as “linguistic turn”, “narrative turn”, “anthropological turn”, etc. Philosophical background of a biographical/autobiographical tradition in the culture, nature and ontology of the biography/autobiography was studied by German thinkers Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and George Misch (1878-1965). Their key philosophical idea is co-dimensionality and co-equality of the Personality and the History. The History is understood as a face of the person. In its turn, the Personality is treated as a source of primary sociality and historicity. It postulates a principle of self-reflexivity of human life (Dilthey’s “*Lebenerfassthier Leben*”). The Man is a hermeneutical animal, the life has self-hermeneutical and therefore – autobiographical structure.

In my opinion, it was the first “biographical turn” in Humanities methodology. I would like to give some prominent examples of deep scientific researches related to the biography nature as a social and cultural phenomenon in Russian and Ukrainian tradition.

First of all, it is the book written by Grigori Vinokur “Biography and Culture” (Винокур 1927) where the author relied on ideas of

Lebens-philosophy and Phenomenology (W.Dilthey, E.Spranger, G.Shpet). The biography is represented as an “inner form” and “Lebensformen” of the culture, mainly a cellule of the history.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975) offered the special biography theory: *Toward Philosophy of the Act* (1919–1921), *The Author and the Hero in Aesthetic Activity* (the 1920ies), *The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism* (1936–1937), *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel* (1937–1938). Bakhtin considered the biography, autobiography, “self-report-confession” in the context of “sociological and historical poetics”, “philosophy of dialogue” and “philosophy of the act”. He described biographical and autobiographical acts as representations of “ontology of culture”, manifestations of “inner sociality” and “primary historicity”. I will discuss Bakhtin’s biography theory in details.

The 1960s and 70s were a turning point in the modern history of traditional genre. Since this time biography study has become a scientific method of research in many spheres of the Humanities. The biographical method was developed in sociology, psychology, and cultural anthropology. In addition, phenomenology, existentialism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, semiotics, linguistics, and other intellectual strategies were applied. Biographical studies became one of tinterdisciplinary strategies in the modern Humanities. Through this attention is focused on subjective, personal meanings that organize practices of life and self-presentation, self-performance, one of basic theoretical assumptions in modern biographical studies is a principle of homology between the real life and reality of an autobiographical narrative.

The biographical research is carried out within scopes of the tendencies: “biographical turn” and “death of the author” concept.

Thus, the “linguistic turn” and “narrative turn” have resulted in the second (probably third) post-Diltheynian “biographic turn” in the modern Humanities.

One of the brightest figures in the Russian Humanities of this period is Sergey Sergeevich Averintsev (1937–2004). In his work “Plutarch and Ancient Greek Biography” (Аверинцев1973) studied historical, cultural and literary sources of the genre. He

connected evolution of biography forms with transformation of an individualism phenomenon. Sergey Averintsev called Plutarch “a revolutionary of the biographical genre”. At the same time Plutarch and Ancient Greek Biography has really become a revolution for the Soviet Humanities. S. Averintsev was awarded by the Lenin Komsomol Prize for his book.

Yuri Lotman (1922–1993), a prominent literary scholar, semiotician and a philosopher of the culture studied biography and autobiography in the context of semiotics of the culture, semiosphere theory (Лотман 1985; Лотман 1987; Лотман 2001). He claimed that the culture is a poly-dimensional and complex-organized text. Two of the most representative cultural texts are biography and autobiography. These phenomena implement complementarity and transitivity of a “life-text” and “existential-narrative dimension”. Lotman offered a synthetic interdisciplinary model of biographic reconstruction (“novel is a biographic reconstruction genre” in the “Creation of Karamzin”) which combines literary, cultural, historical, and philosophical aspects. His Poetics of Culture project was close to “new historicism” (S. Greenblatt, A. Etkind). “New historicism” considers biographical analysis to be one of theoretical bases of this concept along with an inter-textual and discourse analysis.

I could continue listing names and ideas of scholars who developed the biography theories of and biographical studies in Humanities. However, I would like to return to M. Bakhtin. At the end of the first part I would like to stress that S. Averintsev and Y. Lotman kept a permanent dialogue with Bakhtin, argued with him, wrote about his ideas.

2. Fundamentals of the M. Bakhtin’s biography theory: “new biographism”

Within the brief presentation it is impossible to define all aspects of the M. Bakhtin’s biography theory. I have chosen the most important points. I’ll start with biographical details that explain the theory. The first detail is: as you know, in his memoirs Bakhtin said that he studied at History and Philology Department of Novorossiyskiy (Odessa) University (1911–1913?). He mentioned

that it was in Odessa where on an advice of his fellow student he firstly read Kierkegaard whose personalistic ideas had a great influence on young Bakhtin. It should be noted that M. Bakhtin was not registered in a list of students and irregular students of Novorossiyskiy University. The second detail is: two notebooks with detailed summaries of George Misch book History of Autobiography were found in Bakhtin`s archives.

Bakhtin offered the “biographical form” concept in (“Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”). Historical examples of the biographical form are happiness-unhappiness in antiquity, hagiography, confession in the Middle Ages, a family novel of the XVIII century. He defined features of the biographical form: a) a special type of biographical time (real time of life included in a longer process of historical time, age, generation); b) a specifically constructed image of a person passing the course of his life; c) a plot which correlates with the normal and usual course of life (birth, childhood, marriage, activity, death); d) a degree of “publicity” or “intimacy” of the biography/autobiography; e) relationship between inner and outer life chronotopes.

Bakhtin raises a problem of “biographical value”. This is the force that forms biography and autobiography from the outside. He distinguishes between two types of biographical consciousness (“biographical axiological consciousness”): adventurous-heroic and social-domestic. Principle of the second type is being with the world, observation and experience of the world again and again, love to simple things and ordinary people. The main figure of the social-domestic type is not a hero but a witness.

Very important problematic area for M. Bakhtin is an ethos of personal documents reading. He considered reading as a responsible act and a morally oriented strategy of cultural memory. These ideas formed a basis of an ethical code for biographical researchers and a policy of the cultural memory. You cannot force and prejudge recollection, Bakhtin writes. Memories of the whole life of another person hold a “golden key” of ethical and aesthetic completion of an individual.

Bakhtin`s “author and hero” architectonics is very important for the biography and autobiography theory, biographical and

autobiographical narration. A principle of author's and hero's asymmetry, "vnenakhodimost" ("finding oneself outside"), author exotopy (Todorov) is closely related to love, tenderness, compassion, mercy, gift, "amorous contemplation" ("contemplation with love"), "merciful consciousness". "Amorous contemplation", "merciful consciousness" are not just emotional characteristics ("emotional-volitional tones") but fundamentals of humanistic paradigm of the biographical discourse, methodological and ethical assumption of biographical studies. He thought about mutual activity of the hero and witness (contemplator) observing lives of other people. He notes that the contemplator of the others' life begins to be inclined to authorship, the hero becomes a subject of self-report-confession.

It is interesting that Bakhtin sharply criticized the biographical method which was developed in a positivism style under influence of Charles Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869) and Gustave Lanson (1857-1934). He placed the biographical approach in a par with vulgar sociological and causal explanation in a spirit of the natural science, with a "history without proper names". Bakhtin wrote about the biography: "it is an organic product of organic epochs".

However, we should not overstate the critical attitude of Mikhail Bakhtin to the biography and biographical method. In my opinion, Bakhtin's position – is not anti-biographism but rather "new biographism" which is more consistent with specific features of the Humanities, Geisteswissenschaften. I use the term "new biographism" coined by British writer and literary critic Christine Brooke-Rose (1923–2012) in her article *The dissolution of character in the novel* (1986). However, my understanding of this term does not coincide with a position of Brooke-Rose. Theoretical basis of the new biographism is also revealed in philosophic hermeneutics, phenomenology, existentialism, philosophy of dialogue.

3. Theory of biography and methodology of Jewish studies in the modern Ukrainian philosophy

Theoretical biography space is now mastered by Ukrainian philosophy which develops a tradition of "Kiev ontological and anthropological school" (G.Skovoroda's Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Sciences – V. Shinkaruk, V.Tabachkovsky,

V.Ivanov, S.Proleev, V.Gorsky, S.Crimsky, V.Malakhov, and others). *Foundation of Biographica* by Alexey Valevsky (Валевский 1993) is the first special philosophical research of the biography nature and ontology. The scholar defines a biographical writing as a type of humanitarian knowledge and textual representation of a personal history formation in a language of a given culture. Ontology of the biographical knowledge is defined by Valevsky as a certain set of conditions providing a possibility of textual representation of a particular phenomena. The concept of biographical discourse makes it possible to explain basic epistemes of this representation and “particular rationality” of every stage in the biographical tradition (for example, “orderliness episteme of” for antiquity, medieval and Renaissance types of the biography or “mirror episteme” of the Modern European biography).

The author of *Biographical Approach within the Western Tradition of the History of Philosophy* (Менжулин 2010) Ukrainian philosopher V.Menzhulin studies development and establishment of the biographic approach (biographistics) within the philosophy historiography as a legitimate form of cognition in its own right, with its own strategies, principles and methods as well as its common pitfalls and restrictions. He outlines main tendencies and landmarks in formation of attitudes towards biographic components of the philosophy history from antiquity to our days. The scholar reconstructs and analyses particular models of mutual influence and interaction between biographies and philosophic views within such influential philosophical approaches as neo-Kantianism, neo-Hegelianism, philosophy of life, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism and post-structuralism, pragmatism, and neopragmatism, analytical philosophy (by the examples of lives and works of K. Fischer, W. Windelband, F. Nietzsche, S. Freud, W. Dilthey, K. Jaspers, J.-P. Sartre, H. Arendt, M. Foucault, L. Wittgenstein, and others). V.Menzhulin concludes that every philosophic tradition, no matter how scientific or anti-biographical it seems at first, eventually can give rise to processes that may be described as a “biographic turn”. He gives special attention for “new historicism” in a context of development of philosophic biographic pragmatics. Vadim

Menzhulin did not just write the theoretical work in the field of biography philosophy. I want to draw your attention to *Another Sikorsky: uncomfortable pages of psychiatry history* (2004). It is a biography of the psychiatrist well-known in pre-revolutionary Russia, Ivan Sikorsky. He is the father of the prominent aircraft designer Igor Sikorsky. Menzhulin convincingly shows an unseemly role of Ivan Sikorsky in an anti-Semitic trial of Mendel Bayliss in Kyiv (1912). A Jewish worker was accused of committing a ritual murder of a Russian boy on the basis of a psychiatric examination and pseudo-scientific arguments of Ivan Sikorsky about special nature of national Jewish psyche (“Morbus judaicus”).

My research and professional interest is connected with study of the biography as a cultural, social and anthropological phenomenon. With respect of the “social and cultural ontology” biography in a variety of its forms and types is a cultural invariant, essential expression of basic self-reflexivity and fundamental narrativity of the human life. At the same time the biography phenomenon exists in «double optics» of opposite-directed vectors: a) “personalization” of objective social and cultural meanings; b) “universalization” of unique personal senses.

For the first time in Ukraine I have offered the teaching course called “Fundamentals of Biography” at a Philosophy Department (Odessa National University). Students-philosophers participate in the research project “Oral History of Philosophers” and collect autobiographical interviews of their teachers. This project was offered by Tatyana Chayka (Senior Researcher of the Philosophy Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine). Tatyana Chayka participated in creation of an audio and visual archive of biographical interviews with victims and witnesses of the Holocaust in Ukraine. The Ukrainian collection becomes a part of Survivors of Shoah Visual History Foundation which was established by Steven Spielberg after his “Schindler’s List” (1994), now – USC Shoah Foundation – The Institute for Visual History and Education.

M. Bakhtin theory, his philosophy of dialogue is the one of primary theoretical, ethical and emotion sources for us. Working on materials of Fundamentals of Biography course, students wrote essays about their experiences and impressions. I have no doubt

that they have experienced inspire of exotopy (внезаходимость), acts of compassion, love, “merciful consciousness” and “amorous contemplation”.

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