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Autobiography as Identity Quest: Todorović and his *Book of Revenge*¹

Abstract

However transparent the concept of autobiography may seem, there are numerous attempts at defining it. What all of them have in common is a focus on the narrative voice which explores its own past through the reconstruction of mental images preserved in the memory. The aim of an autobiography is thus to establish / confirm / perpetuate the identity of the narrator or to follow its development in the course of his life. Dragan Todorović, a Canadian author of Serbian origin, explores his own Yugoslav past from the perspective of Canadian present offering in his *Book of Revenge* ample material for reconsidering autobiography as a genre in particular in its identity revealing / forming aspects. In the case of Todorović, this private quest is a subversive act regarding not only the system of values of his old homeland but also of Canada as his diasporic country.

Résumé

Quelque transparent que puisse paraître le concept de l'autobiographie, les essais de le définir sont nombreux. Ce qui est commun pour tous ces essais c'est la concentration sur la voix narrative qui explore son propre passé à travers la reconstruction des images mentales gardées dans la mémoire. Le but d'une autobiographie est donc d'établir, de confirmer et de perpétuer l'identité du narrateur, ou de suivre son développement au cours de sa vie. Dragan Todorović, l'auteur canadien de l'origine serbe, explore son propre passé du point de vue du Canadien actuel, en offrant dans son *Livre de vengeance* un ample matériel pour reconsidérer l'autobiographie comme un genre en particulier de l'aspect de se former et de se faire connaître. En cas de Todorović, sa recherche privée est un acte subversif concernant non seulement le système de valeurs de son ancienne patrie, mais aussi le Canada comme son pays de diaspora.

The word 'autobiography' seems to be more than self-explanatory. If 'auto' means self, 'bios' means life, and 'graph' means to write, then as a term etymologically it denotes 'the writer's life story.' This simple definition of autobiography, nevertheless, does not suffice if one takes into consideration a great number of other attempts at defining the concept of autobiography. The internet offers quite a few of them, and here is a selection:

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- a biography of yourself (1)
- a history of a person's life written by that person (2)
- account of one's life, composed by one's self (3)
- the story of someone's life, as written by that person (4)
- a person's account of his or her own life (5)
- an account of the author's own life (6)
- the biography of a person written by himself / herself (7)
- the life story of someone written by the subject himself (8)
- a biography written by the person it is about (9)
- a written account of a person's life authored by himself or herself (10), etc.

Apparently, only three elements of autobiography may be taken as indisputably constitutive of the genre. It is 1) a nonfiction story; 2) the subject of the story must be the author; and, 3) it records the process of self-analysis significant on a larger scale. The purpose of this presentation is to problematise each of these autobiographical elements on the text of *The Book of Revenge*, the autobiography of Dragan Todorović. I will focus particularly on the identity revealing / identity forming aspects of autobiography as arguably its most critical feature.

Dragan Todorović is a Canadian author of Serbian origin. He moved to Canada in 1995 and therefore belongs to the group of the so-called hyphenated authors. As much as some of these writers may object to such a classification, it is by no means denouncing or confining. As Will Ferguson claims in his most amusing and enlightening book *Why I Hate Canadians*, the opposite of this is true:

Hyphens identify us: on the left side is our private story, on the right side is our public story. Together they encompass us and as a nation our point of contact lies in our common denominator. (Ferguson, 204)

The point which Ferguson is making in this statement concerns the significance of multiculturalism not only in Canada but globally: "In the market that is our world, variety is its own reward" (Ferguson, 206), he claims. Canada is the first country in the world to pass a national Multicultural Act and to establish a Department of Multiculturalism, and since almost 40% of Canadians now claim origins other than purely British or French, it is clear that hyphens indeed identify many Canadians. Todorović is one of them, and therefore he shares the same complex state of mind that characterises the hyphenated Canadians. It is not always that the hyphen connects what is the best of the two cultures, leaving the person to enjoy the benefits of both. More often, one needs to work hard to reconcile the two, the private and the public, and to come to terms not only with the positive but also with the negative aspects of their hyphenated lives. Much of Canadian literature springs from the need to negotiate not only McLennan's two conventional solitudes but also Ferguson's "thousands of solitudes" (200), referring primarily to the hyphenated immigrant selves. John Berger notes that "autobiography begins with a sense of being alone. It is an orphan form" (qtd. in Harcourt, 5). Indeed, moving into an unknown social and cultural environment, one inevitably experiences a (transitory) state of existential loneliness. To those of a creative bent, autobiography among other



genres offers itself as a means for exploring one's past / self, and connecting it to the present and the author's own self in the present. For this reason, Todorović writes his *Book of Revenge* which he subtitles *A Blues for Yugoslavia*, indicating that for him as a relatively new Canadian, the old homeland still holds great emotional significance.

The first feature of the autobiography may be, therefore, its nonfictional character. In other words, the author accepts the unwritten rule that what he will reveal in his text will be based on the truth as closely as possible. There is an implied contract between the author and the reader by which the reader takes for granted what he finds in the author's narrative. The facts related to the dates, the people's names and the events described are assumed to be really facts, and possible mistakes on the part of the author may be understood as an intended falsification. Complying with this norm, Dragan Todorović surveys his life from his early childhood and the first memories, to the year of 1995 and his emigration to Canada. His autobiography is rich with factual information not only about himself but about the whole generation and the Yugoslav society of those times. In this respect, it is not simply a story of one's personal life. It gets close to the so called ethnic autobiography which is "a particular approach to autobiography that emphasizes the influence of group affiliation – the group may be gender, race, ethnicity, religion – on the writer's development". Todorović clearly affiliates with his nationality which he describes as Yugoslav. He claims that "/o/ur generation had been brought up in the spirit of Yugoslavia, in the true spirit of brotherhood and unity" (Todorović, 262) which was fostered by the communist ideologists after WW2. Therefore, he has friends all over the country who share his beliefs and enthusiasm for the country. When the whole idea collapses and his homeland becomes "a corpse of a country" (Todorović, 365), his old identity peels away and a Serbian affiliation emerges. It is assumed that the process is common to all of Yugoslavia, so that some people of his generation undergo the same process in other republics. This evolution of ethnicity does not necessarily have negative connotations, which Todorović makes clear:

I was well steeped in my religion, my culture and a millennium of Serbian history, so I didn't have to hate the Croats to define myself. The differences between us were exactly the thing that made my generation love our unity and the idea of Yugoslavia (Todorović, 373).

Making this contention, Todorović believes he is telling the truth, the proof of which he finds during his visit to Slovenia. In a local store, the shop assistant realises he is from Serbia and says: "Sir, tell your friends over there that we miss you so much. We miss our Yugoslavia" (Todorović, 334).

Brian Finney states that "autobiography specifically presents the writer with an opportunity to pursue the truth about himself, from himself" (Finney, 12). Consequently, pursuing that truth in his *Book of Revenge*, Todorović draws conclusions which reflect the truth as he experienced it. He identified himself as belonging to one generation and then related the whole generation to the concept of Yugoslavia. Whether this is the whole truth is disputable, but it is certainly not fiction. Finney further remarks: "There are endless ways of telling one's story ... but none of them can tell the whole story" (Finney, 12). The reality is illusive and memory can be deceiving, wishful thinking and preconceived ideas playing a significant part in the process

of deciphering reality. Indeed, the author's intention to provide the reader with an accurate, unfabricated account of his life does not save him from falling into the trap of illusion, sentimentality, or subjectivity. Most autobiographers are more than aware of how easy it is to slip from fact into fiction. In the words of Storm Jameson: "I have tried not to lie, but no doubt I have told more lies than truth" (qtd. in Finney, 254). Furthermore, Rudy Wiebe in his story "Where's the Voice Coming From?" reminds the readers of the fictional nature of all narrative. As much as one can try to give a truthful account of a historical event, in the very act of telling, the fact becomes fiction just as all history is actually someone's story. What is after all indispensable for the text to be classified as non-fiction autobiography is a basic level of truth and verifiable lineage. It would be interesting to compare the version of history Todorović renders in *The Blues for Yugoslavia* with the version given in some other autobiographies from the same part of the world to verify its truthfulness.

Related to the nonfictional character of autobiography, one needs to mention that there are fictions which are part of one's life and should therefore be included in the autobiography. Fears, dreams, ideas, hopes, anxieties, reveries, they are all part of what one person is and consequently should be given some room in the account of his life. They are neither lies nor facts and although by their nature associated with imagination, they are not fiction either. Depending on the author's personality, their significance may vary but they cannot be disregarded. Dragan Todorović includes a couple of his most significant dreams exactly because they are important to him in order to understand himself better. They help him to reconsider the moral choices he makes in his waking life and re-evaluate his relationships. The reader also gets to know the author better when he learns about his fears and hopes, not only about the events of his life. These non-truths, if the use of this word can be justified, do not diminish the factuality and the nonfictional character of the biography but, on the contrary, they contribute to the goal of truthfulness.

The second prerequisite for an autobiography is that the subject of the account must be the author himself. This criterion seems to be so indispensable that it needs no explanation. Almost all definitions of autobiography require the author of the text to be also its subject. That is the basic difference between autobiography and biography as genres and therefore the basic idea of the genre. However, at least one definition allows for a fictional subject: "someone's life-story written by the person him or herself; this may be a real or fictional person." (Longman) Also, there have been cases of autobiographies written by ghost-writers. In such cases, the text is composed conjointly with a collaborative writer who usually helps the author record his life. It is most commonly told to the ghost-writer when the subject either does not know the language or is illiterate. The publishing terms stipulate that ghost autobiographies by definition entail the authorisation, cooperation, participation, and ultimate approval of the subject. *The Book of Revenge* by Dragan Todorović is a regular autobiography but what is interesting about it is the approval of the Random House of Canada to publish it without much editing. The book appeared in 2006 and by that time Todorović had polished his English fairly well but not enough to pass for a native speaker. As an author, he is acutely aware of the slipperiness of a foreign language:

I think in Serbian and translate while writing, but it does not work the way I want. Burroughs was wrong, language is not a virus from outer space, it is a snake from hell: it whirls, it moves, it slides



aside. A writer is supposed to be a toreador, but I feel more like a bull trying to nail the red cloth of ideas (Todorović, 378).

Preserving the grammatical imperfection of the language used by Todorović in his narrative is a truly Canadian gesture on the part of the publisher. His autobiography retains the authenticity of a hyphenated writer's story since the text does not create a linguistic illusion of a perfectly well-adapted immigrant. The opposite to this is true, yet such an immigrant is given a chance to express himself, to reach the public in the vernacular, and make room for himself not only in economic and social terms but in terms of culture as well.

The third element of autobiography is its introspective character. That is what distinguishes it from the memoir which is an account of a life where the emphasis is upon the events rather than the person. Naturally, self analysis may be found in the works of all other literary genres but it belongs to autobiography as its foundation. After all, the first autobiographical narratives in the Western civilization were confessional and according to the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, all autobiographies are in a sense religious: "What makes an autobiography religious is the author's attempt to describe and evaluate his or her life from the perspective of the author's present convictions about what is ultimate or sacred." Lejeune's definition emphasises self-reflection which is also the focus of my attempt to pinpoint the essence of autobiography. She says that it is "a retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is the individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (Lejeune, 22). I hold that all autobiographies represent a form of identity quest in which the author is trying to answer the question best formulated by Esmeralda Santiago, "How do I become me?"

Dragan Todorović strives to solve this riddle of personal identity by looking back upon his life from the perspective of his new homeland. The long look into the past is one of his endeavours to recapture the self which seems to be threatened by displacement and uprooting. Autobiography offers a clear mirror in which an author can see himself, in a way recognise and identify himself as an individual. However, this metaphor is not encompassing enough since autobiography also presents the author with the means to define himself, to realise how gradually through experience, knowledge and understanding his self emerges in the constant process of becoming, rather than the fixed state of being. On the last page of his narrative, Todorović reaches the answer to one of his questions, while many others remain unanswered. "I know the name of my disease, I know its identity, and its identity is my own," (382) he says. It is but one piece in the jig-saw puzzle that is his identity but it creates the sense of progress and development, pleasing however minute.

Leigh Gilmore calls the study of autobiography "autobiographics." This new branch of literary criticism deals with the elements of self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation, as legitimate constituents of autobiography. All of them are supposed to contribute to the goal of self-realisation. Karl Weintraub contends: "We are captivated by an uncanny sense that each one of us constitutes one irreplaceable human form, and we perceive a noble life task in the cultivation of our individuality, our ineffable self" (Weintraub, xiii). Therefore, the task of autobiography equals the task of man's life, and that is self-realisation. Practicing autobiography is consequently a significant activity aimed at imposing order and discovering meaning in the

chaos of life experiences. The retrospective analysis of his life that Todorović attempts in his book is a form of self-realisation especially significant for taking place in a new social and cultural environment unsettling to the feeling of self-confidence. As Rebecca Ruppert Johnson wrote in her poem on autobiography:

With myself I share my past,
a history of triumphs not forgotten
but evolving, making way for a present being
unknown to me now,
until I uncover myself again later. (Johnson, 227)

What she does in verse, Todorović does in prose, trying to uncover himself to himself. Yet he knows that “our past is a pastel in the rain” (358), getting blurred and smeared with the passage of time. This awareness of his own unreliability as narrator makes his self-narrative perhaps more dependable. When memory speaks, it definitely tailors the past at least through the process of selection. Nevertheless, Todorović believes that “memories get rusty if you don’t share them,” (199) so that his sense of responsibility only adds to his trustworthiness. His memories are not exclusively individual but collective, generational and even ethnic so that by preserving them through the process of narration, he promotes higher causes than his self-realisation. The self is in any case greatly affected by the social, historical, and psychological forces so that the formation of one’s identity may considerably correlate with these outward influences. Todorović comes to this conclusion when he surveys his life from early childhood to middle age and perceives how he has been formed by his family, teachers, and the system. His granny has taught him about the country life and God, his father about human dignity (“Dignity, son, dignity is the most important thing,” 12), the political system has made him fall in love with communism (“Communists do not hate freedom; they just worship order,” 31), till he comes to his own truth: “Loyalty was the key” (178). If the third criterion for the definition of autobiography requires that the work convey some significant message or moral that the person derived from their life, then this is the moral message of Dragan Todorović. Only after a detailed inspection of remembered scenes and events, contemplating and analysing them from the present perspective, does Todorović realise what it is that gives shape to his life. It is his loyalty not to the political parties or the system, but to his personal principles and love for his parents, friends, the country and the woman of his life. Thus, the autobiography is not a mirror in which he saw himself clearly reflected, offering a vivid image of himself to the public. It is rather a mosaic the pieces of which need to be retrieved from memory and then pasted together so that they create a pattern previously indiscernible. This process involves both the author and the reader and it is more often than not identity forming rather than identity revealing.

Autobiography as a form of written self-analysis is also a transformative process. When the author decides to write about himself, he certainly already has a number of mental images upfront in his mind that deserve to be recorded and perpetuated. They usually mark the crucial moments in one’s life, the significant rites of passage which inform not only the past but also the future. Therefore, the author has a representation of himself which he would like to



make public. However, in the process of writing, Todorović learns one more thing concerning memories: “Memories are strange. Memories are brutal. They don’t pick the time or place, they don’t ask if it’s okay to just spill over your day” (223). These unexpected memories unearthed from the depths of the author’s psyche are probably more valuable than those on the surface. They have the unacknowledged portent revealed as a shock in short epiphanic moments, filling the identity mosaic with tiny missing details and completing the picture of identity. They certainly contribute to Todorović’s understanding of himself and his behaviour in the past. Thus they can change his perception of himself and make him realise, which his dream already told him, that he is “the man in the making” (145). This seems to be the essence of autobiography: it is just like life, meaning that the person who begins the writing is not exactly the same as the person who in the end types the last full stop. As each day in life slightly changes us, so each memory recollected builds up an identity slightly surprising even to the author. As Finney says, the autobiographical act must simultaneously transform the life it is describing and externalise it. “Isn’t autobiography a literary form that externalises (onto the reader) the other?” (Finney, 255). Looking at his life from the outside, almost as an impartial observer, the narrator is being changed. He is indeed the man in the making, not only relative to the future but also to the past. Thus Todorović needs to go on an autobiographical quest in search of his multiple and emerging selves. His story is another odyssey, “a story of identity, of a voyage to the self” (qtd. in Cobley, 54), as Julian Jaynes puts it.

Finally, autobiography is important as a genre because it provides a voice. If it is a quest for identity, it is therefore a quest for voice. This becomes significant in cases of oppression, either by an individual, the family, the peers, or the system. When the subject is silenced by the forces more powerful than himself, then autobiographical narrative may give voice to his pain, anger, and desire. When Dragan Todorović wrote his first verse with lemon juice and afterwards ironed it in order to make it visible, he found many errors “but also a new me” (79). This was his first voicing of the desire not to communicate, but to write his thoughts down. At the same time, he becomes aware of his own complexity, of the fact that the possibility to change is realistic and practicable. When his friends laugh at his poetic experiments, he does not flinch, already knowing about the power of the written word: “I had something to say. They didn’t want to listen. Maybe it was their loss, maybe mine” (104). Yet, he will not be silenced. And later, when he began working for the media (radio, television, newspapers), the authorities constantly kept silencing him by cancelling his shows or simply firing him.

It seems that all this creative energy suppressed in Todorović finally found an outlet in his autobiography. On 400 pages he voices his doubts, fears, hopes, besides describing the events related to them. The impulse to write is implied in the rhetorical questions: “What stays behind us? How will someone know we existed at all?” (150). The answer he offers is his autobiography, the voice in the written form telling of his most personal experiences and public performances. Both in his home country and his new homeland, his writing has a subversive power because it proves that he exists against the external annihilating forces: the oppressive regime in Serbia or the oblivion of disinterested Canada. While in Serbia, he was writing corrosive satires against the leading politicians and their ideas, and he even dramatised *The Leader* by Radoje Domanović, believing in the subversive potential of literature.

In Canada, he turns to autobiography in order to explain to people where his voice is coming from. This time it is not an indigenous but an immigrant voice, eager to make itself heard for his own sake and for the sake of his nation. Narrating the self with Todorović equals narrating nation as defined by Egan and Helms: “Nation...describes in general the communities into, out of, and between which narrators adjust their identities” (Egan, XVIII). The key use of narrative concerns identity, Copley claims, and “narrative is therefore also bound with the notion of large-scale identities such as nation” (Copley, 38). Through his self-narrative, Todorović accordingly makes adjustments as a person who used to be oppressed and is now marginalized. His story is intrinsically bound up with the history of his nation so that by telling it he maintains the self-image of his people. Egan and Helms remind us that “narrating nation is, of course, political, because it presents the minority voices, whose framing and narrative opportunities continue histories of oppression even while the story is being told, and because that story implicates the reader in recognition and responsibility” (Egan, XVII). In other words, the truth relative to his nation and country of origin is revealed in the act of self-narration. In Canada, his cultural identity evolves into cultural duality since he inevitably has to negotiate between the two cultures. Discussing diasporic writing, Yasmin Hussain contends: “It is within this literature that diaspora is used as a social and political tool for expressing immediate grievances, those of which are immediately concerned with identity and the quest for individuality” (Hussain, 3). In this context it becomes clear how heavy the burden of responsibility is, resting on the back of the immigrant author writing about his life. Likewise, the reader assumes his own responsibility to recognise the conditions of an immigrant life and understand the writing Other. In this process the two cultures may move closer together from both directions.

One needs to bear in mind Jameson’s claim that “history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise” (qtd. in Weber, 271). History is indeed “an absent cause” but since it is accessible to us only in textual form, “history and text are inseparable” (Weber, 271), although not identical. When approaching an autobiography for the historical truth, a measure of wariness is commendable. On the other hand, an author silently pledges himself to truth when he begins building his narrative bridge that will bring himself to him. He tackles his multiple identities as best he can, just like Todorović who realises that his private and cultural selves are inseparable, that his individual and collective beings function in collaboration which defines him: “If someone kills my brother, what should I do? If someone destroys my country...” (381). It is difficult to resolve this moral dilemma, and Dragan Todorović is on the horns of it in his retrospective narrative. It may be personal and autobiographical, yet, as Patricia Hampl says, what is remembered is what becomes reality. “If we refuse to do the work of creating this personal version of the past, someone else will do it for us” (Hampl, 104). Todorović seems to be aware of this option and it is one more reason why he writes *The Book of Revenge*. His autobiography as an identity quest reveals not only private truths but public problems in a brave narrative voice.



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