SOVIET THEORIES OF BIOGRAPHY AND THE AESTHETICS OF PERSONALITY

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Biographical writing is a highly hybridized phenomenon, a heterogeneous site that brings together discourses of history, literature, pedagogy, and moral philosophy (see Benton 77). The task of the student of biography often consists in unraveling that knot formed by multiple interwoven specialized languages. What is called for, ultimately, is a synthesis of different approaches, ranging from sociology and psychoanalysis to history of concepts and narratology, which would make it possible to reveal the socio-cultural and historical mechanisms that aid in the production of biographical texts and in the attribution of particular functions to them.[1] By establishing the relations in which these different fields stand to each other we could hope, in the long run, to discern what is distinctive in biographical narratives, to uncover the *biographical* in biography. Once that is accomplished, the genre of biography might emerge in a new light: no longer a resource mined for information on the history of society or culture or on the analysis of the self (as it appears to sociologists, cultural historians, and psychologists, respectively), it could be interrogated for its own *poetics*. This essay seeks to provide an introduction to a theoretical strand that has a lot to contribute to this task but that so far has been underappreciated in the Anglophone study of biography.

A particular challenge for any poetics of biography is the peculiar character of the constitution of the biographical subject. It evolves through the interaction between textual strategies and the realm of social facts such as the workings of institutions, models of behavior, notions of success and recognition, etc. This interaction has been investigated with reference to autobiographical texts (ego-documents) in which the subject is often said to be determined, in one way or another, by ideological mechanisms. A particularly

Biography 38.3 (Summer 2015) © Biographical Research Center

eloquent theoretical statement of this position is Pierre Bourdieu's "L'Illusion biographique," which offers an avowedly deterministic account of the self. According to Bourdieu, the meaning of human life is a product of narrative construction, of the stories of the self told in accord with "the laws regimenting the production of discourses" ("Biographical" 301). Such stories depend on the normative model of official self-presentation through curricula vitae, *cursus honorum*, registration papers, police records, etc. ("L'Illusion" 70–71, "Biographical" 300–301). The "biographical illusion," according to Bourdieu, is produced by mechanisms concealing the operation of social institutions that, contravening individuals' beliefs that they live their own lives, generate predetermined forms of human existence. When inflected by a Foucauldian lens, such a vision of ego documents perceives not only social facts, but also effects of discourse as being fundamentally outside of the subject's control.

The insidious effects of social and ideological institutions have been at the center of recent energetic research on Soviet diaries and memoirs.[2] By contrast, the focus of this article is on biographical texts that, while remaining part of the "official" culture, seek to carve out a space ostensibly unaffected by dominant, state-sponsored forms of discourse. This tradition of reflection on the biographical subject, or on the self as it is articulated in biographical texts, originated in the Russian encounter with German idealist philosophy in the first half of the nineteenth century. As I will argue, it has always remained linked to a particular concept of personality (*lichnost'*) that asserts its independence from the world of social relations and whose formation constitutes the chief plotline for this type of narrative. This notion of personhood was carried forward by the psychological thinking of the early twentieth century, and in a modified form, by post-WWII Soviet literary scholarship, particularly by Lydia Ginzburg and Yurii Lotman. Even though both these scholars drew on models and concepts borrowed from the social sciences, the phenomenon of *lichnost'* was never subjected to a genealogical critique, leaving untouched some of the aspects of the cultural mythology that remained important for Russian and Soviet intelligentsia.

While invariably attentive to the conditioning forces of the social milieu as well as to the broader cultural processes, Soviet theorists discussed in this article privilege the *aesthetic* principle in life writing. Biography has a poetics that is not only conditioned by historically given "laws regimenting the production of discourses," but also pre-structured by its subject, the social agent treated in a biography. In this regard, human life is not unlike a work of art, which even as it obeys the prescriptions of genre is also a unique artifact created by an individual author.

Within the overarching conceptual paradigm here adumbrated, Soviet theories of biography, as will become apparent in the following discussion,

present a rich and heterogeneous body of work. What this article emphasizes, however, is a distinct historical continuity in the Russian-Soviet approach to life writing. This continuity is due to a genealogy that links twentieth-century theoretical work to the idealist concept of the personality that arose in the Romantic period. Once the "right to a biography" was extended to every human being, overriding the earlier definitions of the genre as a kind of rhetorical encomium, the essential totality of personality became a fundamental premise and a powerful challenge to the various analytical approaches, ranging from Russian Formalism to Yurii Lotman's cultural poetics.[3] More generally, this article suggests that to understand what a biography meant in a particular historical context—that is, to write a *historical poetics* of the genre of biography—we need to be attentive to the evolution of contemporary theoretical work on literature, as well as to the history of the concepts of the biographical subject and of personality itself.[4]

BIOGRAPHY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Any general account of the Russian biographical tradition must begin with the observation that in Russia biography was only slowly and with difficulty recognized as a literary genre in its own right. While particular explanations for this may differ, they need to make reference to the peculiar character of the public sphere in Russia, which came into existence as a result of the massive reforms undertaken by Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century. As Viktor Zhivov has shown, in contrast to the Western European nations, the Petrine conception of the state, while representing "a metamorphosis of the European theories of the police state (*Polizeystaat*)," did not allow for society as a "counter-agent of the state" ("Vremia" 55; *Language and Culture* 349–56). The Russian Enlightenment was, in Zhivov's term, "statist," which conditioned the biographical subject by imposing a set of behavioral as well as textual ("literary") constraints that were rigidly regimented by censorship rules and political decorum. This is perhaps best illustrated, in the nineteenth century, by the biographies of generals and high-ranking bureaucrats that amounted to expanded *curricula vitae*, and in the twentieth century, by standardized biographies of Soviet party functionaries, war heroes, and "heroes of labor," firmly associated with honorary plaques and portrait galleries.

The representation of a human life as a text and more particularly as a narrative can exist in at least two modalities. One is encomiastic or panegyrical, corresponding to what Jürgen Habermas describes as "representative publicity" (8–24)—and in this case we may speak of its aristocratic character—or as a story about a member of the socially proximate group, which is only possible within a homogeneous social space. That is the case of the bourgeois

public sphere construed as unconstrained interaction of individuals involved in critical debate that implies continuous production of new forms of rationality. In this modality, narratives about a life begin to operate as a *discourse* that aids in the production of society's knowledge about itself, due to the multiplication of points of view on problems deemed most significant. In Russia, the public—*publika*—that made its appearance in the second half of the eighteenth century was depoliticized, and inasmuch as it could not debate issues of politics and religion, it generally was a group of "consumers of cultural production" (Smith 57).

Such a speculative distinction between two biographical modalities helps explain the belated emergence of literary biography in Russia, compared to other European nations, as well as its lengthier dependence on rhetoric. In Russian, the word *biografiia* (with an early by-form *viografiia*) appears only in the eighteenth century as a borrowing from French. In its basic meaning 'the description of a life of a single individual' (*Slovar'* 24), it offered a modern analogue to the older words *zhizneopisanie* and *zhitie*, the latter from then on restricted to hagiography.[5] *Biografiia* begins to be used more widely in the first third of the nineteenth century, mostly in rhetorical manuals and instructional materials on Russian style and composition. In these contexts, it is closely associated with historiography. For example, Vasily Plaksin writes in *Kratkii kurs slovesnosti, prisposoblennyi k prozaicheskim sochinenii* [*Brief Course in Russian Letters*]: "*Biografiia* or *Zhizneopisanie* should in many respects be classified among the historical type of writings; its aim is to give a precise notion of life, deeds and fate of an individual" (131–32). Alexandr Galich includes an entry on *Biografiia* in his *Leksikon filosofskikh predmetov* [*Lexicon of Philosophical Subjects*], noting that "*Biografiia* or *Zhizneopisaniie* is a special kind of history": whereas "world history describes the life of the whole of humanity, special history the life of a nation, biography does the same with regard to particular individuals." Moreover, it "represents, properly speaking, not a description, but a narration of fate, deeds, and qualities of a particular outstanding person, and has to accord with the rules of a good piece of narrative fiction [*povest'*] or a character sketch" (83).

Rhetorical guidebooks also define the proper protagonist of a biography. In *Kratkaia ritorika ili pravila, otnosiashchiesia ko vsem rodam sochinenii prozaicheskikh* [*A Brief Rhetoric or Rules Pertaining to All Kinds of Prose Writings*] (1808), Aleksei F. Merzliakov does not hesitate when indicating who has the right to a biography: "the biographer should select such persons whose life by itself is of interest [*zanimatel'na*] and rich in events, those who have drawn universal attention either by their social station or their distinguished merits or an odd confluence of circumstances or a change of fortune." The hero of a

biography is a man who has exerted influence on the fates of "a nation or of humanity" or is famous for "an extraordinary peculiarity of character or way of life" (49). On the one hand, the biographical narrative is driven by a pedagogical intent that extracts intellectual nourishment from historical exempla. On the other hand, however, biography legitimates an interest in the everyday life of successful individuals, identifying and affirming the social merits that aid in the attainment of public recognition.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, biographical discourse is radically democratized, as the right to a biography is given to those who, as seen from the perspective of "representative publicity," had no achievements to boast of. The emphasis is transferred to the inner life of the individual and away from his deeds. In *Kratkoe rukovodstvo k izucheniiu prozaicheskikh sochinenii* [*A Brief Manual on the Study of Prose Compositions*] (1866), Mikhail F. De-Poule notes that

> not only famous or well-known people may be an object of biography but—more or less—any individual. . . . There are those whose lives are rich in external actions, yet there are also others whose lives evolved without any special clamor yet represent a phenomenon of interest in respect to the mores. For a biographer it is easier to describe the life of a man who earned his glory by his external deeds than compose a biography of someone who has lived his life quietly, unknown to society. (17–18)

De-Poule's contrast between the exterior and the interior depends on a particular definition of personality (*lichnost'*), that principal object of biography.[6]

The new kind of biographical writing, which came into existence as a result of the general slackening of state control following the death of Nicholas I in 1855, presented a self-conscious antithesis to "official biography" and was based on the liberal ideal of individual autonomy, belief in social progress, and a commitment to a Westernized model of society which, as it appeared, was to make the development of human personality possible. A whole series of new biographical subjects made their appearance in that context: statesmen and public figures such as Nikolai Novikov, Nil Koliupanov, and Timofei Granovsky, writers such as Alexander Pushkin, and later on revolutionaries such as Mikhail Bakunin and Alexander Herzen.

THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF PERSONALITY

The concept of *lichnost'* as it evolved in Russian culture has already been commented on in scholarship.[7] In Western Europe, the corresponding notion of personality resulted from complex processes, which included the secularization of Christian theology and the revival of Roman law. In Russia, the

modern concept of personhood was a later development, greatly influenced by German philosophy. One particular source of influence was Leibniz's idea of the monad as reinterpreted by the German Romantics, whereby the "unrepeatable variety among individuals" assumed the principal significance (Plotnikov 69–70). In the Russian intellectual circles of the 1820s and 1830s, a close familiarity with idealist philosophy made it possible to construe *lichnost'* as an elusive, "peculiar" principle,[8] inherent in the human being that ties within itself "the universal" (*vseobshchee*) and the "particular or the private" (*chastnoe*).[9]

In *lichnost'*, ostensibly, the "ethical" (*nravstvennaia*) aspect of human existence makes itself visible. Pavel Annenkov, the most celebrated biographer of that period, who wrote lives of Nikolai Stankevich, Nikolai Gogol, and Alexander Pushkin, among others, followed Hegel in interpreting the meaning of this charged epithet through the opposition between the moral sphere (*Moralität*), which consists of "the more or less well pondered rules of human intercourse," and the ethical sphere (*Sittlichkeit*), which "comprises the laws that govern the individual's psychic world" (*Literaturnye vospominaniia* 274). For Annenkov, as for many contemporary Russian intellectuals, reflection about the self was dominated by the impulse to annul the contradiction between these two aspects of human existence, allowing for the world and the self to be perceived as a single whole.[10] The connotations of unity, harmony, and fullness inform the concept of *lichnost'* as an aesthetic phenomenon. One's personality is viewed as a product of individual creativity for which the individual bears sole and exclusive responsibility. Obviously, this concept of the self was not the only one available, and the word *lichnost'* could be used to describe other kinds of autonomous existence as well as the means by which individuals can mark their difference from others. Nevertheless, it is the "Hegelian" vision of personality that came to define the ethos of Russian intelligentsia, and in its various modifications, prevailed over the course of the next two centuries of Russian history.

The intellectual "circles" (*kruzhki*) of the first third of the nineteenth century provided the initial laboratory in which new views on human beings and social processes were molded. These groupings were opposed to salons, which upheld codes of high society, and typologically were more akin to the Masonic lodges of the second half of the eighteenth century. What distinguished the nineteenth century *kruzhki* was a consistent interest in German idealism (Schelling, Fichte, and later Hegel).[11] In the words of Vasilii Zen'kovsky, philosophy did not so much offer "answers to theoretical inquiries of the mind," but rather indicated how "questions of life are to be solved": "it was not the removal of theoretical problems, but an urge for total synthesis analogous to

the one offered by religion" (115).[12] In the mid-nineteenth century, *lichnost'* was endowed with a quasi-sacred standing and charged with the task of discovering harmonious unity with the world and of resolving contradictions between the individual and the universal, very much in the spirit of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*.

Texts that aim at depicting *lichnost'* comprise the most original part of the Russian biographical tradition. The first text written in that modality was Pavel Annenkov's life of the philosopher Nikolai Stankevich, who died as a very young man.[13] According to his biographer, Stankevich's main preoccupation that gave meaning to his life was the education of his own personality, "the labor of the self," which consisted in continuous self-scrutiny and self-reflection, epistolary exchanges, and the use of the other as a possible partner in the process of molding the "inner man." These imperatives derive from practices characteristic of the Masonic variety of Sentimentalism, yet in contrast to them, their objectives were not clearly defined since nineteenth century intellectuals did not share the notions of virtue and virtuous life as universal goods, as espoused by their late eighteenth century counterparts. The Romantic personality claims autonomy and self-sufficiency and assumes a critical stance toward the world. It realizes itself in the very quest for sources of self-definition, and one such source was German philosophy. Stankevich, who accomplished nothing in his life, and in the words of his biographer, pursued no "work career in the proper sense of the word" (*polozhitel'nym trudom*), embodied the new type of personality by showcasing a rupture between individual and society, between the life of the spirit and the world of social relations.

In the second half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, this type of personality was subjected to various modifications, giving rise to a significant tradition of conceptualizing the biographical subject. Under the influence of the philosophy of Vladimir Solov'ov, there evolved a movement of Russian "personology," a peculiar synthesis of German Idealism, the Slavophile tradition, and Russian Orthodox theology, represented by figures like Lev Karsavin, Nikolai Berdyaev, Boris Vysheslavtsev, and Georgii Fedotov. "Personology" anchored its notion of the human person in the ideas of *obshchaia zhizn'* 'common life' and *sobornost'* 'communality,' both construed polemically in opposition to Western society, and aimed at overcoming the contradictions between belief and reason, and individual being and life shared by all. For these thinkers, the achievement of "unity common to everyone" should allow the individual to attain the fullness of being, beauty, and genuine freedom. A notable aspect of "personological" terminology was its conscious lack of verifiability, which testified to the special, divine status of *lichnost'* and its irreducibility to the real world and its social conditions (Khoruzhii 102).

In the wake of these developments, one can trace the emergence of various strategies of writing lives for writers, philosophers, and public figures. In Mikhail Gershenzon's biographical works collected in *Young Russia* (1908), which considers the generation of the 1840s (Stankevich, historian Timofei Granovsky, and public figures Ivan Galakhov and Nikolai Ogaryov), the social problem of the molding of Russian *intelligentsiia* as a class is interpreted in a philosophical and existential spirit as the individual's quest for unity and harmony with the world. The category of *lichnost'* is of paramount importance also for Yuly Aykhenvald, the author of the famous book *Siluety russkikh pisatelei* [*Silhouettes of Russian writers*]. In the Introduction, Aykhenvald affirms the absolute autonomy of creative personality, since talent exists outside of everyday life, whose mystery it constitutes, and obeys only "laws of its own" (19). Biographical writing is "opposed" to such notions of personality, and "is acceptable only when it fuses together with creativity; where one finds a disjuncture between the two the critic should base his judgment on creative work, not on biography" (22). *Lichnost'* is a mystical, cosmic principle that realizes itself in art and transcends both actual lived human life and the social world.

In this way, a particular kind of personality is born, in which idealist philosophy, theology, and early twentieth century "personological" mysticism come together. It is founded on an ineluctable gap between personality and the text's capacities to serve as its embodiment, on the ultimate and necessary failure of writing to capture human individuality (Paperno, "Tolstoy's Diaries). The biographical text, in this tradition, is conceived as an attempt to rationalize an essence that necessarily rejects rationalization, since it is identical to life itself and is therefore more rich and complex than any particular form in which it might be explicated.

TOWARDS A THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

Russian Formalism, a movement whose heyday falls in the 1920s, put forward a conceptual framework which both recast the problem of *lichnost'* and offered a new perspective on biography as a genre. In a polemic with the cultural-historical school that considered biographies as a source for the reconstruction of national and social history and as texts in which the hero is explored through complex interactions with the social whole, the Formalists based their inquiries on the demand for the autonomization of literature, which they sought to relieve of various political implications imposed by both academic literary scholarship of the second half of the nineteenth century and Symbolist "aesthetic criticism" such as that of Gershenzon and Aykhenvald.

In 1923, Boris Tomashevsky published a brief article entitled "Literatura i biografiia" [Literature and biography], in which he first posed the fundamental problem that would preoccupy the Russian Formalists later in that decade: that of the relation between literature and everyday life (*byt*). In answer to the question, "Is a poet's biography necessary for understanding [his] creation?" (6), Tomashevsky emphasizes that a writer's life assumes importance only by virtue of its tie to literature. That tie may be manifested, on the one hand, as "literary use of one's own biography," and on the other, as "the intrusion into life of literary patterns [*shablony*]" (7). According to Tomashevsky, documentary biographies "pass into the domain of cultural history, along with biographies of generals and inventors; for literature and its history they may only provide external, albeit necessary background material" (9). Contrasting the tasks of a literary historian and a historian of culture, Tomashevsky assigns to them two different functions: the object of literary history is the "biographical legend" that ties together literature and life, whereas the history of culture seeks to reveal the "real" character of the writer (8).

As might be expected of a literary scholar, Tomashevsky's attention is centered on literature. He is troubled by "a pathologically exacerbated interest in literary history, in the everyday [*byt*], in [the writer's] *lichnost'*" (6). The life of the author is part of a literary project, and texts related to that life can claim interest only insofar as they pertain to, or instantiate, literature. Thus, the ultimate analytic goal was to detect a literary quality in texts that were not previously seen as literary. That became the driving principle of the Russian Formalists' work on documentary genres.[14] Indeed, the historical *lichnost'* was real only if it could, in one way or another, be related to literary creation.

Similar assumptions are at work in Yurii Tynianov's "On literary evolution," one of his landmark essays. Acknowledging the possibility of "the expansion of literature into *byt*," Tynianov points to a correlation between "Byron's lyrical heroes" and his "literary personality (*lichnost'*), [which] . . . assumed life as it emerged from verse [*ozhivala iz stikhov*]" (*Poetika* 279). In some cases, a notable contrast may emerge between biography and artistic creation; thus, Tynianov notes that Heine's literary personality "is far removed from the biographically attested Heine." In any case, any discussion of biography is possible only within this analytic frame. The notion of "literary personality," which ostensibly plays only a minor role in Tynianov's theoretical work, represents a crucial mediating term that eventually permitted him to interpret human personality itself as a "system of relations"; that is, to approach it "in the spirit of that conception of systemic correlation of elements that has already been put forward in the article 'On literary evolution'" (*Poetika* 514). Tynianov's further reflections on the genre of biography found

their realization in his artistic practice. In the 1920s and 1930s, he published several novels and novellas, some of them real or fictional biographies.[15]

While Russian Formalist work points to a new, productive theorization of personality, it should be stressed that for Tynianov, as well as for Tomashevsky, the writer's personality "assumes life" not based on an independent factual narrative, but rather based on his literary output. Art is revealed as an essential lens for accessing the author's life. This move suggested a devaluation of biographical narration as previously conceived. Both Tomashevsky and Tynianov understand by "biography" the life of a writer that is made accessible through diaries, letters, and memoirs: texts that serve either as aids for a philologically-minded commentator or as material for the scholarly reconstruction of the everyday context of literary production (*literaturnyi byt*). Biographical narratives proper—and particularly, biographical texts unrelated to literature, such as biographies of scholars, explorers, politicians, etc.—were thereby assigned to an unspecified and ill-defined domain of the history of culture, where they would remain, as far as most scholars were concerned, from then on.[16]

Grigorii Vinokur's *Biografiia i kul'tura* [*Biography and Culture*] (1927) represents an important attempt to overcome the marginalization of the genre of biography by reflecting on its general foundations, and indeed by offering a particular "theory of biography." Vinokur's book suggests the possibility of synthesizing the German tradition of studying the history of human life in the spirit of Wilhelm Dilthey with the analytic apparatus of Formalist literary scholarship. Although it did not sprout a scholarly tradition and thus remained an isolated intellectual experiment, it deserves credit for exposing the limitations of the Formalist approach to biography, as well as for putting forward a consistently theoretical, holistic vision of this genre.[17] As suggested by its title, *Biography and Culture* carries a polemical and apologetic intent. Vinokur states that biography is "an inseparable unity" of all elements of life, a "living tie [that is] . . . given to us in history" (24), and it is history, for Vinokur, that provides a ground where "not a single element can be understood outside of a relation to the *whole*" (31, italics original). It follows that the life of an individual "must be construed in structural terms" as a synthesis of different aspects that comprise "social reality" or "the social whole" (32, 33). An individual history of life is construed as a process of selection of elements that correspond to the "object" of private life. Biography thus is a special sphere of creativity that possesses an "aesthetics" of its own (18–21). This aesthetics of personality is based on a narrative principle, shifting the emphasis away from the direct depiction of *lichnost'* to storytelling (36).[18]

Grigorii Vinokur's reflections can be easily extended beyond literature, providing a theoretical foundation to the analysis of the biographical text as a

general phenomenon. It also shows how literary scholarship with a philological bent can give rise to a "scholarly-critical" theory of biography. Notably, in the Soviet Union, the most far-reaching conceptualizations of documentary prose emerged from within literary studies. Of special importance in this regard are the methodological inquiries of Lydia Ginzburg, who elaborated a radical critique of the tenets of Russian Formalism.

A student of Yurii Tynianov, Ginzburg focused on what might be termed borderline literary genres—those that exist outside of the literary canon. As Irina Savkina has recently suggested, Ginzburg was not aiming at elevating memoirs, diaries, or correspondence to the status of literature, but on the contrary, at detecting a "peculiar kind of literariness" in them. For Ginzburg, documentary prose is an object of study in its own right, placed between "social, historical and psychological notions and the specific aspects of artistic literature" (*O literaturnom geroe* 7–8). Her main heroes belong, once again, to the generation of the 1840s: the young philosopher Stankevich, the distinguished Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian revolutionary Alexander Herzen, and the writer Lev Tolstoy. All these ostensibly very different individuals are united by the "quest for their own personality." That quest is the main concern in her books *Alexandr Ivanovich Herzen* (1957) and *On Psychological Prose* (1971).

When speaking of *lichnost'*, Ginzburg emphasizes the process of collecting disparate elements into one whole. In conceptualizing this process, she employs the vocabulary of social psychology—in particular, her familiarity with the theories of George Mead and Erving Goffman is an established fact.[19] In the resulting original conception, the biographical subject, or "character" (Ginzburg's term, rendered by Judson Rosengrant as *personality*), is an outcome of individual efforts with inter-subjective interactions: "Personality (*kharakter*) is an ideal conception, a structure created by the individual himself in consequence of his self-conception, and continuously created in everyday life by everyone on the basis of observations of other people or of information about them. It is clear that everyone's personality will be subject to a series of interpretations, some sharply divergent, others differing merely in certain details and nuances" (*On Psychological Prose* 10). The production of one's own character (which is to say, the building of one's personality) is thus revealed as a form of "social" creativity and one of the chief goals of human lives. This process enters into complicated relations with literary creativity, yet it also has independent value.

Moving from Tynianov and Tomashevsky to Vinokur and Ginzburg, we see how the study of second-order biographical texts is gradually accepted in the field, and how a fitting methodological apparatus comes into being.

Within that apparatus, *lichnost'* is construed as a peculiar "cultural" or "aesthetic" phenomenon purified of concrete social investments, as "purposiveness without a purpose," whose history is first and foremost the "history of spirit" and its inner strivings. A fundamental contradiction thus arises: while ostensibly rationalized as a "structure" or a "role," in the spirit of Goffman, personality lacks external motivations, whose origins lie in the social world. Ginzburg's "sociology" (in this case, the term calls for quotes) is opposed to the reductionism of orthodox Marxism, which viewed the human being exclusively through economic relations. For Ginzburg, it is not the economy, but culture that determines the individual, and that relation of determination is not subject to any methodological doubt or critical reflection.

YURII LOTMAN AND THE SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE

Lydia Ginzburg's conception of character as a historical phenomenon was a breakthrough that pushed the problem of personality into the foreground of research in literary studies. Cultural semiotics, a movement closely associated with Yurii Lotman, who was the leader of the so-called Tartu school of semiotics, put forward a new theory of human behavior that, while less centrally concerned with *lichnost'*, shared the basic assumptions stemming from the tradition of pondering personality discussed in the preceding section.

In 1984, Lotman published a small note with the revealing title "Biografiia—zhivoe litso" [Biography: A Living Face]," dedicated to Alexei Gastev's *Leonardo da Vinci*, published in the famous Soviet biographical series *Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei* [*The Life of Remarkable People*]. Pondering the popularity of the genre, Lotman suggests that "behind the reader's interest in biography there always hides a need to see a beautiful and rich human personality [*lichnost'*]" (228). Lotman laments the fact that a scholarly attitude toward the problem of personality has not yet become customary in literary studies, with "the practical result that stereotypes dominate in the biographical genre."[20] Ironically, however, when he turns to Leonardo da Vinci himself and asks "What was that man? What shapes the unity of his personality?," Lotman seeks recourse to Gastev's term *sfumatto*, referring to the painterly device that creates a hazy effect of fading lineaments. "[T]he psychological structure of personality," Lotman concludes, "is a mutual projection of different lives," where "one thing shines through another, where inspiration is visible through the lumps of life's circumstances, and light, through smoke. A portrait in the *sfumatto* manner" (236).

This note, which was intended for a broad audience of non-specialists, suggests a conflict between two seemingly opposed positions. The imperative of subjecting personality to analysis is confronted with a twofold hermeneutic

deficit: the inadequacy of analytic categories for grasping *lichnost'* and the insufficiency of artistic means for reproducing it. Lotman sought to resolve this paradox in his own biographies of Karamzin and Pushkin, in which personality is cast as an object of self-conscious construction. As a result of this effort of self-fashioning, *lichnost'* takes on a degree of autonomy and integrity, as well as aesthetic qualities such as "richness" and "beauty."

Yurii Lotman's own biographies can be seen as illustrations of the potential of the semiotic approach to this genre. In the preface to the Polish translation of his biography of Alexander Pushkin, Lotman states that the book's main objective is "to approach biography as an object of semiotic analysis" (*Lotmanovskii sbornik* 86). Lotman's semiotics, which presented an explicit, lucid method of studying human behavior in texts and in real life, was thus based on Formalist premises, such as the view of literature as the highest cultural form, the definition of personality in terms of structure, and the importance of the writer's biographical legend. It bears emphasizing that cultural semiotics ignores those forms of behavior that lack marked, easily recognizable features. Lotman's hero performs a role, or a multiplicity of roles, that are laden with cultural meanings. Viewed through the semiotic lens, the biographical subject easily dons different hats and masks, continually existing in the regime of social performance that presents a contrast to the routine of everyday life.

In these terms Lotman describes Pushkin's work on the creation of his *lichnost'*:

> the more brilliantly, in this or that poem from the Lyceum period, Pushkin learns to employ existing stylistic and generic norms, the more the properly Pushkinian becomes manifest in him. Something similar occurred in 1817–1820 in the domain of the poet's construction of his *lichnost'*. He acquired "the rules of the game," accepted in this or that social circle, with an astonishing ease, entering the style of amiable interaction proposed by this or that mentor-interlocutor. Nevertheless, Pushkin does not dissolve in alien characters or norms. He is in quest for himself. . . . It would be a mistake to imagine "the construction of *lichnost'*" as a dry rational process. As also in art, here a pre-calculated design coexists with intuitive findings and momentary illuminations which suggest a solution. All this together forms that mixture of the conscious and the unconscious that is characteristic of all creativity. (*Pushkin* 44–45, 79)

Indeed, the poet creates his personality "as an original and complete artistic work" (79).

This creative process, nevertheless, takes place in a social context that has its objective laws and is founded on values that an individual must embody in order to attain a special standing for his *lichnost'* and to mark his whole life

project as a success. What is called for is a lucky synthesis of various elements, of the man and the world, of the personal and the universal, the kind of synthesis that opens access to the historical. Lotman's use of the metaphor of history as a "chain" of events is particularly telling:

> Pushkin assigned a special meaning to the notion of a "link in a chain": in order to carry on the relay of generations, one must be a bright personality that has dignity of its own, as well as personal autonomy, fullness of spiritual and psychological life, mental and emotional richness. Only the individual who is a bright human totality is part of history. Not self-annihilation and subjection, but independence and efflorescence of human individuality, brightness of experienced life, a meditative and carefree stance—joy and sadness at once—can constitute at once a contribution to culture and an adoption into culture. (*Pushkin* 151)

Lotman's biography of Pushkin is anti-psychological in a principled way. Lotman's protagonist at any given time performs a role, thus leaving open the question of how the unity of a *lichnost'* can be compatible with the multiplicity of stances that it adopts. Ginzburg's conception of personality tends in the opposite direction: it is hyper-psychological in that it involves labor on one's self which is being painstakingly assembled from available historical material. Within that conception, anyone can be a biographical subject, even a hero who does not pursue marked forms of behavior.[21] This difference, however, should not conceal an overarching similarity: a *lichnost'* can only be built through participation in a culture that serves as the chief and indisputable source of legitimacy.

CONCLUSION: THE ANTINOMIES OF BIOGRAPHY

In the beginning of her article on the conceptions of the self in Mikhail Bakhtin, Yurii Lotman, Lev Vygotskii, and Lydia Ginzburg, Caryl Emerson notes that all of these thinkers are "wholly free from hermeneutics of suspicion" (201). Indeed, *lichnost'* can exist in a tragic or a heroic hypostasis; it is open to the outside world and to language, and is granted the power of creation and a determination to find a place in the world. It acquires the meaning of its existence through culture, and although it can be represented by structural relations between various elements (as, for example, in Ginzburg's conception of the historical character), or by reference to performed roles, it ultimately overrides all interpretations that seek to reduce its status by exposing its concrete determinants, objectives, or social strategies. In this regard, Lotman's approach to self, for example, lacked a spirit of critique, in part because, in contrast to analogs in French structuralism and poststructuralism, it was not designed as an instrument for unmasking dominant ideology or social myths.

The use of sociological models for conceptualizing culture and the self notwithstanding, powerful continuities link Soviet literary theorists to the tradition going back to the middle of the nineteenth century, the liberal epoch that saw the rise of the new modality of biographical writing as well as the quest for a metaphysical unity of society and the individual. That tradition consolidated the new class of intellectuals, the *intelligentsiia*, by monopolizing access to the de-politicized domain of culture which in that particular manifestation tended to be identified with literature. Biographical narratives about a creative artist, a poet, or a writer were part of a hermeneutic effort that had a political meaning inasmuch as they instantiated the struggle of a specific social group for the right of "imposing a legitimate vision of the world" (Bourdieu, "Espace social"). That effort proved constitutive for the identity of the Soviet intelligentsia.

In the Soviet epoch, the theoretical effort to define human personality (*lichnost'*) as a historical entity had to negotiate between two contradictory intentions or realizations. On the one hand, literary scholars sought to base their inquiry into the human psyche on scholarly methodologies and analytical categories, with the stated goal of revealing its participation in concrete relations intrinsic to the social world. On the other hand, they adhered to a powerful holistic cultural mythology that was closely tied to the concept of *lichnost'* and whose genealogy went back to the Russian reception of German idealism. In the Soviet period, this antinomy was inflected by a persistent opposition of the principle of *lichnost'*, embraced by the intelligentsia, to the pressure of official discourses. It is fair to say that *lichnost'* had the function of compensating for the spiritual, mystical-religious holistic principle of human individuality, associated with Orthodox Christianity and therefore suppressed during the Soviet period. This concept thus was charged with the ethos of emancipation from any kind of regulatory systems, revealing its latent liberal (as opposed to Hegelian) connotations.

NOTES

1. Among numerous relevant studies the following should be mentioned: William H. Epstein's *Recognizing Biography* and John Batchelor's collection *The Art of Literary Biography.* Other works that are significant from a methodological viewpoint include Ira Bruce Nadel's *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*, Paula R. Backscheider's *Reflections on Biography*, and Ray Monk's essays "Objectivity, postmodernism and biographical understanding" and "Life without theory: biography as an exemplar of philosophical understanding."
2. See Halfin; Hellbeck; and Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience.*
3. The term "a right to biography" was apparently introduced by Boris Tomashevsky in his 1923 article "Literatura i biografiia" (as I will discuss in the "Towards a Theory of Biography" section of this essay).

4. Important theorizations of genre within the Russian tradition of Historical Poetics include Mikhail Bakhtin's "The Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," and Alexander Veselovsky's "From the Introduction to Historical Poetics: Questions and Answers."
5. See also Geim 1: 357: "*Zhizneopisanie*—L'histoire de la vie; la biographie; *zhizneopisatel'* Le biographe, der biographe." Ivan Rizhskii defines the history of a single person as "*zhitie* (biographie)" (283).
6. Both *chelovek* 'human being' and *litso* 'person' can be used of synonyms of *lichnost'* during that period. In other contexts, the distinct meaning of *lichnost'* as a uniquely constituted individuality is unmistakable, as in Mikhail Arkhangel'skii's *Rukovodstvo k izucheniiu slovesnosti* (204–205).
7. See Vinogradov (273, 291–92), Sorokin (201–205), and Plotnikov (64–84).
8. "One cannot deny the influence of moral qualities on the feeling of love, yet when one loves a person, one loves him in his entirety, not as an idea, but as a living *lichnost'*; one especially loves in him that which one can neither define nor name. Indeed, how would you define and name, for instance, that elusive expression, that mysterious play of his face, his voice, in a word, all that constitutes his particularity, makes him unlike other people, and all that for which—trust me—you love him most of all?" (Belinsky 10: 28).
9. Consider Gerzen (3: 42): "Turbid individualities, produced from natural unmediatedness [*iz estestvennoi neposredstvennosti*], are elevated as fog into the sphere of the universal and, illumined by the sun of the idea, they are dissolved in the eternal blue of the universal. Yet they are not annihilated in it; having received the universal inside them, they pour down as beneficent rain, pure crystal drops on the same old earth. The grandeur of the returning *lichnost'* is due to its having preserved both worlds, to its being both *genus* and *individuum* at the same time [*rod i nedelimoe vmeste*], to its having become what it was born as, or better put, that for the sake of which it was born—a conscious link between both worlds, to its having comprehended its universality while preserving its singularity."
10. In a letter to Bakunin of 10 September 1838, Vissarion Belinsky describes the process of the birth of *lichnost'* construed as the recognition of the mutual interrelatedness of various world phenomena on the plane of individual existence. Reporting on his intellectual and moral transformation, Belinsky represents *lichnost'* as a coming together of previously incompatible concepts: "Duty, the moral point of view, selflessness, self-sacrifice, grace, will, freedom in gratitude, the directness of actions, politics, love, marriage, taste in what is elegant—in a word, all the most contradictory concepts have for me taken on a certain integral meaning and no longer fight each other, but rather form a whole structure with many facets, one general painting using different colors" (11: 282).
11. On the reception of Schelling's ideas in Russia, see Kamenskii.
12. Zen'kovsky's language is indebted to the tradition of Russian personology.
13. On Stankevich and his influence on Russian intellectual life, see Brown.
14. In "The Literary Fact" (1924) and "On Literary Evolution" (1927), Yurii Tynianov approaches literature as a dynamic system in which "literary function" may arise as a result of a modification in the relation between different "series": "literary" and "non-literary" (273). Thus, in some cases, memoirs and diaries would have the quality of "literariness," and in others, not (they would therefore belong to the non-literary series).

15. Tynianov's biographical narratives include works on Wilhelm Küchelbecker (*Kiuchlia*), Alexander Griboedov (*Smert' Vazir-Mukhtara*), and Pushkin (*Pushkin*; left incomplete at the time of his death); his famous novella *Lieutenant Kijé* is based on a historical anecdote from the reign of Paul the First. Tynianov also discusses the problem of biography in his private correspondence. For instance, in a letter addressed to Viktor Shklovsky (5 March 1929), he writes: "It is imperative that biography be recognized, that it be yoked to the history of literature and not run by the side like a foal. 'Human beings' as they exist in literature are a result of cyclization around a name, the name of the hero [*tsiklizatsiia vokrug imen—geroiia*] and [the result of] the application of devices in other domains, where they are tested out before they are admitted into literature. There is no 'unity' or 'totality' but instead a system of relationships toward different activities, whereby a change in one type of relations, for instance in the domain of political action, can be linked, in a combinatory fashion, to a different type, for instance, the relation to language and literature (Griboedov, Pushkin). In general, *lichnost'* is not a reservoir whose emanations take the form of literature etc., but a cross cut across [the domains of] activity that are subject to a combinatory evolution of different series [*riady*]" (*Poetika* 513). For more on literary-theoretical debates around the relation between "literature" and "real life" [*byt*], which touch upon the problem of biography, see Chudakova 439, 443.
16. Across the Atlantic, the commitment of American New Critics to the autonomy of literature was similarly detrimental to the recognition of biography's distinctive value. In René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature*, the genre of biography is not discussed under the rubric of "Literary Genres," but instead dealt with cursorily in a chapter on the misuses of the biographical and psychologizing approaches to literature, where it is stated that most scholars have not perceived a "specifically literary" quality in biographical narratives (76). Northrop Frye, for his part, does not even mention biography in *Anatomy of Criticism,* and would probably subsume it, alongside historiography, under the category of "descriptive pieces of writing," which "survives by virtue of its 'style', or interesting verbal pattern, after its value as a representation of facts has faded" (75).
17. As Vinokur states, work on biography in Russia is hampered not only by a deficit in theoretical reflection, but also by a lack of a strong biographical tradition. In his article "Rannie biografii Pushkina" ["Early biographies of Pushkin"] (1937), he writes that "in Russia the art of biography lacked solid traditions; there were few genuine biographical writers, who would see biography as a vocation. The very problem of biography not only was not debated in scholarly-critical or philosophical literature, but almost never emerged as a serious cultural problem" (*Stat'i* 35).
18. In Vinokur's account, *lichnost'* is conceptualized in a Formalist spirit as a structure and even as a "structure of structures" that represents a particular constellation of elements that are sifted and selected by the biographer: "*lichnost'* is that which lives and that without which there is no life. Yet biography does not study *lichnost'* as such. Titles or subtitles of biographical works that suggest as much, in fact, always refer to the *history of private life*" (*Biografiia* 35–36). The biographer should be able to grasp the growth and becoming of a person from "a coherent and living historical context" (43). According to Vinokur, it is history, and not an essential inner psychic core, that grants life to personality, yet it is history seen through the lens of the aesthetics of life writing.
19. For Ginzburg's interest in Goffman, see Andrei Zorin.

20. "The simple truths that human personality represents a complex psychological and intellectual structure which appears at the interstices of period-based, class, group and uniquely individual models of consciousness and behavior, that all historical and social processes are realized through this mechanism and cannot bypass it (that is, through human thoughts and human behavior), that the social process is also manifested in the structure of social interaction and that, consequently, all humanistic inquiry must reckon with the achievements of scholarship in these fields—all these simple truths have not yet penetrated the scholarly consciousness of students of literature" (Lotman, *Biografiia* 230).
21. "We all know people who readily fall into one or another typological category, however superficial, and others who remain elusive in this regard (their behavior is either 'semiotic' or 'nonsemiotic'). We also know people who maintain poses and roles, and others who do not" (Ginzburg, *On Psychological Prose* 16).

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