

Pain and healing in the first-person narrative, historically speaking

Most studies of pre-modern first-person writings suggest their contextualization. One common way of placing these writings into a context is to approach them in relation to others of the kind – earlier, contemporary or later. The other way, comparatively new and much less common, is to approach them in relation to the concrete social contexts of their appearance and functioning. The article suggests that this second way is particularly helpful for understanding pre-modern first-person narratives better. To prove this suggestion it offers a reading of one such piece of writing as a constituent part of historically specific social activity. The text under discussion is the autobiographical *Life (Zhitie)* of a Russian monk Epifanij, written around 1675-1676. The analysis of this text is focused on one topic: representations of pain and healing. Within this topic three sections are read in detail: on the author's genitals, fingers and tongue. The paper concludes that although each of three refers to a different part of Epifanij's body and each is narrated in a different manner, all three have two major characteristics in common. First, they refer to Divine Providence as the only source of healing, and, second, they send a strong propagandist message to their readers. These characteristics support the idea that socio-historical contextualization of pre-modern first-person writings allows for deeper comprehension of their meanings and compositional structures.

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Most historical studies of early first-person writings suggest their contextualization. One way of doing this, especially common among historians of literature and culture, is putting them in connection with other works of the same kind – earlier, contemporary or later. Contextualization of this type presupposes the existence of a lucid continuity in both the development of first-person writings and the development of human self understood as their source. A remarkable example of such contextualization was recently presented in the form of a lecture entitled “Rousseau and the Autobiographical Revolution” by Philippe Lejeune, the renowned maitre of autobiographical studies¹. Analyzing two preambles of the *Confessions*, which Lejeune called the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Autobiographer,” he convincingly described the revolution Rousseau “brought about in the practice of autobiography.” The core of this revolution, according to Lejeune, is the appearance of a radically new concept of autobiographical narrative concurrent with the appearance of a radically new concept of the self. The scholar argues that these two concepts, first formulated in the *Confessions*, are the cornerstones of modern autobiographical practice and of the modern individual self.

Another way of contextualizing early first-person writings, comparatively new and much less common, is to approach them in relation to the concrete socio-historical situations in which they appeared and functioned. This way has been developed by social historians and sociologists largely inspired by social constructionism. One of the most well-known advocates of this approach is Gabrielle Jancke, who has thoroughly studied early modern autobiographical narratives in German-speaking Europe². Jancke insists that “in order to uncover what was implied in autobiographical writing for early modern writers, it would be necessary to contextualize the sources – in their own times and settings.”³ She emphasizes that “autobiographical writers were not isolated individuals but social beings, belonging to certain social, professional, religious and gender groups, moving in certain contexts and relationships,” and that the autobiographical texts they produced were the result of their “acting socially.”⁴ Thus, Jancke suggests that emphasis be given not to the historical development – either of autobiographical narrative or the concept of the self – but on specific social circumstances that shape this or that concrete form of self-narrative. Reading early modern autobiographical narratives in this way allows her to make a strong argument that contradicts most traditional

¹ IABA Europe 2011 Conference “Trajectories of (Be)longing: Europe in Life Writing” (Tallinn, May 18-20 – <http://iabaeurope2011.edicypages.com/keynotes/philippe-lejeune>).

² Gabriele Jancke, *Autobiographie als soziale Praxis. Beziehungskonzepte in Selbstzeugnissen des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts im deutschsprachigen Raum*. Köln: Böhlau, 2002.

³ Gabriele Jancke, “Autobiography as Social Practice in Early Modern German Speaking Areas. Historical, methodological, and theoretical perspectives,” in *Autobiographical Themes in Turkish Literature: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*. Würzburg: Ergon, 2007, p. 72.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

approaches to the field: “We cannot go on telling the story of the rise of Western individual, at least not in combination with autobiographical writing.”⁵

In agreement with Gabrielle Jancke, this paper rests upon the premise that social contextualization is extremely helpful for understanding pre-modern first-person writings. By “helpful,” I mean not only that it allows for deeper comprehension of their meanings and compositional structures, but also that it suggests a variety of new heuristically provocative perspectives for autobiographical studies.

To make this argument clear, I will offer a reading of one of the texts as a constituent part of historically specific social reality. The text under discussion is *A Life* (in Russian *Zhitie*, the meaning of the word is close to the Latin *vita*) of the Russian monk Epifanij written around 1675-1676.⁶ The reading will focus on the author’s representations of pain and healing, which occupy most of the text.

Epifanij’s *Zhitie* is mostly an account of his individual experience of physical and spiritual pain followed by healings, which are always of a miraculous nature. The larger part of the story is comprised of episodes in which the monk tells of the results of his punishments by persecutors who cut off his tongue (twice) and amputated four fingers of his right hand. We read here in detail about what the author felt during and after these punishments: about his bleeding truncated hand, about his touching it with the unharmed one to make sure that the fingers are really gone, about the difficulties of ingesting food and plentiful saliva after the removal of his tongue, etc. Other episodes of physical sufferings not related to his corporal punishments by persecutors are marked by the same naturalistic descriptions: of the pain caused by ants attacking his genitals, of Epifanij’s eyes and lungs suffering from the smoke in his cell, etc. These narrations of physical pain are always accompanied with narrations of spiritual distress.

⁵ Ibid., p. 71.

⁶ On Epifanij and his *Zhitie* see: Serge A. Zenkovsky [=Sergei Aleksandrovich Zen’kovskii], “The Confession of Epiphany a Moscovite Visionary,” in: *Studies in Russian and Polish Literature in Honour of Waclaw Lednicki*. Gravenhage: Mouton, 1962, pp. 46-71; Idem, „Der Mönch Epifanij und die Entstehung der altrussischen Autobiographie“, in: *Die Welt der Slaven*. Wiesbaden 1956. Jahrgang I. Heft 3. S. 276-292; Andrej N. Robinson, “Zhitie Epifanija kak pamjatnik didakticheskoi avtobiografii”, in: *Trudy Otdela drevnerusskoj literatury Instituta russkoj literatury (Pushkinskij dom) Akademii nauk SSSR*. T. XV. Moskva; Leningrad: Nauka, 1958, s. 203-223; Idem, “Avtobiografija Epifanija”, in: *Issledovanija i materialy po drevnerusskoj literature*. Moskva: Nauka, 1961, s. 101-132; Idem, *Zhizneopisanija Avvakuma i Epifanija: Issledovanija i teksty*. Moskva: Nauka, 1963; Yuri P. Zaretsky, “Telo i ego kazni (ob avtobiografizme Epifanija Solovetskogo)”, in: *Kazus. Individual’noe i unikal’noe v istorii – 2000*. Moskva: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2000, s. 319-344; Idem, “Tortured Body as the Location of the Self? A Seventeenth-Century Russian Case,” in *Räume des Selbst. Selbstzeugnisforschung transkulturell*, Hg. A. Bähr, P. Burschel, G. Jancke. Köln: Böhlau, 2007 (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit), S. 187-196.

The same detailed descriptions are typical for the monk's healing that follows his suffering. In all cases, healing comes after prayer: either the Blessed Virgin or another heavenly force interferes in the course of earthly events and brings immediate relief.

Let us look closer at one of central episodes of *Zhitie* – Epifanij's suffering and healing in his prison cell after amputation of four fingers on his right hand.

This is how the author describes his pains:

“And my heart and all my innards were lit with great fire, and I fell on the ground sweating heavily and started to die and three times I was about to die but I survived and my soul did not leave my body” (*i vozgoresja serdce moe vo mne i vsja vnutrennjaja moja ognem velikim, az zhe padoh na zemlju i byst' ves' v potu, i nachal umirati, i tri nakona umiral, da ne umer, dusha moja is tela moego ne vyshla*).⁷

The physical pain was so intolerable that Epifanij makes an attempt to commit suicide. The “mechanics” of this attempt are given in striking detail:

“And risen from the ground, I lay down on a bench, put my truncated hand on the ground and thought to myself: ‘Let the blood flow out of me, this is how I will die.’ And much blood flowed out and it became wet in the pit and the guards covered the blood with hay and I was shedding blood for five days to cause death in this way.” (*I az vostav so zemli i na lavku leg nic, a ruku moju sechenuju povetil na zemlju, pomysljalja v sebe sice: “Puskaj krov-ta vydet iz mene vsja, tak ja i umru.” I mnogo krovi vyshlo, i v temnice stalo mokro. I strazhi sena na krov' naslali. I pjat' dnejj tohil krov' is tela moego, daby mi ot togo smert' prishla*).⁸

Despite these efforts, death did not come to Epifanij and spiritual unrest began to accompany his physical sufferings:

“And I, a sinner, was lying on the ground alone in the pit, rolling in every possible direction on my belly and on my back and on my sides, out of great anguish and bitter melancholy.” (*Az zhe, greshnyj, v temnice edin valjajasja po zemle na brjuhe i na spine, i na bokah, i vsjako prevrashajasja ot velikija bolezni i ot gorkija toski*).⁹

Finally, in desperation, he passionately appealed to God, the Blessed Virgin and all saints to bring him death. Soon after this, a heaven-sent vision came to him in the image of the Blessed Virgin who started to cure the sufferer:

“[...] And I hear that the Blessed Virgin is touching my wounded hand with her hands [...] as if her hands are playing with my hand, and it seems to me as if the Blessed Virgin

⁷ All citations of the text are taken from: Andrej N. Robinson, *Zhizneopisanija Avvakuma i Epifanija: Issledovanija i teksty* (URL: <http://feb-web.ru/feb/avvakum/texts/rob/rob-179-.htm>). Translations are mine.

⁸ Ibid., p. 193.

⁹ Ibid., p. 194.

restored the fingers to my hand.” (*[...] i slyshu – Bogorodica rukami svoimi bolnuju moju ruku osjazaet, [...]rukami svoimi nad moeju rukuju jako igraet, i mnitmisja, kaby Bogorodica k ruke moej i persty prilozhila.*)¹⁰

The pain immediately vanished and Epifanij’s mood dramatically changed to joy and admiration of the Almighty.

Two stories that follow Epifani’s loss of his “tongues” after two amputations follow a similar narrative model and finalizing each story, the author informs his readers that in a while his tongue grew back. These stories are different only in some details. We notice that the narration regarding the first amputation is much shorter, that the first punishment resulted in severe pain while the second was almost painless, and that the healing from the second punishment was accompanied by a vision. This vision, described in detail, tells of how Epifanij put his amputated tongue back into his mouth and fixed it with his unharmed hand.

The descriptions of pain and healing not related to Epifanij’s physical punishments are also structured similarly. One of them tells a story that took place in the monk’s early years, when he lived as a hermit in a wooden hut:

After an unsuccessful attempt to burn his hut, the Devil decided to harm Epifanij in another way: by sending into it a swarm of ants that severely attacked the monk’s genitals. Telling about his desperate attempts to rid himself of the attackers, Epifanij repeatedly points to the selectivity of the insects: “And they eat nothing – neither hands, nor legs, nor anything else, but the secret part of the body” (*A inovo nichevo ne jadjat – ni ruk, ni nog, ni inovo chevo, tokmo tajnyja udy*).¹¹ The pain caused by the ants was so intolerable that the monk was about to give himself up to despair. Finally, one day at the dinner table he received such a strong bite that had to stop eating. Suffering from severe pain, he fell on his knees and addressed his passionate prayers to the icon of the Blessed Virgin. Very soon, the insects quit attacking his body and in a while disappeared never to return.

The second story took place much later in prison. It begins with a detailed description of new bodily sufferings Epifanij has experienced: his earthen cell became so full of smoke that he was close to death several times (*stalo u mene byti v temnice nuzhno i chadno, i pylno, i gorko ot dyma, i mnogazhdy umiral ot dyma*). In addition to his breathing, the smoke affected his eyes: they became filled with pus (*i gnoju stalo mnogo vo ocheh moih*), and the monk began to lose his vision (*nachasha u mene glaza hudo gljadeti*). He vainly attempted to tear the pus off his eyes

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 186.

with his hands (*i ja gnoj sodiral s nih rukami moimi*) and in the end he was unable to read his prayer book (*I uzhe zelo iznemogosha ochi moi, i ne videl po knige govorit'*). This disability was especially difficult for Epifanij and drove him to despair (*i ja, greshnoj, o sem opechalilsja zelo i unyl, i tuzhil nemalo vremeni*). In such physical and moral conditions, he laid down on his bench and appealed to the Lord, the Blessed Virgin, his guardian angel, and all the saints for help. After this he had a dream in which he saw a warder approaching him and asking to make several wooden crosses. When Epifanij objects that he is no longer capable of doing this handicraft anymore due to the loss of eyesight and fingers of his right hand, the warder replies: "Do, for God's sake, do! Christ will help you" (*Delaj, Boga radi, delaj! Hristos tebe pomozhet*). After these words the warder disappears.

Three days later, now in reality, he comes up to Epifanij with the same request as in the dream. After some hesitation, prayers, and obtaining his spiritual father's blessing, Epifanij decides to try to resume his handicraft. At this time a miracle occurs: his eyes immediately became free of pain and able to see, and his truncated hand becomes able to manufacture crosses (*Kresta radi Hristova byst' ochi moi v tom chase bezbolezneny i svetly zelo, a i ruka moja stala potrebna na sluzhbu krestu Hristovu*).¹²

These examples of stories about pain and healing in *Zhitie* clearly show striking differences between Epifanij's self-narrative and conventional self-narratives of Modern times. If asked about the reason (or reasons) for these differences, we would most likely agree that they are historical in nature. One may also add that they are the result of Epifanij's religiosity and his status as a monk. Questions about the meaning of the text would produce less unanimity.

If we take the first approach briefly sketched at the beginning of the paper, which suggests continuity in both the development of first-person writings and the development of human self understood as their source, we may easily come to a number of self-evident conclusions about the text and its author.

For example, that *Zhitie* mostly follows traditional medieval Christian patterns of spiritual autobiography, and thus does not offer revolutionary meanings; that in some cases, the stories about miracles it tells about follow Russian sixteenth- and seventeenth-century hagiographical models, that it reveals clear traces of a medieval mentality (the author's strong belief in miracles in particular); that in search of relief from his pains, Epifanij relies on supernatural powers and not on medicine, etc.

¹² Ibid., pp. 198-200.

All these conclusions can be hardly argued from the standpoint of mainstream history of autobiography, which is based on the concept of development (either gradual or revolutionary) and thus looks at the early texts retrospectively.

Meanwhile, taking the second approach to Epifanij's narrative (i.e. autobiography as a social practice), our reading of the entire text and stories about pain and healing in particular brings quite different results. Contextualization of this type makes it clear that *Zhitie* was written not for us to discuss it as a part of literary or cultural tradition, but for other readers and for other historically specific aims.

Let me briefly suggest such contextualization.

Epifanij composed his life narrative in a dramatic period of Russian history later labeled the *raskol* (which means 'split' or 'schism'). The *raskol* is associated with religious reforms made by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Nikon, and supported by Tsar Aleksei Mihailovitch. The main idea behind these reforms was to correct "corrupted" Russian church service books in accordance with their original Greek counterparts, and to correct some of the rituals as well (for example, the sign of the cross was to be made with three fingers instead of two; and "hallelujah" had to be pronounced three times instead of twice).

Implementation of the reforms raised strong discontent in society and caused a split in Russian Orthodoxy. Those who rebelled against the reforms became known as Old Believers. They viewed the reforms as evil to the extent that Patriarch Nikon himself was regarded as the Antichrist.¹³

Monk Epifanij was among these rebellious Old Believers. In about 1665 he wrote a book portraying the tsar's support of reforms as a betrayal of the "true" faith. The following year he set out for Moscow to expose the ruler of all Rus. Soon he was arrested, excommunicated by the Church Council, physically punished (his tongue was cut out), and deported to the distant northern fort-town Pustozersk.

¹³ See some basic general studies on *raskol*: Makarij (Bulgakov), mitr., *Istorija russkogo raskola, izvestnogo pod imenom staroobradstva*. Sankt-Peterburg: Korolev & Co, 1855; Afanasij P. Schapov, *Russkij raskol staroobradstva*. Kazan: Ivan Dubrovin, 1859; Aleksandr K. Borozdin, *Protopop Avvakum. Ocherk iz istorii umstvennoj zhizni russkogo obschestva v XVII v.* Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo A.S. Suvorina, 1898; PIERRE PASKAL, *Avvakum et les débuts du Rascol. La crise religieuse au XVIIe siècle en Russie*. Paris: Mouton & Co, 1938; Peter Hauptman, *Altrussischer Glaube. Der Kampf des Protopopen Avvakum gegen die Kirchenreformen des 17. Jahrhunderts*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963; Sergej A. Zenkovskij, *Russkoe staroobradchestvo: Duhovnye dvizhenija XVII veka*. Moscow: Kvadriga, 2009; ROBERT O. CRUMMEY, *The Old Believers & The World Of Antichrist: The Vyg Community & The Russian State*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970; ROBERT O. CRUMMEY, "Old Belief as Popular Religion: New Approaches," in: *Slavic Review* 52. 1993 pp. 700-713; GEORG B. MICHELS, *At War With the Church: Religious Dissent in Seventeenth-Century Russia*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000; PETER HAUPTMANN, *Russlands Altgläubige*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005.

Epifanij endured a second punishment while in exile after he again refused to accept the reforms. Again his tongue (according to some evidence, the tongue had regenerated after being cut out the first time) and now the four fingers of his right hand were amputated. Epifanij remained in exile for the last 15 years of his life along with the leader of Old Believers protopope Avvakum and two other companions-in-arms. On April 14, 1682 he, together with other prisoners, was burned in a wooden hut in a common auto-da-fe.

Zhitie was written during this time in exile on the request of protopope Avvakum who had composed his own autobiography earlier. Both texts were produced in at least two copies each, and both were clearly addressed to “brothers and sisters in faith” at large. At the very end of his story, Epifanij identifies his desired audience as his “spiritual children, brothers and fathers,” and also a wider group of “all servants of Christ, who read and hear this.”¹⁴ The text of *Zhitie* also gives us some hints as to the effect it was to produce on its readers. Thus, Epifanij asks his spiritual son Afonasij who several times visited him in prison and was ordered to secretly pass on the manuscript “to accept the writing with love of Christ” and “to look at it as at me, who is a poor *starets*, and to respect it with love of Christ.” In conclusion, the author adds: “And if you find something for the good of your soul, you, son, glorify for this God and do not forget me in your holy prayers.”¹⁵

The socio-historical contextualization provided strongly suggests that Epifanij’s stories about his pain and healing – and certainly his *Zhitie* as a whole – comprise strong propaganda messages. These messages are read as encouraging appeals to other Old Believers: one must be firm in the devotion to the old belief; those who remain firm are helped by God; devotion and prayers to the Blessed Virgin is the best way to obtain divine protection; one must be patient and try hard to avoid sin. Keeping these messages in mind, we may assume that both for the author and for his readers, the bodily suffering and miraculous healing so strikingly detailed in the *Zhitie* are of key importance not as manifestations of Epifanij’s individual pains, but as a part of a larger sacred story.

Reading of this second type gives answers to many questions about content and structure of the stories told by Epifanij otherwise left obscure.

Let us take a look at the author’s selection of objects in telling about his pain and healing. A careful reader of the *Life* would grasp that each of these objects has its own symbolical sacred meaning and each is related to the fight for the ‘true’ faith. It becomes clear that the tongue is given to Epifanij to say prayers in the traditional pre-reform manner and to accuse his religious

¹⁴ Andrej N. Robinson, *Zhizneopisanija Avvakuma i Epifanija*, p. 202.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

opponents; his fingers are destined to make the sign of the cross in the traditional way and also to manufacture wooden crosses; his eyes are for reading his pre-reform prayer book and, again, for manufacturing crosses.

The same symbolical meaning is attributed to the monk's genitals, the weakest and most sinful part of the human body, which is most vulnerable to the temptations of the Devil. Not coincidentally, in this episode Epifanij metaphorically calls the ants "worms"¹⁶: in Christian eschatology this word is directly associated with the death of the body and with Hell. The edifying general moral of the episode is clear: without Heavenly help all human efforts to defeat the Devil are doomed to failure.

Contextualization of this type also leads to questioning the author's subjectivity in the text of *Zhitie* as such. On the one hand, there is little doubt that Epifanij's narrative is about himself: it follows (more or less) the events of his life, includes descriptions of the 'inner' motions of his soul, begins (after a short introductory statement) with the traditional autobiographical formula ("I was born...")¹⁷, and – last but not least – the author himself labels this narrative as a "life" (*zhitie*)¹⁸. There is also little doubt that his explicit and graphic descriptions of pain are something that comes from his own individual experience as a martyr.

On the other hand, the story contains declarations that contradict such an individualistic interpretation.

From the very beginning, Epifanij underlines that he himself is not the initiator of the work. He claims that it has been undertaken first in obedience to Christ, second at his confessor's command and in expectation of his blessing, and finally in response to a request of one of Epifanij's spiritual sons. Moreover, addressing his readers Epifanij announces that his story is not about himself at all but about things divine. He says: "I will not refuse telling you about Jesus Christ [...]" (*ne otrekusia skazati vam o Iisuse Hriste*).¹⁹ From this point of view his narrative may be read not as a story about his *self* but about something else, most likely about Almighty God and the divine miracles Epifanij witnessed in his fight for his faith. As for his own individual self and his life, they are of little importance. Rather they are the means for the implementation of God's will.

To conclude, I want once again to emphasize the importance of the idea that socio-historical contextualization of first-person writings that may be a particularly useful tool in their

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 186.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 202.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 179.

analysis. Advocating this approach nevertheless does not imply its superiority over or even rejection of the time-honored one that constructs an autobiographical tradition and traces its development. We just cannot get rid of ourselves and of our retrospective view on pre-modern texts ‘from above’. It is likely that both may go somehow hand in hand.

Finally, I would also agree with Gabrielle Jancke that socio-historical contextualization might be effective for better understanding not only early, but also modern autobiographical texts and “autobiography as a literary genre” as a whole.²⁰ If we return to Rousseau’s *Confessions*, which is considered by most literary historians to be the first example of this genre, this would mean an exploration not of revolutionary semantic shifts in this self-representation but what may be called the “revolutionary situation” that made these shifts possible.

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²⁰ Gabriele Jancke, “Autobiography as Social Practice in Early Modern German Speaking Areas,” p. 71.