

Dmitri Shalin

## **Biocritical Reflections on the *Encyclopedia of Youth***

### **Dmitri Shalin's methodological reflections on Mikhail Epshtein's and Sergei Iur'enen *Encyclopedia of Youth* against the backdrop of biocritical hermeneutics.**

For about a week now I have been reading the *Encyclopedia of Youth* [Entsiklopediia iunosti, 2017]. I skimmed through the text first, made my way to the afterword, then cycled back to the beginning and read the text closely, twice. What follows is a medley of notes and reflections occasioned by the dual autobiography (Abio) that Mikhail Epshtein and Sergei Iur'enen teamed up to write. My discussion focuses primarily on the original sources deployed in the *Encyclopedia* – diaries, journals, correspondence – and briefly touches on the issue of retrospective interpretations. Space constraints also limit my recourse to personal reminiscences contained in the original communication from which these notes are abridged.

In my reflections, I rely on the framework of biocritical hermeneutics, an emerging research perspective on auto/biographical writing (Shalin 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020). To maximize the validity of autobiographical framing, biocritical hermeneutics interrogates disparate sources and triangulates alternative accounts of controversial events. Biocritique deploys *reverse editing* to test the certified accounts, starting with the authorized version of described events and avowed identities, gathers bits and pieces left out of the official presentation, and reconstructs alternative enforcements which augment and challenge the over-determined self-framings (see Appendix for a summary).

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I have learned a lot about the authors from the dual *Abio*, the battles they waged with the world and themselves. Ample visual materials and diary entries reproduced in the book offer a multi-stranded view of two intersecting lives unfolding at a key juncture in Russia's history. Acute and unsparing, this self-analysis speaks volumes about soviet society, and the human predicament in general. *The Encyclopedia of Youth* is a study in complementary self-memorialization styles, and as such, it is especially appealing to students of autobiographical discourse like myself.

Both authors started their diaries at about the same age, on the verge of 12<sup>th</sup> birthday (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 132-3). A diary is an instrument of self-mastering, or as Foucault would say, 'taking care of self' (Foucault 1988). The agenda is self-improvement, weeding out the inferior strands of selfhood: '[Р]ешил как следует за себя взяться. Писал обязательства и расписки самому себе' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 337). 'Недоволен собой. Нарушил свои нормы общения. Много и дружески выболтал Эпштейну, врал и хвастал. О женщинах не вспоминать и не говорить. О работах тоже' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 141). Routine entries offer a window on how the self emerges as an object in experience and an agent in material world. Ambitions driving the self-writing are evident from the start. Here is an entry from Epshtein's journal dated January 10, 1962:

Я слышал по радио, что многие великие люди вели дневники. Я тоже решил вести дневник — может, буду великим человеком. А если нет, что ж, все равно пригодится, как дневник Анны Франк. А может быть, я напишу, когда стану взрослым, книгу по этому дневнику. А если не то и не другое, все равно интересно потом будет читать (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 131).

A narrative element is strong in early entries filled with particulars and short on generalization. Situations are soaked with raw emotions, but the collision resolves itself quickly without yielding an insight into oneself or the world. Here is Epshtein's recording the calamities that befell him on January 13, 1962:

Урок уже кончился. В коридоре был один наш класс. Ко мне стали приставать Репин, Адлер и мелкая сошка — Коршунов,

Дубцов и др. Купцов — редкий наглец. Хотя он и не приста-ет, но я его ненавижу больше всех, и он меня, наверно, тоже. Как бы я хотел избить его, это проклятое, желтое, вытянутое, как огурец, лицо! ...Стал драться с Адлером, но разошлись. Дома было все обыкновенно. Я мылся в тазу (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 132).

Sergei's earliest entries included in *Abio* go back to 1964. Narration predominates here, the language evincing early signs of writerly sensibilities. May 30, 1964:

Папа постучал в кабину шофера. Автобус остановился, и мы сошли, и пропустили его, прошел он мимо нас, пахнул теплым и бензиновым. Сразу стало тихо, светило солнце, освещало лес, шоссе и дорогу в лесу, по которой мы пошли, дорога между молодыми двадцатилетними соснами, дорога, которая вывела нас на огромную солнечную поляну, и мы пошли по мягкой дороге во ржи, мимо картофеля, к сараю, мимо пере-кладины с сеном и картофельного погреба к домику с голу-быми наличниками, а во дворе уже собаки зашлись от лая, открываем щеколду, скрипят ворота, собаки молчат, и мы, узванные собаками, входим, и старик идет через двор (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 237).

As time passes, the diary entries change their character, with judgment, generalization, and self-analysis taking more space and urgency. The need to take hold of one's agency weighs heavily on the shoulders of this 16-year-old diarist:

Когда ты уже прожил немного и твоя речь засорена, и уже она не твоя, ты стал, как другие. Если бы мне кучу новых слов, новых, как деревья после дождя! Микромир. Когда смотришь в траву; и так только один раз. Не повторяется та-кое. Муравей поволок травинку. Как бревно на 1-м Коммуни-стическом субботнике. Интересно, у муравьев какое классовое сознание... (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 297).

The disgust with oneself intensifies, as self-reflection becomes more sophisticated and writing shows the familiarity with literary prototypes:

Состояние раздражения. Бросил книгу на пол, испугался, когда упала. Где-то внутри любовался и наслаждался бешенством. Однако — задело. Невозможно жить с близкими вследствие их пристрастности. Слишком долго я обманывался, считал, что любовь к иным людям равнозначна всепрощению, подчиненности или опеке. Все тебе судьи, но ты — один в мире, и никто не может приблизиться к тебе, ибо природа такова, что чем больше сближаем — тем сильнее чувство отталкивания. Да и кому, честно говоря, важен ты, твое я? Лишь бы жилось хорошо твоему телу, лишь бы тело было обеспечено и имело специальность. Какого же смысла слушаться? Если это послушание — подавление телом 'Я', глубочайшего и сокровеннейшего! Надо самому, исключая любые советы опытных, то есть подавленных жизнью, отвершихся, отвергая их, надо начать идти только своей тропой, сколько б ни отличалась она от навязанного и принятого. Только своей тропой идти (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 297-8).

Mikhail Epshtein's penchant for philosophical reflection and self-generalization surfaces early on. At 14, Epshtein already started his metaphysical diary: 'Из дневника. 16.12.1964. "В конце ноября написал несколько философских этюдов или заметок, не знаю, как это называется"' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 342). Gradually, philosophical disquisitions and generalizing self-assessments claim more space pushing out the narrative element:

Я чувствую в себе страшную энергию, которая ни в чем не может найти выхода. То, что я делаю, меня по большому счету не устраивает, но делать лучше я не могу. Больше всего на свете я хочу любить и быть любимым, и меня угнетает невозможность такой большой любви, когда можно было бы без остатка раствориться друг в друге, жить друг другом. Это какая-то болезнь духа, проистекающая от недостатка любви и любимости. Для меня телесная близость сама по себе необязательна, это несовершенное выражение страшной духовной жажды. Если было бы можно, я отбросил бы все свои руки и ноги и остался с одной душой, чтобы отдаться любви без препятствий, без разделений, без знаков собственности и принадлежности. Но куда мне деть свои руки и ноги, как

обойтись без них, ведь без них мое существо не цело, и я не могу полностью отдать себя (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 225).

Retrospective assessments are even less steeped in daily minutia. A reference to a specific event in Epshtein's memorialization quickly yields to the flight of essayistic imagination. A story about a violent outburst against the mice swirling under one's feet occasions a disquisition about the restlessness of youth: 'И дело, конечно, не только в мышах — это были годы каких-то надрывных, компенсаторных попыток стать *сверхчеловеком*, от чего страдал я сам, как от спертости, духоты, замкнутости своего я. Когда я читаю экзальтации Ницше: "почему я так умен", "почему я так силен" и т. д., — то порой узнаю это опь-Я-нение задержанной *яности*, перехлестнувшей и за 30, и за 40 лет и в конце концов сломавшей его рассудок' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 485). The snippets of younger selves gleaned from the vantage point of the present yield critical reappraisals of one's maturing agency – verbal, social, sexual:

В юности я казался себе ужасно косноязычным и, перечитывая свои дневники до 19—20 лет, вижу, что так оно и было. Слова давались мне с трудом, я долго думал над каждым, и они не складывались в ясный жест или картину, а торчали в разные стороны, тупенькие, короткие, вялые. Я ходил по листу бумаги на ватных ногах, покачиваясь, с дрожью в коленках от сверхнапряжения каждого шага. С годами поступь твердеет, слова начинают выговариваться сами собой, очерчивая пластически внятный жест мысли. Очень трудно давалась мне эта наука: снять перегородку между мыслями и словами, писать так, чтобы это само собой, легко и вприпрыжку сбегало с пера (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 302-3).

Sergei's diary reflections and post factum assessments are full of generalizations about himself and asides about the state of the word, yet they retain a strong narrative form missing in his co-author. Certain entries are painterly in character, sort of *проба пера* [first attempt at writing], befitting a budding fiction writer: 'Минск. Впервые в жизни приснилась атомная война. 22 марта 1968... Я глянул в верхнюю часть окна и испугался: рядом с одиноко стоящим огнем, слишком ярким для звезды, двигался медленно еще один, он двигался около первого так медлительно, что я подумал равнодушно: вот летит ракета на

нас; потом... понял, что это огонь на движущейся стреле подъемного крана...' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 54). Some sketches include dialogues, waiting to be absorbed into a novel or short story:

1968, 8 марта. Станция Малая Вишера. 10-й час уже, как я сел на поезд в Москве. Я пишу за столиком в вагоне 3-го класса. С другой стороны, положив голову на руки и навалившись на стол, тонко храпит молодой мужик. За окном вьется снежок. Черные палки деревьев, черные вышки, черные пути. За косяк линией серого снега бурые частые кусты, дома двухэтажные нижней половиной просвечивают через кусты, верхней — поднимаются над ними рядами окон, белыми скатами крыш, трубами. Вблизи от окна у вагона снег сухой, шершавый, местами в провалах следов. В соседнем отсеке собираются пить принесенное вино — поезд стоит долго, и они успели сбегать в вокзальный ресторан. — Пятерки как не было, — говорит голос молодого парня.

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...

— Я тебе говорю: допей, — и слышно: тот допивает.

Жующие звуки. Поезд трогается.

— Следующее Чудово будет. Чудово, — кричит, проходя, проводница (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 366-7).

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Political awareness comes to the fore early in the protagonists' self-seeking exercises. Epshtein is painfully aware of his Jewish roots which make him stand out in a society with the illustrious anti-Semitic past. 'Быть евреем было постыдно — как быть червем' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 145). The struggle to define oneself in the face of oppressive realities is emotionally riveting:

2.6.67. "Вчера вечером говорил с мамой о гражданственности. Она взволновалась: "Ты сумасшедший, ты не знаешь жизни, никому нельзя об этом говорить. Нельзя идти против большинства, тебя предадут, арестуют, посадят, ты погубишь себя и родителей, сломаешь себе всю жизнь. Одумайся, тебе всего 17, ты вырастешь и поймешь, что это бредни юности". Я же знаю только одно: жить нужно так, как сам считаешь нуж-

ным, а не как большинство; жить для высоких целей, для правды и добра, для людей, всем своим существом воздействовать на бытие, не уходить от него в семью или науку, не бояться повернуть против течения — пусть хоть сильный всплеск будет!” (Epshtein and Iur’enen 2017: 11-2).

14 января 1968. Сегодня узнал о деле Гинзбурга. Я не волен совладать с тем чувством, которое вызвал процесс и приговор (7 лет). Гнусно, грязно, постыдно. Совестно. Как современно звучит Толстой: ‘Не могу молчать!’ И мне хочется бежать к людям, где понимают, где возникает единство чувства и сострадания, к людям, которые не молчат (Epshtein and Iur’enen 2017: 113).

This struggle is familiar to all of us who lived through the 1960s in the Soviet Union. The choice for the nonconformists was between joining the dissident movement, opting for internal or external emigration, and seeking solace in professional competence. For Mikhail and Sergei, the solution, before emigration emerged as a viable option, was consummate professionalism, to which the authors committed as a middle ground between fighting the regime and sinking into depression: ‘Но возник и третий путь, между идеалами и цинизмом: путь самоцельной, самодостаточной, профессионально-качественной, морально-ответственной работы в своей области знания и мастерства’ (Epshtein and Iur’enen 2017: 308). ‘Спасение от абсурда жизни — в литературе, в работе, в писательстве масштабном, с расчетом на долговременность книги’ (Epshtein and Iur’enen 2017: 19).

One senses an element of self-justification here, with the authors outlining their generational choice:

Так было у шестидесятников: целина, великие стройки Сибири, очищение партии, Ленин опять молодой, революция продолжается, через двадцать лет новое поколение советских людей будет жить при коммунизме... Мы, конца 1940-х — начала 1950-х гг. рождения, были, вероятно, первым поколением, которое совсем не очаровалось коммунизмом — и по той же самой причине не разочаровалось в нем, не пошло в диссиденты: послесолженицынское и послеевтушенковское

поколение (хотя мой политикоз в 1966—1967 гг. еще был остаточным симптомом той генерации, но август 1968 г. разделался со всеми иллюзиями) (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 307-8).

A rationalization might be at work here, a desire to explain to oneself and the world why the authors opted for a stoic forbearance and professional excellence rather than for active resistance. Epshtein senses the problematic nature of a compromise he settled for, as we can see in this entry:

18.7.1973. Случайно встретился в трамвае с тетей Людой. Ей за 50, искусствовед, друг старых друзей нашей семьи. Мучительный разговор. Выяснилось, что я, в 23 года пишущий статьи по литературоведению для советских (а каких еще?) журналов, не располагаю ее к уважению. Поскольку своим поведением оправдываю существующий строй... Овладение профессией, вне отношения к режиму, дает человеческую и историческую свободу и меру вещей. Примиритель Пушкин больше борца Рылеева... Все равно стыдно. Не могу себя простить, что случайно ли, в шутку ли обмолвился про 'волю народа', которая якобы свершилась в России в XX в. Но что же делать: возвращаться к моему диссидентству, когда мне стукнуло 16 лет? Или все же работать? Обидно, что почти чужой человек несколькими искренними фразами доводит меня до таких сомнений в себе. (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 129)

This is a moving testimony about the struggle the authors waged to salvage their dignity while fending off the repressive regime. Historians of soviet autobiographical discourse will be grappling with these fine-grain observations in years to come.

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The book annotation informs the reader that the *Encyclopedia of Youth* covers 'the seven-year period, from 1967 to 1974'. This time frame is baffling, for the autobiographical sources cited in the text go back to the early 1960s, and references to the events unfolding beyond the designated cut-off point sprinkle the exposition. Part of the problem is the retrospective nature of the overall design, which allows the authors to



insert their mature selves into the discussion and mention earlier and later developments. Such strategy raises questions for which the book doesn't always have answers.

The *Encyclopedia* contains a section titled *Departure* where the authors gloss Sergei's train ride from Moscow that took him out of the country and into the self-imposed exile. This momentous occasion, which happened on November 8, 1977, brings up the topic of emigration – the watershed event in the authors' lives. Emigration comes up repeatedly in the dual autobiography, notably in Sergei's diaries and reminiscences (Mikhail generally avoids the subject). Here is the conversation Sergei Iur'enen had in the summer of 1972 with his future wife who had broached the couple's relocation to Paris:

— Да хоть завтра.

— Нет, я серьезно?

Она нарисовала мне картину полного отчаяния. Окраина, бидонвиль, и я, еще один выброшенный на свалку истории русский писатель, сижу под горячим солнцем чужбины на пороге своего дома из картона и шифера с канистрой дешевого красного вина...

— Французского?

— Другого там нет. Но из пластмассы пьют только клошары.

— Что ж, буду пить и я.

— Ты уверен, что готов к такому? А к тому, что тебя там будет некому читать?

Заранее и беспощадно моя будущая жена отнимала у меня все возможные иллюзии, после чего предрекла, впервые тогда выступив в роли Кассандры:

— Жизнь твоя будет там трагичной.

— Жизнь вообще трагична, говорит ваш Унамуну.

— То есть ты бы со мной уехал?

Прямо над нами загрохотал поезд — как раз мы проходили бетонный туннель под железной дорогой. Поперек. Тогда как поезд перекачивал свой грохот в западном направлении.

Чтобы быть услышанным, просто нельзя было не перейти на крик:

— ...!...!! ((Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 11)).

Sergei's answer is muffled in this dialogue, but his interest in the subject is obvious. His motives can be gleaned from elsewhere in the text, although the topic is not addressed head-on, and some key circumstances remain obscure. Sergei Iur'enen's emigration saga is intertwined with his entangled family story which the reader pieces together from tantalizing tidbits. The text offers no straightforward chronology, but from various clues one gathers that Sergei was born in January of 1948, met his wife Aurora in the spring of 1972, became a father in June of 1973. When did the parents chose to tie the knot? A picture of Mikhail and Sergei bears a caption telling readers that it was taken on the day of Sergei's marriage – June 14, 1974. So, Sergei's child was born about a year before the parents obtained a marriage license – a courageous decision. Why did Sergei and Aurora choose to formalize their relationship? It could have been love, the need to secure the daughter's legal status, the mounting pressure from the KGB, the desire to resettle in France, or a combination of the above.

Sundry hints pop up on page 224 where Sergei links his family situation to Solzhenitsyn's expulsion and 'непоправимое прошлое СССР — в унисон автору *Архипелага ГУЛАГ*, как раз в тот год высланному из страны, где мы с Ауророй вынужденно бракосочетались (а в Париже вряд ли стали бы формализовать отношения, жили бы “просто так” и “до тех пор, пока”)' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 224). A lot is packed into this passage, which suggests that the marriage was forced by external circumstances and could have been a matter of convenience. However, another sentence casts doubt on this reading: 'Мне — нам с Ауророй — не удалось сохранить наш юношеский брак... Никогда не верил в возможность подобного финала наших отношений' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 480). Further complicates the matter Sergei's references to 'моей любимой американской жене' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 375), and again to 'my beloved wife Marina' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 507), which are left hanging in the air. Perhaps these questions will be answered in the *Encyclopedia of Adulthood*, if such is ever written.

Mikhail Epstein leaves out the circumstances of his departure from the U.S.S.R., regrettably if understandably, given that he emigrated years after his friend. The wealth of details about his parents' family contrasts with the paucity of particulars about his own marriage commenced in the early 1975. His family situation is mentioned in passim without any

specifics or explanations. Here is a retroactive comment on the hopes of the youth yearning for a meaningful union: ‘Это был переход к этической и экзистенциальной стадии, подготовка к решающему выбору, к жизни в единственном числе (одна семья, одна жена, одна работа)’ (Epshtein and Iur’enen 2017: 97). ‘Запись конца 1974 г., меньше чем за два месяца до встречи с будущей женой: “Я ищу женщину, которая стала бы мне ученицей по уму и наставницей по сердцу”’ (Epshtein and Iur’enen 2017: 166). There is a reference to the first (?) child: ‘Когда у меня родилась дочь, я переименовал эту заповедь: “возлюби ближнего как свое дитя”’ (Epshtein and Iur’enen 2017: 486). And again, ‘новую квартиру мне, уже отцу троих детей, выделил Союз писателей’ (Epshtein and Iur’enen 2017: 197). So, we learn that Mikhail married, became a father, changed residencies with the family, and left Russia with his wife and children in 1990. To find out more about Mikhail’s family and departure from Russia readers would have to consult other publications.

Let me be clear that I raise these nosy questions not because I am entitled to answers. The authors owe nobody full reckoning of what happened in their lives – except to themselves. I ask as a scholar grappling with memoir ethics and the theory of auto/biographical discourse, who struggled with these issues and came to doubt our ability to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in any autobiographical story. The following aspirational sentiment that appears in *Abio*, noble as it is, seems unrealistic: ‘Написать автобиографию или мемуары, но только доподлинно как было. Ничего от лукавого ни до, ни после точного воспоминания, соответствующего правде жизни’ (Epshtein and Iur’enen 2017: 173). Jean-Jacque Rousseau made a similar commitment in his *Confessions* and fell short of his aspirations. Just as his predecessor St. Augustine did centuries earlier.

No matter how hard we try, there will be holes in our autobiographical tales – missing links, strategic evasions, fudged self-interpretations. This is not just a matter of good intentions and moral fortitude, important though these are in self-reckoning. There are limits to any self-interpretation – ethical, psychological, ontological – which call for special strategies to get around them.

\* \* \*

As I collect my thoughts on the *Encyclopedia of Youth*, I realize that my analysis suffers from the same methodological predicament I spot in the work under review.

Of all the diary entries and theoretical asides, I single out in *Abio* a minute fraction for comments. Another reader would no doubt select different scraps from the same treasure chest. When the authors went over their notes preparing to write the *Encyclopedia*, they had to decide which items to include and which to bypass, just as they zeroed in on some events and ignored other when working on an original diary entry. Such is the informational funnel which imposes the epistemological limits on our capacity to grasp reality in its entirety, leaving unrecovered and unrecoverable what William James called ‘big, buzzing confusion’ of everyday life (James 1950: 488).

As *abio* co-authors, Mikhail Epshtein and Sergei Iur’enen raise no claim to representing things as they really are – only as they remember them. The picture they paint is filtered through their value-laden apperception. Does the book’s dual perspective safeguards against outright misrepresentation? Not necessarily. The authors have been traveling in the same boat for a long time, their perspectives have been synchronized – entrained – emotionally, cognitively, philosophically, and joint blind spots were likely to emerge.

To address the selection bias, autobiographers need to reduce self-sampling errors, ascertain which collisions in their lives are over-sampled (overcounted) and which undersampled (undercounted). Getting access to original documents is the first step in this process. In *Abio*, I spotted only one facsimile reproduced in its original form – the survey the authors addressed to each other in 1972 and 2004. This document raises few methodological issues (although for some reasons several questions in a 1972 survey went unanswered). More documents of this kind are needed, however, if we wish to understand the editing practices the authors followed in sampling their source material.

Did the authors edit the wording of the original diaries? Which events in their living experience were ignored or underreported? Are there alternative perspectives on the same incidents recorded in the diaries? Did the co-authors attempt to verify reported facts, collect testimonies from other participants, join issues with the antagonists? What is likely

to go unnoticed in a typical autobiography of the writers shaped in a particular age? ('[Я пишу] оставляя на своем я-полотне куски грубого, непрописанного холста. Может быть, для этих белых страниц еще нет на свете автора? или я его еще не нашел?' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 46).

I remember being startled by an obscure story Aulus Gellius regales in his *Attic Nights*. It is about the amiable Plutarch, an imminent biographer, who ordered his slave to be flogged mercilessly because the slave dared to point out to his master that he forswears anger in his writings but loses his temper in real life. To prove his slave wrong, Plutarch allegedly resolved to show how long he can keep calm while his servants brutalized the impudent slave. Imagine how many cruel historical realities of this kind go underreported, leaving posterity with a distorted image of the past. As Туныанов put it, 'Там, где кончается документ, там я начинаю' (Тунянов 1930: 163). Indeed, the document is when the inquiry beings, not ends.

\* \* \*

The biocritical hermeneutic approach cautions against overbroad generalizations and sweeping philosophical dicta. The thesaurus-anchored autobiography developed in the *Encyclopedia* carries the risk of becoming schematic or diagrammatic, to use a Peircean term. Birth and death, virtue and vice, love and hate, marriage and divorce, education and achievement – life preserved in such categories quickly grows stale. That's not what makes individual existence special. Says Mikhail Epshtein, 'философия имеет дело с чистыми понятиями и сущностями, уже освобожденными от плотской изменчивости и многообразия, скинувшими свою земную оболочку и приобщенными к вечности, как и душа, покинувшая свое брренное тело' (Epshtein 2014: 16). But philosophical generalizations remove us from the immediacy of lived experience.

Knowing what we have in common is important, but so is what draws us apart, what makes us unique, resistant to typecasting. Philosophy, especially of the idealist variety, tends to gloss over the chaotic properties pervading the universe, contradictions and inconsistencies endemic to embodied existence. For a Platonically-minded observer, biographical being predates biographical existence. Long before the historical

agents set out to frame their existence, impersonal bio forms conspired to inform their self-objectivations. I doubt Epshtein would claim with Plato that these forms are eternal – biographemes evolve over time, metaphors capturing our experience are historically specific. Still, the thesaurus-driven inquiry goads us to look past the muddle of everyday life and grasp the ready-made vocabularies pervading our consciousness – the lovers' discourse, self-improvement model, hero-worshipping archetype, budding genius myth.

Some observers are better at spotting a priori bio forms than others:

Но может быть, некоторые люди мыслят и чувствуют не событийно, а именно словарно, суммарно: вдумываются в сущность юности, в смысл любовных переживаний? И тогда *жизненная сумма* таких людей будет состоять не из историй 'как это было', а из пониманий того, как это бывает: из таких биограмм — жизнеописательных и жизнемыслительных единиц, как *юность и любовь, юность и стыд, юность и одиночество, первый заработок, первое предательство...* Опыт и сознание выстраивают картину жизни из таких надвременных, надсобытийных категорий — образов, понятий, — которые уподобляют ее не повествованию, а энциклопедии. И тогда становится выразимо то, что невыразимо в жанре повествования (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 569-7).

The narrative and biogrammatic approaches are complementary, stresses Epshtein, each specializing on a specific life dimension. 'Если нарратив — это временной срез жизни в последовательности ее событий, то тезаурус — это континуум событий, одновременно предстоящих сознанию, где содержание жизни развернуто в виде всеобъемлющего *каталога* людей, мест, книг, чувств и мыслей' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 571). Which tack one favors depends on personal sensibilities.

Точно так же есть и личности нарративного и тезаурусного склада. Во время общего застолья одни сыплют бесконечными историями, анекдотами, случаями из жизни. Другие делятся мыслями и взглядами и выясняют отношение к ним собеседника. Как правило, нарративные личности легче привлекают к себе внимание, становятся душой общества; тезау-

русная личность склонна скорее к персональному или профессиональному разговору, предмет которого — не частные случаи, а картина мира (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 574).

Mikhail Epshtein is renowned for his thesaurus-minded sensibilities, the kind pioneered in Montaigne's *Essays* and reprised in Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*. I can see why he admires the founder of the genre of essay who assured his readers, 'I have painted my inward self with colors clearer than the original ones. I have no more made my book than my book made me – a book consubstantial with its author, concerned with my own self, an integral part of my life'. (Montaigne 2003: 612). But Montaigne also wrote this:

All contradictions may be found in me by some twist and in some fashion. Bashful, insolent; chaste, lascivious; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; surly, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; liberal, miserly, and prodigal: all this I see in myself to some extent according to how I turn; and whoever studies himself really attentively finds in himself, yes, even in his judgment, this gyration and discord. I have nothing to say about myself absolutely, simply, and solidly, without confusion and without mixture, or in one word. *Distinguo* is the most universal member of my logic. (Montaigne 2003: 294)

Ambiguities and contradictions abound in Montaigne's evolving self-appraisals, which makes me wonder if he can be unambiguously identified as an exponent of the thesaurus-based biography. The author of *Essays* praised Diogenes Laertius' philosophical biographies and lamented the fact that so few books on philosophy take seriously the philosopher's mundane lives. Still, it was Montaigne who claimed, 'I expose myself entire: my portrait is a cadaver... It is not my deeds that I write down; it is myself, it is my essence' (Montaigne 2003: 332-33). What essence is this other than "Distinguo" itself?

Nietzsche is another philosopher who spoke fondly about Diogenes Laertius' *bios philosophicus*, which clued him to the mundane motives behind the flights of philosophical fancy. 'That reflecting on the human', he wrote in *Ecce Homo* (Nietzsche 1998: 31), 'is among the expedients by means of which we can alleviate the burden of living, that practice in this art lends presence of mind in difficult situations, that

one can, indeed, pluck useful maxims from the thorniest and most disagreeable stretches of one's own life and thereby feel a little better: that was believed, that was known – in former centuries.' For all his insights into the autobiographical roots of philosophical imagination – 'Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir' (Nietzsche 1966: 13) – Nietzsche was unreliable as an auto-biographer. You wouldn't know from his writing on resentment and disdain for the weaklings how the author of *Zarathustra* diligently climbed up the academic ladder, how much he longed for public recognition, how he couldn't summon courage to act on, or even acknowledge, his sexual needs.

One more telling example of a strictly anti-narrative autobiography is Pierre Bourdieu's *Sketch for Self-Analysis*. In it, a renowned sociologist lays out his life with barely a narrative sequence. He casts his life story as a function of French class society and academic credentialism. A son of a low-level state employee, Bourdieu struggled to pull himself up against the established order that favored the elite, the offspring of propertied and knowledge-producing classes. Through sheer grit he rose to the pinnacle of academic and intellectual hierarchies, upending some longstanding traditions and founding his own school. Bourdieu doesn't bother to answer critics charging him of being a vindictive person who made life miserable for his students and derailed some promising careers. Rather than offering a straightforward narrative of controversial events and defending his actions, Bourdieu chose to inhabit a rarified world of grand theory where he could dismiss criticism without getting down to the dirty particulars and appealing, instead, to impersonal social forces and the general tenor of the time.

Mikhail Epshtein's autobiographical stance is different. There is plenty of life episodes lending emotional substance to his self-portrait. He may shy away from certain narrative details Sergei Iur'enen is apt to bring up, but he is the first to own up to his shortcomings as a narrator, 'выстраивать события во времени, в последовательности действий было для меня обузой, наценкой на философский замысел. Образы у меня подчинялись понятиям, я исходил из идей и конструкций' (Epshtein and Iur'enen 2017: 300).



I am in agreement with Mikhail on this score, ‘Огромная часть человеческого опыта, как личного, так и социального, остается неизвестной из-за преобладания нарративных приемов и неразработанности тезаурусных полей... Разработка иных методов ее описания могла бы наполнить смыслом и словом жизнь миллионов людей, нарративно немых, обладающих другим, тезаурусным опытом ее постижения’ (Epshtein and Iur’enen 2017: 578). We do things with words, and words have a therapeutic value (logotherapy is based on this premise). Mastering symbolic media can improve anybody’s life situation, it even helps some people get laid. Still, *life in a thesaurus* differs from *life in the flesh* in that the former can serve as a tranquilizing substitute for action. There is no substitute for getting down to pesky details and narrating real life sequences. The challenge is to do so in a manner respectful of alternative readings and protective of people’s dignity.

Which is why the following distinction strikes me as invidious, ‘низшая ступень — разговор о вещах; средняя — разговор о событиях; более высокая — о людях; высшая — об идеях, понятиях’ (Epshtein and Iur’enen 2017: 575). These discursive forms are coeval in value. We should resist the proclivity of reason armed with privileged vocabularies to efface the emerging bio forms. Our narrative stories clue us to obscure facets of existence and potentialities of being struggling to come to language amidst the arid abstractions and vapid generalities that dull our perception. So, let’s welcome them into our world and keep updating our vocabularies.

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### Appendix

#### *Twelve Theses on Biocritical Hermeneutics*

1. Biocritical hermeneutics finds its object at the crossroads of biography, theory, and culture. It explores the affective-somatic dimension of discursive practices, the historically specific ways humans sign themselves in the flesh, the misalignment in the word-body-action nexus, and the role of auto/biographical narrative in accumulation and transmission of culture.
2. Biocritical hermeneutics starts with the assumption that every event unfolds on the intersection of competing editorial perspectives, that the privileged edition reveals not the thing-in-itself but its socio-historical incarnation, and it seeks to illuminate the editorial policies undergirding objective reality in a particular time and place. At the same time, biocritical reflection rejects skeptical deconstruction which dismisses objective reality as fiction. In the tradition of pragmatist philosophy, biocritical inquiry aims at the practical reconstruction of historical reality in its discursive, emotional, and behavioral forms.
3. Every sign, according to this perspective, has a flesh that no signifying process can erase. Even in its most disembodied – symbolic – form, culture cannot shed its material substrate, be this a sound, a gesture, or a written mark. At issue is the embodiment-disembodiment-reimbodiment arc which goads us to look for signs of the flesh behind narrative profusions and the flesh of the signs comprising an autobiographical corpus. Signing in the flesh is accorded a special place in a biocritical analysis as a corrective to the life writing centered on a disembodied signifying media.
4. Biocritical hermeneutics systematically juxtaposes alternative versions of reality by deploying *reverse editing* – a method designed to recover discarded edits in a bid to assemble a more supple account of the narrator's incarnate being. The biocritical inquirer asks how representative the life samples included in a bionarrative are, which episodes are undersampled and which ones are oversampled, and consequently, what biases are likely to skew an autobiographical reconstruction. Where the self-sampling procedures are deemed representative, the

question is raised about the stochastic nature of reported experience and the general vector of the narrator's life. To sample or count things in the auto/biographical domain, we must first render them accountable, i.e., discernible in terms of the historically specific categories like selfhood, identity, character, personality, and biography. How these precepts emerge in the course of history and which accounting frames they supplant is an investigative problem in its own right.

5. The misalignment between discursive, affective, and behavioral indicators is at the heart of the biocritical exploration, which is especially attuned to the figures of non-identity such as irony, parody, and travesty taken in their embodied and not just literary forms. Conduct is predicated here on the conductivity of a human body immersed in history, informed by competing vocabularies, saturated with ambivalent emotions, and engaged in performative contradictions specific to a chronotop. While efforts to align our words, emotions, and deeds are central to ethical life, one cannot escape affective lapses and behavioral non-sequiturs that auto-biographical narratives tend to gloss over. Moreover, such inconsistencies are deemed to be productive insofar as they evince the ambivalence that can spur civic imagination and nourish authentic expression.

6. An auto/biographical event is transformed into a bionarrative fact as it is appropriated in the age-specific semiotic terms. Biocritique problematizes this transformation, zeroing in on the historical biographemes embedded in a narrative. Two pitfalls are to be minded here – presentism that imposes present day standards on the past and historicism that denies transhistorical patterns and cumulative trends. The intermeshing of bionarrative categories and the historical breaks in bionarrative practices is a focal topic in biocritical investigation. Through the act of life writing, we body forth a society that brought the bionarrative categories into existence or offer new models for self-reflection that clue us to alternate social orders. Novel forms of self-framing let biocritics conjure up virtual realities waiting to be eventualized by self-conscious agents who take these frames up as a guide for self-identification.

7. Biocritical inquiry implicates not only the person under scrutiny but also the scrutinizer, as the two cross pathways in virtual space and engage in a covert and sometime overt dialogue. The double hermeneu-

tics that comes into play raises several ethical questions – what should biocritics disclose about themselves, do they need to engage in auto-biocritique, must they open their own archives, and if so – when? Records included into a bionarrative must be judged against data shielded from view, the latter illuminating the stigmatized enforcements and neglected models of cultural reflexivity. Biocritical researchers delving into other people's lives are responsible for preserving the documents of their era, starting with their own.

8. We own our archives and can dispose of them as we see fit, but we are not entitled to other people's memories any more than we own our reputation. It is helpful to compare our views of the reputational dynamics with practices of other ages and cultures. The canonization process in religious confessions, prestige systems in scientific fields, prized performances in artistic domains, value hierarchies in other life spheres may yield valuable insights into the paradigmatic features of life narrative and the transmission of cultural knowledge. Ancient biographies (Socrates, Jesus of Nazareth) and auto/biographies (Seneca, Plutarch, St. Augustine) are of special interest in this respect, for they have furnished blueprints for life writers throughout the occidental world. From the biocritical vantagepoint, Western civilization could be appraised as a series of commentaries and emulations inspired by the lives of Socrates and Jesus.

9. A big stumbling block in a biocritical analysis is the paucity of reliable sources and witness testimonies. Diaries, correspondence, memoirs, interviews, autobiographies, and kindred scraps of evidence increase opportunities for crosschecking and triangulation. When a sizable portion of the documentary material is lost or otherwise unavailable, the analysis focuses on the character of lacunae and the biases apparent in secondhand accounts. Where reverse editing is impossible, the attention shifts to the hermeneutical horizons and the editorial practices prevailing in the era under investigation. As biocritical investigators sift through partial, biased, sometimes deliberately tainted information, they need to bear in mind that Plutarch built his work around hearsay and gossip, and that after he strained these motley data points through the sieve of his wisdom and experience, they congealed into *Lives* – a key source in the Western auto/biographical canon.

10. Ancient biographers singled out three dimensions in their life writing – *vita activa*, *vita contemplativa*, and *vita voluptuosa*. Intellectual and spiritual life is generally preserved in written documents. Harder to gauge are deeds and actions shielded from observation. Still less accessible are affective, sensual, erotic, and other taboo-ridden bodily manifestations which dominant cultures tend to edit out. In writing about other people's lives, Voltaire's principle applies, 'We owe respect to the living, to the dead we owe only the truth' (Voltaire 1719). In writing about one's life, the decision to include or omit certain life samples will reflect the writer's willingness to square off with the problematic aspects of one's life story. The impact of sensitive information on the third parties should be weighed in as well. Mindful of the indignities and absurdities inherent in self-realization, biocritical auditors run the canonization process backward, grant damaged reputations a second look, and leave ample room for the honest disagreement about competing editorial decisions.

11. The biocritical project has on its agenda social reconstruction, understood as the dialectical refashioning of the embodiment-disembodiment-reembodiment arc that constitutes reality as objective and meaningful for those inhabiting a lifeworld. Special role in this process belongs to the somatic-affective dimension of historical process that operates at cross-purpose with its discursive-symbolic and behavioral-performative counterparts. Mis/shaped by dominant culture, our affective-somatic habits prop up the status quo as powerfully as coercive institutions. Perestroika – rehabilitation – in society is possible only as the simultaneous transformation of affective, behavioral, and discursive practices anchoring the established order.

12. Viable democratic institutions fail to sink roots where somatic-affective currents are throttled by the editorial diktat breeding intolerance, cruelty, and cynicism. Authoritarianism loses ground when the intellect becomes emotionally sane, emotions grow intelligent, and humans take seriously their ambivalent emotions and conflicting identifications. The public agenda of biocritical hermeneutics invites life writers to explore the editorial policies conducive to the ongoing social reconstruction and formulate the somatic-affective conditions of possibility for an emotionally intelligent democracy.

## Materials and Discussions