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## Serbian Autobiographical Studies: A Survey

Autobiography has a prominent place in the history of Serbian literature as one of its most prevalent and practised genres, especially in modern and contemporary times. Throughout different ages, Serbian autobiographical literature has encompassed a wide variety of sub-genres and literary approaches.

Given the popularity of autobiographical genres in Serbian literature, one would expect there to be a great interest in the subject and an equal abundance of critical studies. Indeed, autobiography has been an object of research for scholars of Serbian literature for quite some time. One of the first studies in the field, entitled *Memoari, monografije, biografije* (*Memoirs, Monographs, Biographies*; see Ignjatović, 1988), was written towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Serbian writer Jakov Ignjatović, whose memoirs are among the finest products of autobiographical writing in the history of Serbian literature as a whole.

Although literary criticism on Serbian autobiography can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the general approach towards this particular field still tends to

be incidental, with the majority of contributions being articles about individual authors or works. This applies not only to Serbian literary theoreticians and historians but also to other European scholars. Some scholars have gone so far as to speak of a 'lack of criticism' regarding Serbian autobiographical writings (Vaglio, 2004). Personally, I think the problem is not a lack of critical concern regarding this particular genre but rather a need to open a serious discussion on this matter that should involve both literary theoreticians and historians.

As I will try to illustrate in this paper, scholars of Serbian literature have so far adopted two different approaches to autobiographical material: theoreticians have been more interested in narrative theory and intertextuality, while historians have focused mainly on analysing various examples of this genre throughout history. It is high time that scholars joined forces to find some common ground. But while some efforts in this direction have been made in recent years, what is still lacking is a systematic and thorough general overview of the develop-

ment of autobiographical genre(s) throughout the different ages of Serbian literary history, as well as a comprehensive anthology of Serbian autobiographical writings<sup>1</sup>.

The aim of this paper is to present a survey of the most significant studies pertaining to Serbi-

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<sup>1</sup> Over the last three decades, autobiography has also been a frequent topic of discussions among Croatian scholars. The first significant steps to address the question of autobiographical writing in Croatia were taken in the 1990s by Mirna Velčić (*Otisak priče: intertekstualno proučavanje autobiografije*, 1991) and Vinko Brešić (*Autobiografije hrvatskih pisaca*, 1997), whose works are still considered milestones. In recent years, the two foremost experts are without a doubt Andrea Zlatar-Viočić (University of Zagreb) and Helena Sablić-Tomić (University of Osijek), who have published numerous articles and books on the topic. Zlatar-Viočić's *Autobiografija u Hrvatskoj* (1998), in particular, provides a historical analysis of autobiographies in Croatia from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Keeping in mind the most recent theoretical findings in the field, Zlatar-Viočić focuses on the most representative authors and illustrates the major autobiographical narrative forms in contemporary Croatian literature. Helena Sablić-Tomić's more recent work, *Hrvatska autobiografska proza* (2008), is a collection of lectures delivered by the author at the University of Osijek since 2002 as part of courses in 'New Croatian literature' and 'Contemporary autobiographical prose'. In a sense, this work takes up where Zlatar-Viočić's stopped, as it deals with Croatian autobiographies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

an autobiography. I should start by saying, however, that my research was not based on all the extant criticism but on what I believe to be an adequate number of the most representative and significant samples produced by Serbian scholarship<sup>2</sup>.

In examining the literature produced so far by Serbian scholars of autobiography, I came to realise that criticism on this subject is beset by several difficulties, of which I would like to point out three: the problem of periodization; the problem of defining a literary canon of Serbian autobiography; and, finally, the difficulty of merging theoretical and historical studies in this field. Accordingly, I have decided to divide this paper into three parts in which I will sum up the findings of my research.

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<sup>2</sup> I am deeply grateful to the staff of the Matica Srpska Library of Novi Sad for the support they gave me during my research, particularly to Ms. Jelena Kovaček-Svetličić, who provided me with a bibliography of autobiographical texts held at the Rukopisno odeljenje Matice Srpske (Manuscript Department of the Matica Srpska Library). The bibliography, which was drawn up by Professor Božidar Kovaček towards the end of the nineties, consists of 353 entries and is still unpublished. I am also grateful to Professor Nikola Grdinić and Dr. Nataša Polovina of the University of Novi Sad for their much appreciated advice and for introducing me to some of the most recent critical works on the matter.

### 1. The question of periodization

The first thing I noticed when I started to investigate Serbian autobiography was the lack of agreement among scholars regarding chronological boundaries. In order to compile a final systematic canon of Serbian autobiographical literature it should first be determined, as accurately as possible, how far back into history the modern autobiographical mode extends. Unfortunately, as in some other literary traditions, historians have yet to agree as to when autobiographical writings first appeared in Serbian literature and, most importantly, how they may be recognized. In this first section I will try to draw some broad lines regarding the matter of periodization.

Scholars of autobiography usually agree that in ancient and medieval literature the 'autobiographical impulse' emerges only in a fragmentary way, so that it is difficult, if not impossible, to find real autobiographies. Nevertheless, Serbian medievalists have been eager to trace the first examples of autobiographical writing as far back as the age of ancient literature (since the 12<sup>th</sup> century). Some of the most representative works of the time – most notably Simeon Nemanja's

*Hilandarska osnivačka povelja* (Charter of Hilandar), King Milutin's *Ulijarska povelja* (Charter of Ulijarska), Jefimija's *Tuga za jedinčetom* (Lament for an Only Son) and the preface to Stefan Dušan's *Zakonik* (Code of Laws) – have been described as 'autobiographical works' and have even been designated as 'real autobiographies'. However fascinating, in some cases such attributions have proved to be disputable, if not completely unjustified.

Autobiography is not always an immediately recognizable object, and this is especially true of autobiography in medieval culture when individuality was considered almost a 'sin of vanity' and authors were expected to follow earlier established traditions according to the literary genre they practised. Such writings as letters, wills, official proclamations and any other medieval texts that contain fragments of personal information (and in which medieval Serbian literature is particularly rich) are thus qualitatively different from modern autobiography. In such documents, autobiographical elements are usually incidental and no more than fragmentary, because these works were not meant to be read as 'writings of the self'. In Serbian medieval literature, as in

many other traditions, autobiography was still instrumental to other ends, usually political<sup>3</sup>.

Consequently, most Serbian literary historians are eager to narrow the chronological boundaries we mentioned before and converge in ascribing the beginnings of Serbian autobiographical writing to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Early materials are scarce and their purpose is very often hortatory; nevertheless, we may regard the Baroque era (ca. 1690–1770) as the ‘seed-time’ of Serbian autobiography. The first intellectuals to include clearly autobiographical portions of writing of any length in their works are Partenije Pavlović and Jovan Rajić: these two authors thus constitute the forerunners of Serbian modern autobiography, which was ultimately to flourish in the age of the Enlightenment<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Among the ‘autobiographical fragments’ scattered throughout Serbian medieval literature, those which have the most resemblance to the modern genre are probably Jefimija’s (Jelena Mrnjavčević) writings, primarily on account of their highly emotional tone.

<sup>4</sup> Partenije Pavlović’s autobiographical notes were written before 1760, rediscovered only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and finally published at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jovan Rajić left two autobiographical works, entitled *Moreplavanje Ivana Raića* (finished by 1758 but published in instalments only in 1905) and *Točnoje izobraženije katihizma*

The last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> constitute what Jovan Deretić defines as the “great era of Serbian autobiography” (Deretić 1981: 27–28). Dositej Obradović’s *Život i priklučenija* (*Life and Adventures*), published in Leipzig between 1783 and 1788, is usually considered the first and most popular example of Serbian modern autobiography. Dositej’s eclectic works and modern thought have deeply influenced Serbian cultural history, not only the age in which he lived but also in later years. This influence is seen in literature, too: echoes of Dositej’s work are manifold throughout 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Serbian literature, especially in narrative prose. Dositej’s autobiography, in particular, is usually described as a turning point in the development of modern Serbian literature, marking the transition from medieval hagiographical writings (*Žitije*) to modern secular autobiographies. The first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a steady succession of memoirs, autobiographies, diaries and travel writings, many of which are characterized by a clear, sometimes even openly declared aim of imitating Dosi-

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(written between 1776 and 1795, and published only in 1884).

tej's *Život i priključenja*<sup>5</sup>. These works played a crucial role in the development of Serbian literature as a whole, especially as precursors of the modern novel. Whereas the authors of the first Serbian autobiographies offered accounts of their lives as *exempla*, the confessional tendency receded at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while narratives whose key themes were military service and foreign travel became more numerous. In writing their memoirs, Serbian authors – many of whom had held high positions in the ecclesiastical or secular system – mainly focused on descriptions of the campaigns and battles in which they

had participated, reporting historical events as they actually happened<sup>6</sup>. Accordingly, the memoirs written in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have often been described as 'documentary prose', since historiography is combined in them with personal experience. Some of these works (e.g. Gerasim Zelić's *Žitije*, published in Budapest in 1823) were conceived of as a sort of apology to future generations, which is one reason why they are often richly documented.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the age of Realism, Serbian authors of autobiographies already seemed to be writing within a tradition rather than practising a new genre. As the private lives of individual persons finally became important in themselves, whether or not they would be regarded as exemplary, the domestic milieu also began to be

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<sup>5</sup> Luca Vaglio has recently suggested a possible periodization for the history of the autobiographical genre in Serbian literature whose point of reference is Dositej himself (see Vaglio, 2013). Vaglio separates a first 'post-Dositejan' phase, to which belong some autobiographical works written and/or published between 1823 and 1840/1841, from a second 'post-Dositejan' phase, which begins in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and extends to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In between these two phases there is a hiatus of a few decades during which no (relevant) autobiographies emerged. Among the authors who belong to the 'first phase' are Gerasim Zelić, Sava Tekelija, Joakim Vujić, Milovan Vidaković and Sima Milutinović Sarajlija, while Stefan Mitrov Ljubiša, Jovan Hadžić, Nikanor Grujić, Simo Matavulj and Jovan Subotić (all professional writers) could be ascribed to the 'second phase'.

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to notice a general tendency of Serbian criticism to include in the same category both autobiographies and memoirs, which are traditionally distinct in other critical traditions. A case in point is that of Milorad Pavić: in his stressing of the importance of this genre in the development of Serbian prose literature between the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Pavić speaks of "memoarska književnost" or "memoarski spisi", without distinguishing autobiographies from memories in the true sense of the word (Pavić, 1991: 93).

depicted by writers. In addition, readers had become more numerous and their interests more universal, a factor that began to influence both publishers and writers. Serbian literature was clearly undergoing a rapid and fundamental transformation – one which resulted not only in the writing of more autobiographies but also in a greater willingness on the part of authors to publish them. From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, the most important changes that have taken place in the genre have been consequences of a deepening of psychological insights and the borrowing of techniques that have proved useful in other accounts of life experience, most notably in the writing of novels.

### 2. *The Serbian autobiographical canon*

Since scholars are still arguing over the ‘beginning’ of Serbian autobiography, a potential canon of Serbian autobiographical writings has yet to be defined.

A first (partial) attempt to produce a bibliography of Serbian memoirs, autobiographies and diaries was made in 1999 by Slavica Merenik and edited as part of a collection of studies entitled *Pero i povelje: srpsko društvo u sećanjima*. This bibli-

ography consists of over 700 entries and includes only printed texts. Nevertheless, Merenik acknowledges in the preface to her paper that the results of her work are not to be considered complete or definitive.

As far as Serbian medieval literature is concerned, the most exhaustive achievement is still the collection *Pisah i potpisah*, edited by Radmila Marinković in 1996. This volume collects together a large number of autobiographical fragments that were originally parts of charters, epistles, inscriptions, epitaphs and hagiographies ranging from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The publication set out with the intention of listing every fragment of autobiographical writing in Serbian medieval literature and identifying the author of every single text – an aim which the editor actually managed to achieve. The decision to include in the collection all fragments written in the first person singular seems quite disputable, however, at least from a methodological point of view.

In the definitions of autobiography offered in contemporary theories, much emphasis is placed on the notions of identity, individuality and subjectivity; by contrast, one of the basic assumptions in approaching medieval culture is that personal

identity was almost completely suppressed by social identity in those ages, insofar as medieval people were reduced to the function they had in society. Given that the same rule applied to all forms of art, the right to write an autobiography was granted exclusively to individuals of socially recognized importance, and writers (or better, scribes) were seen as mere 'instruments of God'<sup>7</sup>. In the afterword to *Pisah i potpisah*, Marinković herself points out that "ancient autobiographers" (*stari autobiografi*) should be seen as mere "onlookers and guarantors of the events they witnessed" rather than as proper authors (Marinković, 1996: 239). Furthermore, she states that autobiography and memoirs did not exist as independent genres in medieval Serbian literature and that it is not possible to distinguish between literature (*književnost*) and the basic act of writing (*pismenost*). Finally, we need to keep in mind that the poetics of medieval literature was dominated by the principle

<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, the author was to be recognized only when alterations and mistakes surfaced, leading to the development of a 'topos of modesty' (*topos skromnosti*) employed by scribes to define themselves as "sinful", "inadequate", "unworthy" and to admit their ignorance and incompetence to write about a specific topic.

of genre rather than the principle of authorship, meaning that genre was the crucial factor in determining what writers would say about themselves and their lives. For all these reasons, most (or almost all) of the autobiographical fragments collected in *Pisah i potpisah* are qualitatively different from modern autobiography: in truth they were not meant as 'writings of the self' and therefore can hardly be part of the Serbian autobiographical canon.

The task of establishing an anthology of Serbian autobiographical writing becomes easier as we approach the modern age, even if the majority of the very first Serbian autobiographical works remained only in manuscript for a hundred years or more before being published. (Among the few exceptions to this rule there stand out certain 'classics', such as Dositej Obradović's *Život i priključenija* and Ljubomir Nenadović's letters (1852–1889)<sup>8</sup>, which found a permanent place in Serbian lit-

<sup>8</sup> *Pisma iz Švajcarske* (Letters from Switzerland, written in 1847, published in 1852 and 1855), *Pisma iz Italije* (Letters from Italy, written in 1851, published in 1869/69 under the title *Vladika Crnogorski u Italiji*), *Pisma iz Nemačke* (Letters from Germany, published in 1870) and *Pisma sa Cetinja or O Crnogorcima* (Letters from Cetinje or On the Montenegrins, published in 1889).

erary history almost immediately upon their first publication). This situation changed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from which time the majority of Serbian autobiographies and memoirs have been published either immediately after being written or after only a short delay.

A first collection of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Serbian autobiographical writings was issued in 1964 as Volume 29 of the series entitled *Srpska književnost u sto knjiga* (*Serbian Literature in One Hundred Books*)<sup>9</sup>. The volume, entitled *Memoari XVIII veka* (18<sup>th</sup> Century Memoirs) and edited by Milorad Pavić, includes excerpts from the memoirs of twelve different authors (i.e., S. Piščević, G. Zelić, S. Tekelija, M. Vidačević, P. Jokić, A. Protić, P. Čokorilo, J. Đorđević, M. Miličević, P. Todorović, M. Garašanin, and Č. Mijatović). In the preface, Pavić suggests that a complete anthology of Serbian memoirs can be achieved by taking Volume 29 together with other books issued as part of the *Srpska književnost u sto knjiga* series, specifically those dedicated to Konstantin of Ostrovica, Dositej Obradović, Vuk Karadžić, Matija i Ljubomir Ne-

nadović, Jakov Ignjatović and Branislav Nušić<sup>10</sup>.

A more solid corpus of Serbian autobiographical writing seemed to take form towards the end of the 1980s when one of the most prominent Serbian publishing houses, the Belgrade-based Nolit, launched the publication of the series *Memoari, dnevници, autobiografije* (*Memoirs, Diaries, Autobiographies*). According to the original scope of the project, the series was to consist of 25 works (28 volumes), 21 of which were published between 1988 and 1989. The series includes not only the 'classics' mentioned above (Dositej Obradović, Mateja Nenadović, Jakov Ignjatović), but also some autobiographical writings (exclusively prose) that had not been reprinted since their first publication or which had thenceforth been published only in instalments (e.g. Simo Matavulj's

<sup>9</sup> For a bibliography of 18th-century Serbian memoirs, see Mičić 1993 and 1997.

<sup>10</sup> These writers did not find a place in Volume 29 because they stand out by themselves as key figures in the history of Serbian literature and culture; consequently, each of them was granted a single book in the series *Srpska književnost u sto knjiga*. Pavić also writes that Serbian memoirs are always very similar (if not equal) to travel writings, which are collected in Volume 62 of the same series under the title *Izbor srpskog putopisa* (A selection of Serbian travel writings).



*Bilješke jednog pisca - Notes of a Writer*).

Among the 28 volumes published by Nolit, I would like to say a few words about Volume 16, entitled *Memoarska proza XVIII i XIX veka*, which may be described as a sort of 'series within the series'. The two-volume collection, edited by Dušan Ivanić, provides a comprehensive anthology of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century memoirs that includes not only the works of 'professional writers' (e.g. Joakim Vujić, Milovan Vidaković and Sima Milutinović Sarajlija) but also those of prominent ecclesiastic figures (Metropolitan Vikentije Jovanović, Archimandrite Jovan Rajić, Bishop Nikanor Grujić) and prominent secular figures (Prince Miloš Obrenović). In addition, it should be noted that it was the first collection of Serbian memoirs to take female writing into account (i.e. Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja), as well as (auto)biographical sketches dedicated to some key figures in Serbian modern culture (for instance, Đorđe Rajković's 'literary memoirs' on Vuk Karadžić and Matija Ban's 'notes' on Petar II Petrović-Njegoš).

Thanks to this ambitious though unfinished undertaking, several autobiographical works finally entered the Serbian literary can-

on; what is more, the *Memoari, dnevnici, autobiografije* series managed to provide a basic corpus of autobiographical writings in the Serbian language, at least as far as the modern and early contemporary age are concerned. Clearly, the next step would be to issue a similar series for Serbian autobiographical works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3. Serbian autobiographical studies

In this final section I will focus my attention on literary criticism pertaining to autobiographical writing in Serbia. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, my aim is not to provide a survey of all the extant criticism on Serbian autobiography but to focus on some studies that I believe to be among the most notable achievements in the field.

In October 1990 the Novi Sad-based Committee for 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Studies (Odbor za proučavanje 18. veka) held a conference dedicated to the problem of autobiography and autobiographical studies in Serbian literature. The proceedings from the symposium were published in 1993 under the title *Autobiografije i memoari* in the first issue of the literary journal *XVIII stoleće* (18<sup>th</sup> Century), edited by

Professor Nikola Grdinić (University of Novi Sad). As stated in the foreword to the volume, contributors were given only two guidelines to follow, i.e. time (18<sup>th</sup> century) and genre (autobiography and memoir), and were asked to investigate these according to their personal interests and competences. The results of this initiative proved to be quite remarkable, as scholars managed to combine modern literary theories with traditional historicism in their approach to specific questions concerning Serbian autobiography<sup>11</sup>.

Another significant attempt to analyse the products of autobiographical writing in Serbian language throughout history was provided by an international conference held in Belgrade in 1997 under the title *Naučni sastanak slavista u Vukove dane*. The collection of papers published after the conference, *Srpska autobiografska književnost*, offers a historical perspective on the uses of autobiography in Serbian literature, ranging from poetry to prose

writings, from medieval to contemporary authors<sup>12</sup>. It may be interesting to observe that the author most studied by far was Miloš Crnjanski, followed by other 'classics' of Serbian autobiographical prose such as Dositej Obradović, Branislav Nušić and, among contemporary writers, Danilo Kiš and David Albahari. Although this volume offers a broad range of high-quality studies, perusing the single papers gives one the general impression that the scholars tended to research Serbian autobiography not (or not only) as an independent genre but rather as a (more or less relevant) feature in the structure of a particular work.

The new millennium has seen the publication of a series of noteworthy books and papers written by some of Serbia's most prominent literary theoreticians who have devoted their attention to the study of autobiographical genres.

Radoman Kordić's book *Autobiografsko pripovedanje* (*Autobiographical Storytelling*), for instance, took shape during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was finally published in 2000. The first two chapters of the book (i.e. *Fantazmatski*

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<sup>11</sup> For example, concerning the problem of autobiography in ancient and medieval European literature, the need for a proper definition of autobiography, the difference between autobiography and memoir, and the presence of fiction and non-fiction in autobiographical writings.

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<sup>12</sup> Only half of the 56 papers given during the conference were published, however.

*smisao pripovednih oblika i retorike u memoarima* and *Tekstualne strategije u autobiografijama XVIII veka*) were originally written as conference papers and therefore focus exclusively on 18<sup>th</sup>-century Serbian autobiographical works, specifically on Simeon Piščević's *Memoirs* and on Gerasim Zelić's *Žitije*. As Kordić explains in the preface, these first two papers inspired him to broaden his field of research and to investigate the problem of the incidence of autobiography in storytelling, particularly as regards fictional prose, a matter that deserves "special and serious discussion" (Kordić 2000: 8). Later on Kordić tries to identify the mechanisms by which autobiography became a structural feature of prose fiction, concentrating on works whose structure is not as obvious and clear as that of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Serbian memoirs and autobiographies. In his book, Kordić guides us through the changes that affected the poetics of prose fiction over the last two centuries, focusing on the different roles played by the autobiographical element, as well as on its incidence in narrative strategies. The remaining four chapters of the book examine the use of cultural models in autobiographies, autobiography as a scheme, autobiography of 'the

Other' and autobiography as testimony. Kordić's research concentrates on the works of modern and contemporary authors, both Serbian (Rade Kuzmanović, Dragan Stojanović's *Dvojež*, Radovan Konstantinović's *Dekartova smrt*, Jovica Aćin's *Leptirov sanovnik*) and foreign (Nikolaj Berdiaev's *Samopoznanie*, Jacques Derrida's *Moscou aller-retour*, Slavoj Žižek's *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Tolstoy and Kafka). According to Kordić, his final aim was to unveil "the aesthetic, literary, discursive, material truth" of these texts, which "no other form of archaeological investigation has so far managed to fathom" (Kordić 2000: 9).

A similar theoretical approach was chosen by Nikola Grdinić in the paper *Autobiografija – problem proučavanja* (2003), in which he 'deconstructed' the problem of how to study autobiographical genre(s) and narrowed it down to three main questions: the proper use of terminology; the fictional versus non-fictional nature of autobiography; and the relationship between the subject and the object. The article stands out as a valuable addition to studies in the field, offering a more nuanced and specific view of the history of Serbian autobiography – a view resulting from a solid theoretical understanding of this

genre. Grdinić's statements about the emergence, content and formal characteristics of Serbian autobiography are consistently supported by solid theoretical principles.

More recently, the Novi Sad-based cultural journal *Polja* also devoted a major portion of one of its issues (No. LIV/459, September–October 2009) to the study of autobiography, publishing Serbian translations of some significant theoretical texts in autobiographical criticism. Among others, the issue features contributions by Philippe Lejeune (*Autobiografski sporazum, dvadeset pet godina kasnije*) and Andrea Zlatar-Violet, one of the most prominent contemporary scholars of Croatian autobiography (see note 1), whose paper consists of a survey of the history of autobiographical criticism (*Autobiografija: teorijski izazovi*)<sup>13</sup>.

Another study that certainly deserves mention is Mirjana Stefanović's book *Autobiografija*, published by Službeni glasnik in 2010 as part of the series *Pojmovnik* (Thesaurus). As the author states in the preface, the aim of the book is to provide an answer to the basic question: 'What is autobiography?' ('Šta je autobiografija?', Stefanović 2010: 10). At first, Stefanović herself seems to be quite sceptical

about the results of her enquiry, so much so that she raises doubts as to the very existence of autobiography. However, it soon becomes clear that she is only challenging the reader to follow her into a quest for the final answer, which will start from the 18<sup>th</sup> century ("The centre of the autobiographical planetary system", Stefanović 2010: 20) and will follow paths that are far from traditional. By denying the usual 'literary-historical', 'chronological/diachronic' approach, Stefanović is well aware that her study may be judged as unsystematic; nevertheless, she insists that her book should be read 'circularly', as each chapter is devoted to a specific theoretical problem (Ibidem). An expert in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Serbian literature, Stefanović is not new to this kind of work: she has edited various texts throughout the years showing accuracy and methodological skill. A good example of her meticulous accuracy can be found in the bibliography at the end of the volume *Autobiografija*.

Among the most recent and interesting additions to the field of Serbian autobiographical studies is Žaneta Duvnjak-Radić's book *Autobiografija, fikcija i ja* (2011). Like the other scholars mentioned so far, Duvnjak-Radić decided to focus on the issue of

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<sup>13</sup> The complete issue is available at <http://polja.rs/polja459/index459.htm>.

form by exploring different autobiographical sub-genres in modern Serbian literature, with particular attention to the works of Matej Nenadović, Jakov Ignjatović and Simo Matavulj. In her preface, the author concisely summarizes her methodological credo by stating that the question of 'how' is more important than the question of 'what' ("Ukratko, pitanje KAKO važnije je od pitanja ŠTA"). As suggested by the title of the book, Duvnjak-Radić's research revolves around the concepts of autobiography ("a literary genre that escapes rules, yet functions well through different literary times and trends", Duvnjak Radić 2011: 15), fiction ("a literary/philosophical concept which is normally employed in defining non-reality, as well as the reality of a literary work") and, finally, the 1<sup>st</sup> person subject as "the premise of all autobiographical writing" (Duvnjak Radić 2011: 7)<sup>14</sup>. The first chapter comprises an attempt to summarize the development of autobiographical prose in Serbian literature over time. This is an initiative that deserves praise

<sup>14</sup> As stated in the preface, the book *Autobiografija, fikcija i ja* originates from Duvnjak-Radić's Master's dissertation, entitled *Problem fikcionalnosti autobiografske proze. Autobiografska proza 19. veka: Nenadović-Ignjatović-Matavulj*.

(especially as it comes from a young scholar), although it should be noted that the survey does not extend beyond the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

I would also like to mention the work of another young scholar, Dr. Nataša Polovina of the University of Novi Sad, whose doctoral dissertation, entitled *Autobiografski fragmenti u srpskim spisima XIV veka* (2014), has confirmed that the problem of autobiography in medieval Serbian literature is a complex one that still has not been sufficiently researched to this day. In particular, Polovina has proved how prior efforts in this field have only aimed at collecting and partly describing medieval 'autobiographical' texts without attempting to interpret them systematically or to relate them to the peculiarities of Serbian and Byzantine medieval literary tradition. Since fragmentariness is the central feature of medieval autobiographical writing, one of the aims of Polovina's research was to establish the basic function of autobiographical fragments in medieval Serbian literature in order to see whether they were used to preserve memory and resurrect the past or simply to allow authors to speak about their own religious and spiritual development. In any case, by analysing Serbian

14<sup>th</sup>-century writings, Dr. Polovina has demonstrated that the autobiographical principle in medieval times cannot be regarded as a sign of the search for self-expression but rather as a reflection of the spirit of an era. Finally, I would like to draw attention to the most recent publication I have managed to consult in preparing the present paper, Dušan Ivanić's book *Događaj i priča (Event and Story)*. This is essentially a collection of studies on Serbian autobiography – studies which were published over the last two decades (1990-2009) as single articles or as prefaces/postfaces to anthological editions. As the table of contents immediately suggests, Ivanić is inclined to research autobiographical genres from a historical perspective. His studies are thus mostly devoted to so-called 'dokumentarno-umetnička proza' (documentary-artistic prose), i.e. to autobiographical writings which the Serbian scholar describes as "non-fictional" (since they are based on real historical facts) though characterized by all the peculiarities of "artistic storytelling" (Ivanić 2015: 187).

#### 4. Conclusion

In the opening chapter of his well-known volume *English Au-*

*tobiography. Its Emergence, Materials, and Forms* (1954: 1), Wayne Shumaker writes that "the critic and the historian are like men who stand outside a doorway inviting each other, by gestures and smiles of encouragement, to go first to the buffet supper within, while the bread and ham and cheese lie undisturbed on the table". This seems to have been at least partly the case of Serbian autobiographical criticism to date.

Given the abundance of materials at our disposal, I am inclined to think that any serious attempt to organize, classify and analyse the products of autobiographical writing in Serbian language throughout history will take many years. Nevertheless, I believe that a comprehensive history of Serbian autobiography is not only possible but also deeply needed, and that such an accomplishment can only be achieved by cooperation between theoreticians and historians. The most valuable results in the study of Serbian autobiography to date have undoubtedly been achieved by combining solid knowledge of literary history with valid theoretical principles; this is clearly the goal we should pursue in the years ahead.

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