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Autobiography as Zoography: Dmitrii A. Prigov's *Zhivite v Moskve*

Abstract

This article discusses Dmitrii Prigov's autobiographical novel *Live in Moscow* (*Zhivite v Moskve*, 2000). Following Giorgio Agamben's distinction between *bios* as political life and *zoe* as biological life, it develops the term 'zoography' as a poetological concept. Thus, the article aims to illuminate an aspect hitherto neglected in life-writing studies: autobiographical texts do not only refer to the life of a human subject, but also to non-human forms of life. After outlining a concept of zoographical writing, the article points out its narrative and anthropological implications in Prigov's text.

1. *Between the Soviet and the Posthuman: Zhivite v Moskve*¹

In the late 1990s, Dmitrii A. Prigov announced a novel project in which he would explore "three European genres of authentic writing": memoirs, travel writing, and confession (Prigov 2004: 72)². Although the initial project remained unfinished, Prigov wrote four autobiographical novels before his death in 2007³. In contrast to his work as

a poet and a visual artist, they still lack contextualization⁴. *Zhivite v Moskve*, the first book published in 2000 (Prigov 2000)⁵, incorporates several elements from Prigov's earlier work. It can not only be read as an adaptation of his famous poem cycles about Moscow (*Moskva i moskvichi* [*Moscow and the*

ished text *Tvar' nepodsudnaia* [*An Immune Creature*, 2004] has been published recently (Prigov 2013: 413-488).

⁴ Il'ia Kukulin reads the novel project as a re-entry of modernist writing into postmodernist literature and observes the phenomenon of a massive 'autobiographization' of postmodern writers (Kukulin 2010: 584), accompanied by fragmentary and intertextual forms of subjectivity.

⁵ The English title would be *Live in Moscow*, 'live' being an imperative form. The Russian title *Zhivite v Moskve* will be abbreviated as ZVM in the following, all translations by the author.

¹ This article is a revised version of a talk I presented at the conference *Beyond the Subject: New Developments in Life Writing* at Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography Vienna on November 1st, 2013.

² Cf. Pogorelova 2010: 127-143.

³ The travel text *Tol'ko moia Iaponiia* (*Only My Japan*) appeared in 2001, while the confession *Nepodsudnyi* [*The Immune*] was not published. The unfin-

Muscovites], 1982) and the Soviet militiaman (*Apofeoz militsanera* [*The Apotheosis of the Militiaman*], 1975-80)⁶, whom he famously impersonated during performances. It can also be seen as a novelistic reflection on his paradoxical image of the conceptual artist Prigov as merely a bearer of images or masks (Schmid 1994: 284). Moreover, *Zhivite v Moskve* includes his shift of focus since the 1990s. After the collapse of the USSR, his artistic interest moved from Soviet Russian everyday mythologies to anthropological subjects, with monsters, mythical or humanoid creatures becoming an increasingly important part of his work⁷. The following analysis will try to develop a terminology for the overlapping of an autobiographical level with elements from Soviet history and posthuman scenarios in the novel.

In ZVM, a first-person narrator refers to biographical and historical events from Prigov's childhood after World War II until his years as a conceptualist poet in the 1980s. Very little is said about the period after 1991. In

terms of genre, autobiography, pseudo-memoirs⁸, autofiction, fantasy or historiographical metafiction come to mind. Yet ZVM has a narrative structure that makes it difficult to narrow the text down to one genre: cyclically, factual events develop into fictional, quasi-apocalyptic scenarios. This dynamic may be set off by a minor everyday incident: for example, in one episode, little Dima has a high temperature, which results in a surreal heatwave melting down almost the entire city of Moscow. Likewise, natural catastrophes are triggered by major historical events, e.g. when Stalin's death causes a country-wide cold spell, so that the inhabitants of a communal apartment freeze together (Prigov 2000: 97ff.). This technique of fading from factual to fictional narrative prompts one to ask: what really happened, and what is made up? Some episodes bear obvious parallels to autobiographical accounts in interviews (Prigov/Shapoval 2003). There are hence good reasons to call ZVM an autobiographical text, if

⁶ Prigov 1996: 19-26. These poem cycles form the lyrical background of *Zhivite v Moskve* and will be part of a forthcoming edition of the novel by Brigitte Obermayr and Georg Witte.

⁷ See for periodizations of Prigov's work: Witte 2001, Golyenko 2010.

⁸ As Mikhail Iampolskii states in his extensive and insightful discussion of the novel's philosophy and poetics, Iampolskii 2010: 200. Irina Pogorelova calls the novel "anti-memoirs", discussing the conceptual strategies of Prigov's late prose (Pogorelova 2010: 132).

one takes Philippe Lejeune's definition into account, requiring that author, narrator and main character are identical (Lejeune 1989: 19f). But then the question arises: in which moments does the narrator start fantasizing and leave the 'autobiographical pact'? When does he become a somewhat unreliable autobiographer? As a schematic explanation, a term long-cultivated by Prigov might serve, '*mertsanie*' ('oscillation' or 'shimmering'). By '*mertsanie*' Prigov describes ways of switching between images, levels of artificiality, or, more generally speaking, modes of reality, without taking a stable position on either side⁹. In my reading, three levels of oscillation can be identified in ZVM: (1) The first level is a narratological one: the switching from factual to fictional narration. Although we can clearly state that the Soviet Union did not literally freeze after Stalin's death, we have to acknowledge that this circumstance refers to something factual, if only by way of metaphor. It refers to collective

memory, and this happens in a cyclical mode: remembering and forgetting, accumulating and erasing data. In the constantly filling and emptying world of the text, all possible memories are already there, albeit headed for extinction. For this dynamic, the categories fictional/factual seem to reach certain limits. The narrator explicitly rejects a fictional mode of writing:

Я просто не умею придумывать — не дано, умением не вышел. Да вообще, мало чего можно выдумать, придумать в этом насквозь уже напридуманном, намысленном, населенном и напереселенном мире. (Prigov 2000: 182)

I just can't make anything up – I'm not gifted, I didn't learn it. Anyway, there's little that one can invent, make up in this already so made-up, thought-of, populated, and overpopulated world.

This passage seems to contain serious doubts about the possibility of fiction, implying the hypothesis that there is already too much life to put any more fiction into it. The sheer volume of 'biomass', of lived and imagined lives, makes fiction impos-

⁹ The narrator of ZVM defines it as a "gnoseological trick", permitting us to "oscillate between two poles, remaining in a zone of irresolvability" ("мерцать между двумя полюсами, оставаясь в зоне неразрешимости", Prigov 2000: 11). Iampolskii has discussed this term as a matter of difference and meaning (Iampolskii 2010: 208).

sible.

(2) It seems that the oscillation between factual and fictional narrative is only one partial aspect of Prigov's strategy. There might, however, be a second type of oscillation that leads further: between private life and some type of life in general. In Prigov's terminology, we find the poles *byt* and *bytie*, an old etymologically linked opposition between particular existence and cosmic being¹⁰. The narrator hints at the intertwining of both when he claims: "[Я] не рассказчик о событиях своей частной жизни. Но лишь повествователь о мощном общем, общественном бытии, прокатывающемся через меня" ("I am not the storyteller of events from my private life. But only the narrator of the mighty general, public being that is rolling through me", 260).

For example, when a small fire on Dima's grandmother's stove causes an inferno that ultimately destroys all civilization, such a switch from the everyday to the cosmological sphere points up a paradox for autobiography: who can write life when all life has been obliterated? Although there are moments in the book

when nothing seems to be left, when a mystical emptiness is evoked¹¹, something or somebody always persists. However, although the narrator of ZVM repeatedly stages his status as a post-apocalyptic remainder figure, he does not turn into a dehumanized instance. The novel does not present the memoirs of a disembodied cyborg.

(3) In order to grasp this specific anthropological dynamic, which the opposition of *byt* and *bytie* does not include, a third level of oscillation should be taken into account: the switching between two concepts of life – *bios* and *zoe*. I do not take these terms from Prigov's own language – although he may have been acquainted with the debate initiated by Giorgio Agamben's book *Homo Sacer* in the late 1990s. Agamben borrows a distinction from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where *bios* refers to the form of life in the polis and *zoe* refers to life without political qualities, including non-human life and the life of gods (Agam-

¹⁰ Cf. Boym 1994: 73ff. With regard to the opposition of *byt* and *bytie* in Prigov's poetry, see Smirnov 2010.

¹¹ For an interpretation of the recurring states of "collective amnesia" in ZVM as a form of gnostic emptiness (*kenoma*), see Iampolskii 2010, 201ff. Golyenko-Vol'fson reads the process as an achievement of harmony through a hypertrophical cosmic chaos (Golyenko-Vol'fson 2010: 230).

ben 1998: 9f). Jacques Derrida, amongst others, doubted whether this distinction was sustainable in Aristotle (Derrida 2011: 315f). Nonetheless, Agamben's distinction developed a discursive life of its own that has, however, not yet been sufficiently discussed in life-writing studies. I will use Agamben's terms as a heuristic distinction for my novel analysis: with *bios* as the biographical-moral sphere of a realized life and with *zoe* as the biological-organic sphere of potential life. The oscillation Prigov effects in his text would then be one between the life of a narrative subject and life in its existing and non-existing forms – between biography and zoegraphy. The latter term has recently been introduced by Louis van den Hengel, who defines zoegraphy as “a mode of writing life [...], which centers on the generative vitality of *zoe*, an inhuman, impersonal, and inorganic force which [...] is not specific to human lifeworlds, but cuts across humans, animals, technologies, and things” (Van den Hengel 2012: 2). Focussing on examples from contemporary performance art, van den Hengel, however, sets aside both literary and literal aspects of zoegraphy, which despite the medial ambivalence of ‘*graphein*’ (Greek: ‘to carve’, ‘to draw’, ‘to

write’) needs to be explored as a mode of writing. I will therefore go one step behind van den Hengel's fruitful approach, trying to examine the poetical and rhetorical implications of zoegraphical literature. Prigov, who programmatically linked the act of writing to his everyday life routine and has therefore been perceived as a graphomaniac¹², seems to be a promising object of analysis.

2. *Writing Bios/Zoe: From Participation to Immunization*

Which possibilities does the concept of ‘zoegraphy’ offer with regard to Prigov's literature that biography does not? First of all, it seems to correspond to Prigov's aforementioned anthropological turn in the 1990s. Under the term ‘new anthropology’ – which seems to be more of a discursive slogan than a theoretical concept – he summarizes phenomena of what has been called posthuman culture¹³. In essays and interviews, Prigov developed his views on the imaginary space of new life forms

¹² Cf. Tchouboukov-Pianca 1995: 65-109. In 1963, Prigov announced that he would write a daily quota of three poems and thus produced an estimated 36,000 texts.

¹³ For a contextualization of these thoughts with Georges Canguilhem's philosophy of life see lampolskii 2011.

and their consequences for art. One central thought here is the disappearance of life's limits: virtual life forms like clones, cyborgs, avatars or angels live without birth and death (Balabanova 2001: 153). Popular culture imagines new, post-ideological types of immortality, in contrast to the immortalization projects of Russian avant-gardists and Soviet utopians that are referred to in the book repeatedly¹⁴.

A key aspect of Prigov's zoe-graphical form of autobiography is his treatment of human birth. On the biographical level, he omits his own birth – unlike Sterne's narrator in *Tristram Shandy*, who begins his account before he is even born. On the biological level, there is a similar situation – with regard to the cyclical destructions and restorations of Moscow and its population, one question remains unanswered: where does the new life come from? Birth is replaced by some kind of epistemological void in the evolutionary logic.

'Life' is a subject of Prigov's novel in a literal way, the word

'zhizn' appears to serve as a discursive marker (with allusions to the philosophy of life, the avant-garde movements of *zhiznetvorchestvo* and *zhiznestroenie*) or even – through rhetorical devices such as prosopopoeia and anthropomorphism – as an impersonal protagonist. Understood as *zoe*, life is referred to as a continuously self-reproducing process – autopoiesis, as Maturana and Varela have described it (Maturana/Varela 1980: 73-76). But in Prigov's case, this autopoiesis is out of order: the life Prigov looks at produces mutations and deformations. This not only happens on a phenomenal level – members of the Politburo literally melt away, their body mass has to be contained in metal tanks –, but also on a textual one: the text is incapable of implementing the 'genetic code' of the memoir genre, it digresses. Life in ZVM is like a poorly constructed machine, as the narrator states: "И вообще жизнь не удалась. Не удалась жизнь" ("After all, life didn't turn out well. It didn't turn out well, life" [Prigov 2000: 91]). It remains undecidable, whether "my life" or "life in general" is referred to. The malfunction of biological life has a biographical analog: Prigov suffered from polio in his childhood. The initial moment of paralysis is de-

¹⁴ For example, grotesque effects of Nikolai Fedorov's immortalization philosophy, which produces non-anthropomorphic beings (Prigov 2000: 136), or a rejuvenation of Lenin that eventually turns his body into dust (ivi: 178).

scribed repeatedly as a disturbance of the body that is translated into disturbances of organic matter in total. After being hospitalized with other children, a crippled boy crawls along Dima's face:

Он, видите ли, таким вот образом удирал от партнера, не имея ничего конкретного против меня. Но жизнь, сама жизнь была против меня. И это было ее лицо, ее дыхание, ее ухмылка на страшном нечеловеческом лице. (Prigov 2000: 59)

You see, he was running away from his playfellow this way, he didn't have anything against me in person. But life, life itself was against me. And this was its face, its breath, its smirk on a dreadful inhuman face.

Life takes on the 'inhuman' face of a crippled and mentally retarded child, of a weak form of life that has a special status in the context of totalitarian systems – it is the life that a society can protect or destroy. Using the substantialist formula 'life itself', Prigov draws on a vitalist vocabulary and confronts it with his biographical impairment. This

vita minima, in turn, seems to be something like the source of artistic production for the novel. The initial point of this life story is not birth, but a childhood disease that is described as a state of fever on the brink of unconsciousness¹⁵. Motifs of failed reproduction (infertility, abortion, infant mortality) recur repeatedly in the text. At one point, the narrator observes: "Жизнь тем временем принимала образ стремительно, с нарастающим шелестом завершающейся киноленты" ("Life took the form of a film strip, running out rapidly and with growing rustle" [Prigov 2000: 58]). The strip does not end, but is caught in some sort of loop. Life has neither beginning nor end, but reproduces and repeats itself endlessly. This sort of bad infinity, however, would not be a satisfying description of the way in which Prigov imagines it. My question would then be: Is there some sort of biographical narrative that goes beyond the mode of cyclical destruction? In suggesting a possible answer, I will argue that the narrator's focus on *bios* and *zoe* changes, as can be explained via the development

¹⁵ Kukulin calls the function of childhood disease a "transgressive experience" and points to the parallels with Andrei Bely's autobiographical novel *Kotik Letaev* (Kukulin 2010: 589f.).

of remembering in the text. In the beginning, the narrator states with regard to his way of referring to events from the past: “сила памяти одолевает беспмятство во всепобеждающем порыве жизни” (“the power of memory overcomes unconsciousness [literally: memorylessness] in an all-prevailing outburst of life” [Prigov 2000: 24]). Here, life is thought as activity, as a Bergsonian *élan vital* that triggers memory and artistic production. The narrator is a “simple human being, immersed in life” (“простое, погруженное в жизнь человеческое существо” [Prigov 2000: 159]). The narrative subject defines itself as a part of this life in its destructive dynamic and abundance of forms – *bios* and *zoe* are unseparated. But in the course of writing, the mode of participation changes to a mode of distance. Remembering is no longer being ‘inspired’ by life. Instead, it constructs a separate realm of life, a form of written life. In the beginning of the last chapter, the concept of a “space of memory” (“пространство памяти”, Prigov 2000: 286) is described as follows:

“Эти направления, пространства, линии суть большее проявление жизни, чем сама жизнь,

еще не ставшая точной и четкой. И я это знаю. Я там был”

(“These directions, spaces, lines are a larger manifestation of life than life itself, which has not yet become exact and distinct. And I know this. I have been there”, *ibid.*).

The space of memory transcends “life itself”, an entity the narrator claims to know. He seems to have found some perspective on the raw materiality of life, *zoe*, yet without being part of it. *Bios* can only be narrated by means of such a ‘protective measure’. Accordingly, the last episode of the book stages a scene of self-immunization, a somewhat final point of the oscillation described above: little Dima finds himself surrounded by a horde of cats. As he tries to chase them away, they hurl themselves at his face. The child loses consciousness, and the last sentences of the book are: “Меня нельзя было трогать. Наутро меня разбил паралич” (“I couldn’t be touched. In the morning I was struck by paralysis” [Prigov 2000: 350]). After being attacked by cats, Dima establishes a boundary. He “cannot be touched”, neither physically nor

emotionally¹⁶. Life is no longer “rolling through” (cf. above) the first person narrator – this has turned out to be harmful, too much life to tell. He defines an immune space in order to cope with the dynamic of *zoe*, to maintain the biographical qualities which *bios* includes. This prevents him from becoming one of the monsters he describes, from becoming a “deanthropologized” writer¹⁷. Prigov’s zoographical strategy is not one of identification with non-human forms of life – it is not about acting as an animal, a monster, an angel, an avatar, or a golem¹⁸.

But what his novel does can be called virtual life-writing in a wider sense: Prigov’s autobiographical subject organizes the exchange between physical and virtual forms of life. A childhood

memory at a cemetery turns into a scenario in which zombies crawl from the graves and infiltrate the medical staff at the Kremlin (an allusion to the Doctors’ Plot in 1952–53). Eventually, the living imitate the undead in order not to contract their “infectious, absorbing underdeath and antilife” (“заразительн[ая], засасывающ[ая] недосмерт[ь] и антижизн[ь]” [Prigov 2000: 324]). Over and over again, populations appear and disappear, be they plants, robots or zombies. But none of the physical or virtual phenomena can be said to have more existence than others, including the biographical data of the author Prigov. Thus, the novel stages ontologically dehierarchized forms of life.

3. Zoographical Writing and the Genre of (Auto-)Biography

This article pursued two principal aims: firstly, to help understand Prigov’s memoir writing, which focuses on an autobiographical ‘I’ and transcends it towards life as an impersonal, inhuman process at the same time. Secondly, the article proposes zoography as a concept that draws attention to anthropological dimensions hitherto neglected in theories of (auto-)biography and life-writing

¹⁶ The phrase “Меня нельзя было трогать” can be both translated as “I couldn’t be bothered” and as “I couldn’t be touched”, which can either imply physical or emotional contact.

¹⁷ A term Igor Smirnov has employed in a conversation with Boris Groys Groys/Smirnov 2000: 168.

¹⁸ In the performance *Good-bye, USSR* in 2003, Prigov incorporated a Soviet golem, who was brought to life by Grisha Bruskin through the inscription of the “magical tetragram USSR” (Bruskin 2007: 312). Iampolskii convincingly interprets the marking and unmarking of a golem as a basic principle of Prigov’s language, cf. Iampolskii 2010: 185ff.

studies. The definition of life writing given by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson may serve as an example: it is a “general term for writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject” (Smith/Watson 2001: 3)¹⁹. In contrast to this *bios*-focused definition, my reading of Prigov’s memoir book as zoographical suggests an amplified anthropological scope: when authors write ‘a life’ they cannot do this without writing ‘life’. After the biopolitical shifts in the 20th century, this constellation is of particular significance: totalitarian definitions of life and the biotechnical manipulation and modification of life have redefined the boundaries between *bios* and *zoe*. Contemporary life narrative cannot be studied without looking beyond a particular human life that is described. This has implications for temporal questions: there are empirical data and philosophical positions concerning what can count as a lifetime²⁰. With the

awareness of prenatal and post mortem corporeality in the late 20th century, the temporal concept of a lifetime as a time of *bi-os* has become unstable. What is hence the time of *zoe*? For an answer, ZVM offers various dimensions, first and foremost its overlapping of a timescale of history and a timescale of evolution²¹: In one sequence, the bodies of workers in the foundation pit of the demolished Cathedral of Christ the Saviour stick together in a mass that then turns into a civilization of plants (Prigov 2000: 183ff.). The dynamic of escalation and de-escalation, between a timescale human and a timescale pre- and posthuman, sheds light on techniques of remembering life as a key poetological feature of memoirs and autobiographical fiction. This article does not aim to promote zoography as an alternative genre to (auto-) biography, but rather speaks of *zoe*-

¹⁹ Cf. for a similar critique of the life writing discourse van den Hengel 2012: 1f.

²⁰ Since the 18th century, biography aims to encompass the phantasm of the “entire lifetime”, the paradigmatic text being Karl Philipp Moritz’ *Anton Reiser*. Theorists of the modern novel have related life as a wholeness to the memorable present (Dilthey), to retrospective sensemaking (Lukács) and to the narra-

tion of life experience of one’s own and of others (Benjamin).

²¹ I owe this term to Georg Witte, who gave me the opportunity to present this paper in his colloquium. The time of *zoe* as pre- and posthuman life can be related to recent efforts to establish a concept of ‘deep time’ in literary criticism, e.g. to trace the implications of large geological timescales for narrative. For the category of deep time as a planetary *longue durée* (cf. Dimock 2006: 1-6).

graphical writing as something that is not confined to the memoir genre, but applies to any text displaying interferences of *bios* and *zoe*. In the case of autobiographical fiction, they are related to an *autos*, a narrative self. In Prigov's late novel project, this strategy mingles with other text genres: science fiction or fantasy, animal texts (or 'zoographic' texts²²), ethnographical accounts and travel writing (*Tol'ko moia Iaponiia* [Only my Japan], 2001; *Katia kitaiskaia* [The Chinese Katia], 2007) and the Bildungsroman (*Renat i drakon* [Renat and the Dragon], 2005).

²² Zoographical writing is of course not identical with zoographical writing, such as E.T.A. Hoffmann's animal autobiography *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*, for which Sarah Kofman introduced the term 'autobiogriffure' ('griffe' meaning 'claw', 'stamp' or 'seal' [cf. Kofman 1984]). Iampolskii interprets Prigov's 'new anthropology' as a 'new zoology', however Prigov's work always pays attention to non-animal forms of life such as angels, monsters and virtual beings (cf. Iampolskii 2011: 298).

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