

TOMASZ BASIUK, *Exposures: American Gay Men's Life Writing since Stonewall* (Frankfurt/M.: Lang, 2013), 398 pp.

Tomasz Basiuk's *Exposures: American Gay Men's Life Writing* is an ambitious literary analysis of a representative body of autobiographies written in the last fifty years—the first monograph of this scope in English. The decision to begin the account in the aftermath of the 1969 Stonewall Inn riots is justified by the fact that these events marked a radical change in the consciousness of the American homosexual minority. When this minority, routinely harassed by the New York police, adopted the political strategy of confrontation, its visibility in the public sphere increased. Yet eradicating heterosexism took more than courage in altercations with the authorities. As Basiuk persuasively argues (invoking Jacques Rancière) without concerted efforts to restructure the aesthetic order, it would not have been possible to change Americans' negative attitude towards same-sex desire. Neither would gay people have gradually acquired political subjectivity without subtle interventions in the visual arts, literature, drama, and film. As Rancière observed, it is the aesthetic order that determines what is visible in the public sphere and accessible to our senses.¹ The challenge taken up by gay writers in the post-Stonewall era involved shifting the boundary between what is visible or representable and what is not by means of autobiographical discourse, which Basiuk interprets as a form of testimony.

Selecting his primary texts from a very large body of gay autobiographical literature, Basiuk uses the criterion of aesthetic value: all the texts discussed in *Exposures* were penned by acclaimed authors with more than one book to their name. Although, with the exception of Samuel R. Delany and John Rechy, the authors are white differ in terms of social background, age, and able-bodiedness. Stylistically and thematically diverse, their texts are connected, in Basiuk's view, by a sense of shame acquired by homosexual people in contact with heterosexual others (12). In order to render the experience of shame in a text and to expose the mechanism of shaming, gay writers have developed original

aesthetic strategies. For instance, Edmund White, writing over the course of forty years, described some of the same events from a variety of perspectives in both fictional and autobiographical works (61). The fact that the texts analyzed in *Exposures* belong to a wide range of literary genres, including the autobiographical novel, memoir, journal, essay, collection of humorous anecdotes, and even a home movie, provides a context to enter into the debate about the slippery categories of fact vs. fiction. The axis of this debate is Basiuk's polemic with Philippe Lejeune, who proposed a notion of autobiography based on the autobiographical pact, that is, the authorial declaration that a given narrative approximates the truth. Unconvinced by Lejeune's formulation due to the difficulty of telling fact from fiction (38-43; 342), Basiuk builds his own more capacious category of autobiographical texts characterized by a heightened moral consciousness, which is based on John L. Austin's theory of speech acts.

As Basiuk notes, unlike feminist writers, who can address their texts to a broad and receptive readership conscious of the feminist tradition that goes back at least a century, men who openly write about their homosexual desire cannot count on the receptivity of the "average reader" (42). In anticipation of a less-than-friendly response, all the writers discussed in *Exposures* endow their texts with an affective potential, so that they testify about the experience of shame, putting the reader in the position of a witness capable of identifying with the narrator because he or she too has experienced shame—a universal affect. Empathy, in turn, builds an emotional bond and triggers various thought processes. The homosexual reader who witnesses shame expressed in the text and comes to understand the mechanism of shaming may be able to reject his or her own shame and even to feel a sense of belonging to an imagined community. Meanwhile, a heterosexual reader may acknowledge the narrator's "heightened moral consciousness" that characterizes the act of giving witness; this reader may also feel empathy for the character/narrator who is being shamed and thus reconsider his or her prejudices (43). But above all, the stigmatized person's risky act of testifying builds visibility and facilitates the emergence of a group consciousness, coupled with demands for political change.

The focus on performing shame, which constitutes a sort of game in which the au-

¹ See Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, translated by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010): 36.

tobiographer engages the reader, is Basiuk's most interesting contribution to the study of life writing. The sense of shame understood as being unworthy of love and attention is not new in life writing. Conversion narratives and spiritual autobiographies written by Puritans in colonial America were pervaded by a sense of shame. Though these public confessions of shame were highly ritualized, they were nonetheless ardent. Yet the Puritan spiritual journals and conversion narratives are atypical, for autobiography is usually motivated by a sense of pride. It was pride in his own accomplishments, ineffectually masked by a humble pose, that inspired Benjamin Franklin to write *The Autobiography* (1771-1790). Many immigrants wrote autobiographies motivated by a sense of pride in having overcome great adversity in order to achieve the prized status of U.S. citizenship. Autobiographies are published by presidents, CEOs of prosperous companies, and other people who regularly make newspaper headlines. Those who do not proudly look back on their lives (or at least on substantial segments of those lives) rarely consider writing autobiographically—or so we would assume. Yet Basiuk has identified a group of autobiographical texts produced precisely because their writers had been deprived of the right to feel proud of themselves. These writers redefined the experience of being shamed as interesting literary material. Writing about stigmatization, however, calls for a different “distribution of the perceptible” (Rancière: *partage du sensible*). Strategically “exposing their shame” or “making a spectacle of themselves,” gay writers take on the risk of rejection in the hope that intimate contact between the performer and the reader/viewer has the potential of disrupting and thus altering the viewer's understanding of the world (261).

Exposures is a theoretically refined study written by a scholar who is highly aware of the genealogy, potential, and limitations of the critical terms he makes use of. Basiuk combines theories derived from various fields of the humanities, translates them into terms used in other fields, develops, and illustrates them. He often draws attention to the theoretical interventions made in the literary texts themselves (for instance, in Samuel R. Delany's autobiography). The inclusion of Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin's video-diary *A Silverlake Life* (1993) in his study must have been dictated by the desire to unpack the term

“exposure,” which in photographic terminology means ‘exposing to light.’ The mechanism of shooting a film makes visible that which is consciously exposed to the camera lens as well as that which falls outside the frame. Thus, *A Silverlake Life* plays a double role in the study: it provides a theory of the division of the perceptible in an unusual form as well as primary material for analysis.

Exposures makes a substantial contribution to the theory of affects initiated by Sigmund Freud, developed most fully by Silvan Tomkins in the 1960s, and introduced into queer studies by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the 1990s. A pioneering study of affect in autobiography, *Exposures* is likely to inspire literature scholars to explore the psychology not just of shame but also of other affects, such as interest, pleasure, and surprise. Other theoretical strands present in the study include various schools of psychoanalysis, from Freud, through Jacques Lacan, to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; queer theory as represented by Douglas Crimp, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lisa Duggan, Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, Jasbir Puar, David Eng, and Didier Eribon; Erving Goffman's work on stigmatization, as well as Dominic LaCapra's theories of trauma. Simultaneously, all the analyses are firmly anchored in their historical context.

Basiuk approaches the ideas of other writers—autobiographers, fiction writers, and theorists—with deep respect. It is because he wants to give them their intellectual due that the study ends up being almost four hundred pages long. It consists of a fifty pages long introductory section, six long chapters, and a full conclusion. Although the material is presented thematically, the chapters roughly follow the chronology of events significant for the gay minority. I will stop at briefly summarizing the contents and highlighting a few themes that interested me the most.

Chapter one discusses the theme of shame in the works of Edmund White, one of the most respected gay writers in the United States, as well as a sensitive observer (or “chronicler” as Basiuk calls him) of America's social mores. This chapter reveals White's self-reflexiveness, political consciousness, and humor and, at the same time, introduces the historical context for the subsequent chapters of the study. Chapter two analyzes the writings of Samuel Delany, Daniel Mendelsohn, and Wayne Koestenbaum, which belong to

the genre of personal criticism—a form of social diagnosis based on personal experience. I find particularly interesting and subtle Basiuk's interpretation of *The Motion of Light in Water* by Delany, an author who in a series of memorable scenes manages to encapsulate the moment of the emergence of a new group consciousness and of an open, nonhierarchical gay male community in New York before the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic.

In chapter three, Basiuk looks at four gay narratives that bypass, complicate, and in some cases subvert the emancipatory “coming out” paradigm that is central to the work of literary scholar Paul Robinson. Using Martin Duberman's *The Cures* as a prime example, Basiuk shows that the ‘coming out’ episode is followed by a humiliating period of psychotherapy that leads the narrator to internalize homophobia. Finally, the narrator abandons psychotherapy in order to replace it with a form of therapy he finds far more effective; he chooses sexual relations with men who affirm his desire, and it is only that second ‘coming out’—to other homosexual men—that cures him of his shame. The other texts analyzed in this chapter illustrate the consequences of shrouding non-heteronormative sexuality with silence and point to the need for *parrhesia*—speaking frankly about one's sexuality despite the risk of rejection.

A large part of chapter four theorizes the socially unacceptable mourning of people who died of AIDS as well as the melancholia caused by the denial of dignity to gay mourners. The analyzed autobiographies testify to the slow death of friends and partners on whom the society at large has turned its back. By giving testimony about the humanity of the dead, the narrators overcome their own sense of shame and humiliation and claim their right to mourn. The argument presented in chapter five, titled “Dissent,” concerns writings that express anti-assimilationist sentiments. While the LGBT movement in the United States tends to emphasize the similarity between hetero- and homosexual lifestyles, goals, and values in order to justify the demands for equal treatment, a parallel movement opposed to assimilation has long existed. Consolidated during the AIDS epidemic, the ‘barebacking’ subculture draws many gay men deprived of health care, housing, and family support, who cut themselves off from middle-class values, forming communities that affirm sexual freedom and provide indispensable care. Basiuk's

analysis of several ‘dissent’ autobiographies through the prism of the theories of Leo Bersani, José Esteban Muñoz, and Leo Edelman forces us to rethink such basic issues as ‘ties of blood’ and the right to pleasure and sexual self-expression. It is the most balanced and informative presentation of this radical movement that I have come across.

The final chapter is devoted to David Sedaris's humorous approach to shame. Writing in the 1990s, when positive representations of gays and lesbians were beginning to appear in the American media, Sedaris became immensely popular telling jokes about himself that minutely described moments of acute embarrassment. In order to understand the mechanism of shaming oneself in the reader's eyes, Basiuk turns to theories of humor and psychoanalytic tools developed by Freud and Karen Horney. In the conclusion, he returns to current theoretical debates on such key concepts as affect, shame, emancipation, utopia, and witnessing.

I find particularly inspiring Basiuk's exploration of the relations between shame and interest, which is also classified as one of the basic affects (78-79; 159-160; 217-219). Silvan Tomkins argues that humans would not be able to function without interest, which enables us to focus on selected features of our environment, get to know them, differentiate them from other features, and build an emotional attitude towards them. The fact that we are interesting to others (i.e., worthy of their attention) is of fundamental importance throughout our lives. The mutual interest of mother and child becomes the paradigm of all subsequent relations built on this affect. Shame may be the reaction to lack of interest on the part of the mother or a significant other, Tomkins claims.² Taking off from this observation, Basiuk writes about interest and its lack in the context of literature representing the lives of openly gay men. When writers choose to represent that which, in a given historical moment, is considered unrepresentable (and thus unworthy of attention), they have to think deeply about how to elicit the readers' interest and get them emotionally en-

² See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, ed., *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham: Duke, 1995): 133, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke, 2003): 36.

gaged. This applies to minority authors in general, whose interests often diverge from those of mainstream audiences.

Due to the weight given to emancipatory politics in American academia, as well as the strong influence of New Historicism in literary studies, until recently psychological theories were depreciated as apolitical and were rarely used. Yet as Basiuk demonstrates, the psychology of affects can help literary and cultural studies critics understand what is

going on not just on the narrative level of a text but also in its reception. Located at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics, *Exposures* shows the work literary texts do to engage their prospective readers, evoke their empathy, make them blush with remembered shame, or express righteous indignation in a way that will allow it to be perceived and acknowledged.

Wrocław

Dominika Ferens