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Stephen Dixon's Novels: Autobiographicality as Transgression

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Abstract: The idea advanced in the paper is to theorize the mechanisms of autobiographicality in Stephen Dixon's novels that are viewed as a radical renewal of autobiographical narrative, where the modality of disappearance/return of the subject produces a new mode of life-writing. We propose the term "autobiographical transgression" to capture the essence of this renewal started by three representative figures – John Barth, Stephen Dixon, and Joseph Heller that can be reduced neither to autobiography as a genre, nor to "transgressive autobiography" as its generic variant. Dixon finds a new form for representing autos. He creates the character with the name-deixis I. that personifies a fiduciary subject, thus, suggesting a provocative restatement of postmodernist generic problems. In the novels *I.* and *End of I.* the autobiographical hero I. exists simultaneously as a metaphor of the author's presence in the text, as the subjective author's I and as a character in the novel – an objectified, semi-functional, distancing I. The transplanting of life experience manifests itself in a special kind of repersonalization and double coding of the traditional autobiographical subject.

Keywords: postmodernism, transgression, Stephen Dixon, auto/bio/graphicality, I.-texts, a fiduciary subject.

Introduction

The paper conceptualizes the constitutive features that relate to transgressiveness of conventional confines in the development of new autobiographicality in American postmodernist literature today. New generic concepts acquire urgency to accommodate scholars' encounter with this large and inclusive group of life-stories that had gone far beyond the distinction of a fictional autobiography. The updated theoretical approach will be particularly apt for the analysis of creativity and literary merit of a new mode of autobiographicality marked by generic transgressiveness.

Stephen Dixon's novels represent the most illustrative examples and invite a more thorough theoretical consideration, along with the novels that have the same specificity: John Barth's novels *Coming Soon!!!* (2001) and *Every Third Thought. A Novel in Five Seasons* (2011), Joseph Heller's *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man* (2000). In the paper, the concept of transgressiveness does not refer to what has just been catchy in literary parlance for the description of transgressive fiction with its taboo subject

matters, as advanced by some scholars (Gregg, 1994, pp. 72–98; Jenks, 2003, p. 7; Mookerjee, 2013, pp. 1–14). The purpose of the paper, therefore, is to propose a larger perspective on historical understanding of the generic changes in the wide body of narratives on identity manifested in Dixon's writings.

Stephen Dixon (1936–2019), the author of 18 novels and 17 collections of short stories, the writer with such a striking all-human aspiration, has never been the subject of special scholarly research: brief reviews and random interviews characterize his unclear status in American literature. Jerome Klinkowitz, who in his three books on American literature addresses Dixon in passing as "an experimental realist" (1995, p. xxiii), and in his 1992 book uses a sophisticated concept of a "structured void" (1992, p. 2) to describe Dixon's literary manner. Among other reasons, this obvious critical neglect is caused, most probably, by what Harold Bloom (2014, p. 18) has articulated as a "profession's loss of intellectual and aesthetic standards of accomplishment and value", mentioning the reduction of the aesthetic to ideology. In *The Western Canon* he stresses his growing concern about the concept of the canon that is loosing its academic priority and remains important only for a small group of enthusiastic specialists. Instead, the concepts of political correctness, ethnicity, multiculturalism (the latter he views as "anti-intellectual" and "anti-literary"), inundate the field of academic literary discourse that resulted in the study of "ideologically" salient works but not the texts that possess an "autonomous" aesthetic value.

That is why it is important to redirect the critical interest to the analysis of the features that constitute the "aesthetic dignity" of Stephen Dixon's fiction. His writings that are always diverse and unexpected, never duplicating his discoveries made before, always represent difficulties for critical evaluations. Their artistic qualities are reducible neither to traditional literature, nor to the popular catena of postmodernist traits. Answering the question about his artistic preferences, Dixon said, "I suppose I am naturally innovative. Innovation comes easier to me than traditional writing. I enjoy saying old things in a new way" (Carroll, 2010).

Viewed objectively: the publication data (35 books), numerous national awards, his post of a professor of fiction at Johns Hopkins University, high esteem on the side of the patriarch of American postmodernism John Barth, his friend and colleague, - Stephen Dixon occupies a significant place in American mainstream literature and should enjoy appropriate critical esteem. However, he is more popular in France where his books are made into films.

The titles of Stephen Dixon's novels *I.* (2002) and *End of I.* (2006) actualize the intertext of the postmodernist discourse on the death of the subject, where Dixon's writings stand to manifest new directions in telling personal story, transcending traditional generic boundaries. Autobiographicality as a mode of transgressive writing reality manifests

new dimension, where the world of literary conventions (a hero, a plot and a genre) interlaces with the anthropocentric world of human matters.

The interrogation of this phenomenon became the subject of a lively discussion at the international conference "Transgressive (Auto) biography as Genre and Method" (2010). To characterize the nature of autobiographical writing of the late 20 early 21st century, the scholars (R. Roorda, T. McConnell, K. Stewart, A. van Herk, R. Picard, R. Marling) introduced a new generic definition – "transgressive autobiography". This term manifests the overwhelming desire "to cross the limit" (M. Blanchot, J. Derrida, M. Foucault, P. de Man), which resonates in modern autobiographical literature and literary criticism. The participant of this international debate, the Canadian writer and the author of two autobiographical novels Sharon Butala (2010, p. 21) considers this problem in broader context of contemporary cultural processes. She observes in literary transgressiveness the destruction of cultural taboos, emphasizing the transgressive nature of (auto)biography. The American scholar R. Roorda (2010, p. 141) expresses a similar view. He supposes that "autobiography is *ipso facto* transgressive" and that now its transgressive forms are more noticeable in writings.

These judgments are not sporadic, they are connected with the revision of such concepts as subject and subjectivity, in which philosophical idea of transgression as a transition and overcoming, plays a key role, illustrating that autobiographical writing in the era of postmodernity becomes the most striking evidence of new trends.

The analysis of Stephen Dixon's late novels allows us to view the nature of auto/bio/graphicality as articulated states of textual presence in the context of generic variations: parabiography, autography, autofiction, new belletrism.

1. Breaking autobiographical grounds: Dixon's transgressive novels *I.* and *End of I*

Transgression in Foucauldian definition is "an action that involves the limit" (Foucault, 1980, p. 33). In European literature, George Bataille earned the reputation of "the prophet of transgression" (Noys, 1989, p. 1). His tangled, nervous, nonlinear, and inconsequent manner of writing (as in the books *Divinus Deus*, 1966 or *Julie*, 1971) becomes the peculiar sign of transgression – an action "beyond the limits", problematising not only a complex unity of the fictional and the real but also of philosophical and literary experience. The theorists (Foucault, Blanchot, Bataille) suggest that *limit-experience* indicates "the impossibility of attributing the millenary language of dialectics" (Foucault, 1980, p. 50). This borderline experience exists in the space of autobiography, giving rise to the diversity of artistic forms and strategies. Despite modern pretensions, on the contrary, it is noteworthy that the recently introduced concept of transgressive (auto)biography emphasizes primarily the conventionality of the genre boundaries and the ability to overcome them, as well as the complexity/impossibility of self-description.

Dixon impressively practised this art of transgressing conventional generic boundaries in life narratives. These two distinctly related books have common features: plot, intricate intertextuality, multilevel openness, double coding that give ground for interpreting these novels as representative texts in the endless discourse on the death of the subject, crucial for autobiographical criticism. Not the death of the subject but a subtle denunciation of its death constitutes the centerpiece of Dixon's novels. The essence of this concept is to expose the potentiality of this alternative writing by way of "figurating/disfigurating" the author in the text (De Man, 1984, pp. 93–124). Not only the polemical ambivalence of the titles, but also the semantic and the poetological aspect of the narratological texture of the novels manifest the radical renewal of autobiographically transgressive narrative. We propose the term "auto/bio/graphical transgression", emphasizing the distinction of these modus components, to capture the essence of this renewal started by Stephen Dixon that can be reduced neither to autobiography as a genre, nor to "transgressive autobiography" as its generic variant.

The modality of *disappearance/return* of the subject as a content and narrative sign of autobiographical transgression outlines the poetic specificity of Stephen Dixon's novels. The semantics of its *presence/absence* is imprinted in all elements of the artistic structure of these novels. The boundaries of the fictional world, are permeable and the author's life becomes transparent. At the heart of the process is a new understanding of ontological truth. The autobiographical hero with an unusual deceptively intelligible pronominalised I. is the center of Dixon's *I.-texts*. According to the author, the novel *Old Friends* (2004), published between these two books, was one of the parts of the I.-cycle. However, at the insistence of the publisher, it was rewritten. "I gave the I. character a name" said Dixon in the interview (Dixon, 2006). He regards "I." as a hero, as his personal metaphoric presence in the text and, at the same time, as an independent artistic image devoid of direct personal biographical connotations. This impetus of "preserving the face" and keeping up with the identity is going without additional explications, though the context of the discourse initiated by P. de Man's theory of defacement is transparent. Such a deliberate artistic move creates an effect of flickering of distanced and deliberately (probably for this case) objectified "I." and the subjective author's I. This homophone support of I-eye prevents the immersion into fiction, and at the same time makes clear, whose eye is snatching this reality. Most importantly, on the hardcover of the book, in the perforation of the letter I., the eye of the real author (given as the portrait-sketch on the second page) peeps straight at a reader, thus, at the very start questioning a resonant theory of the author's death. Avoiding the direct "I", he stresses the narrative conventionality of autobiographical tradition - Ich Erzählung -, and transplants his life experience into the realm of fiction. His I.-texts are a form of artistic polemics with the concept of autobiographicality proclaimed by the Romantics.

Dixon insists that two types of writers coexist in one artist – "the inventor and the memoirist" (Libman, 2011) and notes that his position

is intermediate. While inventing, he is more on the side of memory, not fiction. Fiction is necessary when memory does not meet the goals of artistic design or the requirements of literature, does not contain the necessary plot combinations or material for recreating the historical or emotional atmosphere, does not provide freedom for space-time relations et cetera. In such cases, the writer "invents things around the memory" (Libman, 2011). Emphasizing the repetition of the word *invent*, Dixon seeks to give a more precise definition for his strategy: not "fiction", not a slip on the surface, but a focus on deep aspects of a personality.

The ongoing search for new ways of coding and double coding the subject is a significant feature of the writer's artistic strategy. The linguistic minimalism of his prose is in direct line with the tradition of the poetics of allusion, welcoming the reader's intuition and response. These features are inherent in his latest novels *His Wife Leaves Him* (2013), *Letters to Kevin* (2016), *Beatrice* (2016) and in the latest short story collection *Writing, Written* (2019).

2. Writing myself: human matters

Writing myself instead of *about myself* is, according to Abel (2014), Neuman (1979), Will (2014), the essence of the auto(bio)graphical strategy worked out by the Modernists: Proust, Joyce, Woolf and Stein. They depersonalized "I", dethroned the myth of a universal self-identity, rejected a tyranny of facts and chronology. Dixon inherited this tradition though much consistently problematized the authorial presence in the texts.

The tradition of a radical experiment in the genre of autobiography was started by G. Stein, who in her first resonant autobiography pretended to be Alice Toklas and created a genre that L. Z. Bloom (1978, p. 82) called "autobiography-by-Doppelganger". In the second autobiographical book *Autobiography of All* (1937), Stein accentuated the special status of this genre: "it is not a simple narrative of what is happening not as if it had happened not as if it is happening but as if it is existing simply that thing. And now in this book I have done it if I have done it" (1993, p. 312).

This manner was appropriated by Dixon within new coordinates of his transgressive autobiographical poetics. He, like Stein, who in case with Alice B. Toklas is more than Alice Toklas, and the word play with letter B (as the verb be) highlights the central problem of identity, also developed a new original artistic pattern with name-initial I., sharpening and simultaneously removing the urgency of *the death of the subject* problem. The writer uses artistic techniques that were worked out by the Modernists: auto-reflection, auto-commentary, stream of consciousness, open ending, nonlinear narrative, dialogue of consciousnesses and so on. The elements of this system were restated by Dixon and co-exist within the features of new poetics, where significant absence, the intentional *minus-device*, introduced by Russian formalist scholar and writer Yury Lotman in 1964 (1998, pp. 59–60), are charged in his novels with strong polemical rigour.

Thus, in *the floating signifier* I./I in Dixon's texts, the continuation of modernist narrative tradition is evident. The bright examples are Marcel, existing before our eyes in the epopee by Proust, Stephen in the novel by Joyce or Ōba Yōzō in the confession of Osamu Dadzai. These images are as real as Dixon's I.; however, the American writer inserts limits for this autobiographical mode.

In Dixon's novels, the artistic strategy of transgression is revealed as the re-personalization of the text. It creates double-reading and semantic distance between the authorial I and the character's I. When we read the text to ourselves, silently, the full stop (.) after I. with past tense verbs loses its function of a punctuation mark. Furthermore, it transforms the proper name-initial (I.) into the first-person pronoun, thus converting the whole story into the autobiographical narration. If the verb form appears in the present tense, the third person acts as a hero with the name-initial I. The writer's artistic strategy of transgressing the confines and conventions of life-story is highlighted by this choosing the name-deixis I. as his subject.

In Dixon's novels, I. is a transgressive image liberated from a carapace of identity. On the one hand, this image is openly autobiographical, and the author mentions this in his interviews. On the other, I. is not Dixon but the character of the novels. And although this image is woven into the fabric of events of the author's real life (such as writing, taking care of a sick wife and two daughters, working at the University, dealing with the problems of publication), 'I' loses its direct connection with the referent, and 'bio' loses its autobiographical privileges. Besides, the name of the hero I. is the homophone of the word *eye* and refers to the "problem of an eye" that observes itself. Ludwig Wittgenstein in *The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* formulated this idea: "*Where in* the world is a metaphysical subject to be noted? You say that this case is altogether like that of the eye and the field of sight. But you do *not* really see the eye. And from nothing *in the field of sight* can it be concluded that it is seen from an eye" (1922, p. 75). Later on, this thesis was explored in Bataille's novel The *Story of the Eye* (1928) as well as in the works of the "school of sight" initiated by Robbe-Grillet. An impersonal autobiographical hero and an "eye", watching itself, constitute core ideas in disrupting conventional autobiographical expectations.

3. Dixon's textualization of his life and ontologization of his texts

The composition of the novel *End of I.* is largely based on amply clear autobiographical material reproducing the rhythms of mundane human life – resentment/forgiveness, friendship/enmity, youth/ageing, encounters/separations, love/hate, pain/elation, – echoing the generic parameters of classical autobiography. The titles of 12 fragments designate the main thematic centres of the book. The first chapter-fragment – "Friend" and the last "End" - depicts two events – the death of a friend whom I. lost in his childhood and the loss of a potential friend – a person who could have become one, but it had never happened. The personal

experience of losses is the main plot-forming core of the novel. These losses, evoking existential fear, anxiety, uneasiness, give birth to other states, such as compassion, love, and complicity. This rhythm of inner space underlies ten built-in fragments: "I.", "Breakup", "Mother-in-Law", "Go", "Pain", "Brother", "Daughter", "Party", "Three Novels", "Wife" which resemble classic autobiography – childhood, adolescence, youth, and maturity.

The interviewers repeatedly asked Dixon why the main characters of his novels are writers and his books invariably contain autobiographical details. In most cases, the writer laughed it off: "People say, you know, you don't write fiction, you write an autobiography. I say, well, come on, in this one I'm dead! You know it's fiction if I'm dead", but then adds quite seriously, "Write what you know," I don't agree with that. Write about what you don't know. And then find out about it" (Barry, 2007). In such a whimsical way Dixon formulates the basic principles of his strategy.

However, these features have received little critical response. The novel *Phone Rings* (2005), annotated on the cover as "a tour-de-force saga about two brothers" is permeated with the deep personal feelings about the loss of his elder brother. His other novels are also full of autobiographical reminiscences. *Frog* (1991) echoes a family tragedy connected with the disappearance of the writer's middle brother Jim. In *Old Friends*, the main character Irv, like Stephen Dixon, has been caring for an ailing wife for many years. *Meyer* (2007) is a distinctly autobiographical novel, even geographically. The auto/bio/geo/graphicality of this novel is revealed in the location of his hero, Meyer Ostrower, who walks the same streets as the writer, lives in an exact copy of the writer's house, bears one of the names of his father (Abraham Meyer Ditchik), teaches, and writes books as Dixon himself. This *autobiographical beingness* is both in the themes and in the dramatic collision of the novel. *Meyer* is not a novel about the writer's life, though it is written from a subjective perspective. It is neither I.-text. In *Meyer* Dixon explores a person inside himself, revealing common phobias, creating an inner space of life of a highly sensitive person. Besides, it is an ironic allusion to his own life. The narrative resembles autobiographical self-reflection. The writer explains that when he writes about Meyer, he does not see himself. He is creating a character *resembli*ng himself. A similar strategy appears in his novel *His Wife Leaves Him*: "It starts with a single line, each story, and then I see what happens. And so it's sort of the cross between my interior life and the exterior life that I imagined" (Dixon, 2019). It is noteworthy that this novel is told in the third person. As Ted Hendrick noted in the interview with Dixon: "the author uses the third person the way another author would use the first person". And Dixon adds one more important trait: "with third person done in first-person style, you have the advantages of both" (Hendrick, 2013).

This principle of autobiographical transgression is an important discovery of the artist, who develops a brand new narratological concept of pseudo-personal prose. The elements of autofiction, *id est* projecting himself in a fictional world and introduction of such

distanced self-awareness are revealed in the hypertrophied presentation of the characteristic traits (from the writer's interview, it is known that he stammers and possessed an incredible, even morbid sensitivity in childhood). Describing himself as "a very nervous guy, somewhat neurotic", Dixon interprets it as a positive moment: "Neurosis gives writing an edge. It gives a certain truth to it also" (Barry, 2007). The face of the author fluctuates behind the face of a fictional hero in the twinkling of deeply personal details. This narrative strategy creates an effect that resembles a specific painting technique known as sfumato practised, as it is well known, by Leonardo da Vinci.

We presume that this term has a good explanatory potential for interpretation of Dixon's autobiographical transgressiveness. In Dixon's novel *End of I.*, the author named I. finds forms of existence as "non-I" in the hero-initial. At the same time, I.-initial acquires the depth of a personal embodiment in the *world of being* due to the author's I. The process of autobiographical (mutual) transgression reveals existential vibration between the writing subject and the describable object – not-I, that consanguineous, so to say. There is apparent that the truth of the author's real-life is not equal to his confession. There is no auto/confessionality in the novel since the plots of the stories are humanly universal. The main subject is not EVERYMAN, but ALL-MAN, because events, thoughts, feelings, losses, suffering, divorces are familiar to all. Dixon keeps repeating, "My work is very close to my life, but it's still fiction" (Pierce, 2013).

The chapter "Daughter" in *End of I.* reveals fear for the life of his child. Dixon describes the Saturday evening in the minutest details. This description is dramatically and psychologically recognizable by many: the father is on edge, worrying about his daughter, who has not returned from the party at night. His fear is growing in his mind, and he tries to persuade himself: "This is all in his head".

> This is all in his head. His older daughter heads out of the house. He says "Hey, where're you going?" and she says "Out", and he says "But where, and with whom?" and she says "Friends. They're picking me up now". [...] It's late and he says to his wife – this is all in his head – "She should be home by now". [...] He calls the club. This is only in his head. Woman, who answers says she wouldn't know how to page his daughter if she was there. [...] So, what does he do now? This is all in his head. But why's it in his head? Because his daughter's out" (Dixon, 2006, p. 121, p. 127, p. 130, p. 131).

The situation is given authentically, as a direct speech with noticeable nervous intonations. The key sentence creates the dénouement: "Because his daughter's out". Dixon considers rhythm as an important element in the art of his prose. In this episode, the crescendo of questions and growing anxiety is gradually replaced by a feeling of emotional warmth when his daughter returns safe and sound. It was observed by some critics who maintain that while honing the simplicity of the syllable, Dixon tries "to maintain the spontaneity of the first draft" (Trucks, 2002, p. 131) to preserve its natural truth. Sinusoidal waves of sensations display the beating of a panic-stricken heart of the father – from slight uneasiness

to a pressing and already unbearable anxiety that can be soothed neither with a drink of alcohol, nor with a conversation "about anything" with his wife, nor with a fascinating reading, nor a dream in which this alarm grows even more.

This method of autobiographical transgression destroys the distance between the text and the real world. Ihab Hassan (2003, p. 208), the leading theorist of Postmodernism, aptly defines the nature of such literature as "fiduciary realism". This literary phenomenon, underrepresented in academic circles, is often misread by critics as a total postmodernist game deprived of human substance. Dixon's art of autobiographical transgression maintains distinct sets of humanistic priorities. Dixon is often ranked not as one of hard-core postmodernists (among J. Barth, D. Barthelme, R. Federman, R. Sukenik) but as one of "hyper realists," creators of a unique literary brand of "urban American realism" (Carroll, 2010). However, to reduce his creative innovation to a realistic model is to neglect the specificity of his generic discoveries, as well as new directions in the development of American postmodernist literature.

Dixon's postmodernist strategy in the novel *End of I*., as in everything what Dixon wrote, is detected at the start. The author makes the reader a witness of the birth of his novel. The first line of the novel, which the writer/hero is writing, resembles Proustian "cup of tea," or Joyce's epiphany. The "revelation" gives the author a special feeling of incarnation. In the text, this birth-moment is emphasized by the word whole: "he tries the following line, which popped into his head whole a minute ago and seemed sufficiently intriguing for him" (Dixon, 2006, p. 1). The author's emotional state is contrasted with his physical state because we have no idea how the author looks like, how old he is, what his life circumstances are, but we know other minute personal details: he is "too lazy" to get out of his chair, and at the same time "just energetic enough" – ready to sit down at the desk immediately. Probably, therefore, the story of a school friend Marty Newman begins suddenly, and the reader feels relief because now he knows this line is an accomplice in this creative process. The sense of complicity arising in the reader is not accidental. Stephen Dixon creates a scene of a writer's creative process, projecting himself in this text as well. In one of the interviews, he admits, "If the readers are sleeping through the first few lines, they miss what happened" (Epstein, 2002). For him, every line may be a catalyst: "The line is a catalyst" (Libman, 2011).

Such line, like the above-mentioned one - line-epiphany, line-prayer, line-remembrance - is what "is always stayed with him" (Dixon, 2006, p. 139). The chapter "Party" begins with the line-exhortation: "She wants to go. Fine, let her" (Dixon, 2006, p. 77), the chapter "Go" starts with the paragraph that crystallizes the themes and emotions of the whole text. Often the lines in Dixon's text are based on the principle of a single extended paragraph. The textual space lacks punctuation; however, the different and distant ideas form a semantic unity. This stylistic discrepancy creates an effect of estrangement. There are no

paragraphs, and no pauses for a respite in reading, no graphic alignment of dialogues. The whole text is one continuing, compound sentence, broken unsystematically by quotation marks. What is created is a life-narrative that relates to life in flux.

The discrepancy becomes apparent in temporal "failures" when a sentence relating to the present suddenly introduces the story about the past. "He forgets what things they did at I.'s apartment" (Dixon, 2006, p. 4). This segment of the inner speech manifests the generic specificity and semantic stratification of the text. Creating a frame narrative that objectifies the author's figure and inscribes it into the text, Dixon creates "tales within tales." The result is a fascinating degree of transparency of real voice and human life. Numerous repetitions and alogisms that appear throughout the text transform raw material of life into fiction and text. The name-index I. supports its truth-claim. It is a signal for the instantaneous transition from the objective to the subjective narrative, although this process is constantly in flux and any mode could be immediately reversed. Such a transgressive border crossing enables a more flexible reading process, interrogating generic identity of the autobiographical genre, the classical balance between the author, the hero, and the narrator. The roots of this transgressive interaction are exposed by a far-fetching play with the device of pronominalization that invites a more thorough consideration.

Even if this "I" is a trope (De Man), a false name (Derrida), it cannot but highlights all the characteristics of the subject. Having acquired a floating signifier's features, the name is included in an associative game of signifiers where it lacks any direct identification, because "literature begins where the existential demystification ends" (De Man, 1989, pp. 34–35). In this case, the name appears as a trace which, in the framework of the concept of writing proposed by Derrida, is a spatial and temporal realization of distinction (Derrida, 2016, p. 70). This différance conceals both the existence of the real author's story as well as the image of the author projected through words. The double register of I./I hides and unveils the fictional status of the autobiographical subject. The authorial Dixon is both present and absent as the text progresses. The autobiographical tenet: coming alive to oneself in writing - appears as a counterpart of a provocative postmodernist restatement. It is noteworthy that the image of the author could reveal the more intimate and transparent self. Thus, he demonstrates that the authorial I is not totally separated from itself.

Conclusion

The paper intended to look at how a specific mode of postmodernist fiction, represented in the twenty-first century by Stephen Dixon's groundbreaking novels *I.* and *End of I.*, transposed the models of autobiography and fiction and resulted in creating autobiographically transgressive texts. Mimesis and anti-mimesis, humour and tragedy, the truth, authenticity, poignant sincerity, and the intellectual play constitute

the multilayered textual space in his novels. Besides, a provocative restatement of postmodernist theoretical problems is inscribed into the aesthetic texture of his novels. The narrative gains theory-directed irony throughout the text. It concerns primarily a highly arguable Philippe Lejeune's theory of autobiographical pact, as well as of P. de Man's idea of de-facement. In the light of recent advances in literary theory, the proposed term *autobiographical transgression* allows blurring the line between language and reality in autobiographical prose of the early 21st century.

Jeopardizing the truth-claim of any theory, Dixon's novels manifest the search for a new image of the auto/bio/graphic subject. In response to Roland Barthes's exclamation, "Do I not know that, in the field of the subject, there is no referent?" (Barthes, 1977, p. 20), Dixon developed a special poetics of I.-texts in which he demonstrates the respect of the artist for the ambivalence of any truth-claims, trying to deepen the generic perspective in the study of transgressive life-narrative.

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