

Egopolis in a State of Crisis: On the Role of Autobiographical Places in Reportage Prose – Charlie LeDuff's *Detroit: An American Autopsy*

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In his 1936 paper *Autobiografizm* [Autobiographism], Karol Irzykowski introduced the notion of crypto-autobiographism, a term he used to describe the covert embedding of an author's biographical experiences into artistic work, an impulse driven by writers' fear of being accused of excessive exhibitionism.¹ This mode of thinking was later decisively disrupted in the era of late capitalism, dominated by a phenomenon that Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska vividly called "the invasion of autobiographism."² The expansive nature of this form is evidenced by the fact that today it reaches far beyond literary practice, becoming one of the central, trans-

¹ Karol Irzykowski, "Autobiografizm" [Autobiographism], *Rocznik Literacki* (1936): 36–39.

² Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska, *Między autobiografią a literaturą* [Between autobiography and literature] (Warszawa: PWN, 1993), 9.

generic categories present also in media discourse³. Autobiography is no longer associated solely with a separate, monumental work explicitly bearing that subtitle, in which – as Artur Hellich writes – the author “[...] turns inward, converses with themselves, because their aim is to understand and describe how they became who they are.”⁴ In an age of blurred genre boundaries, of “blurred genres,”⁵ and even diagnoses of their death,⁶ fragments of autobiographical motifs emerge with increasing clarity also within journalistic texts – texts that, by definition, are oriented not toward exploring the author’s inner life but toward, to quote Hanna Krall, “writing down the world.”⁷

One journalistic form clearly marked by autobiographical intent is reportage, which – as an important component of the culture industry⁸ – has, in the “age of the document,”⁹ successfully adapted to the logic and expectations of the market, coherently combining cognitive and affective elements into factographic stories about the world enriched with numerous autobiographical traces.¹⁰ In the universe of non-fiction prose, the “autobiographical element” spans a wide spectrum: from extensive references to one’s own biography woven into journalistic texts¹¹ (see, for example, *Trębacz z Tembisy* [The Trumpeter from Tembisa] by Wojciech Jagielski or *Nie ma* [There Is Not] by Mariusz Szczygieł); through a distinct subgenre known as the self-reportage (e.g., *Świadek* [The Witness] by Robert Rient); through reportage sagas that document an author’s family history¹² (Monika Sznajderman’s *Falszerze pieprzu* [The Pepper Forgers] or Maciej Zaremba Bielawski’s *Dom z dwiema wieżami* [The House with Two Towers]); all the way to forms created by reporters that are par excellence autobiographical¹³ (Hunter S. Thompson’s *Królestwo lęku* [Kingdom of Fear]) or reportage-autobiographical (Andrzej Muszyński’s *Dom ojców* [The House of Fathers]).

³ See Monika Wiszniowska, “Autobiograficzne reportaże książkowe. Kategoria genologiczna i jej odmiany” [Autobiographical book-length reportage: a genological category and its variations], *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 2 (2022): 101–117.

⁴ Artur Hellich, “Niechęć do wyznawania. O kulturze autobiografii w Polsce” [Reluctance to confess: on the culture of autobiography in Poland], *Autobiografia* 2 (2016): 22.

⁵ Clifford Geertz, “O gatunkach zmaconych. Nowe konfiguracje myśli społecznej” [Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought], translated into Polish by. Zdzisław Łapiński, *Teksty Drugie* 2 (1990): 113–130.

⁶ Stanisław Balbus, “Zagłada gatunków” [The extinction of genres], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (1999): 25–39.

⁷ See Jacek Antczak, *Reporterka. Rozmowy z Hanną Krall* [Reporter. Interviews with Hanna Krall] (Warszawa: Agora, 2015), 85.

⁸ See Dominik Antonik, “Czy prawda może być medialna? O wątpliwej autonomii reportażu i potrzebie małych kryzysów” [Can truth be attractive for media? On the questionable autonomy of reportage and the need for small crises], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2019): 223–239.

⁹ Zygmunt Ziątek, *Wiek dokumentu. Inspiracje dokumentarne w polskiej prozie współczesnej* [The age of the document: documentary inspirations in contemporary Polish prose] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 1999).

¹⁰ See Joanna Jeziorska-Haładyj, *Tekstowe wykładniki fikcji na przykładzie reportażu i powieści autobiograficznej* [Textual indicators of fiction: the case of reportage and the autobiographical novel] (Warszawa: Fundacja Akademia Humanistyczna, Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2013), 61.

¹¹ See Katarzyna Frukacz, “Autor (w) reportażu. Personalizacja tekstu reporterskiego w dobie mediamorfozy” [The author in/of reportage: personalization of the journalistic text in the age of mediamorphosis], in: *Trzydzieści. Polska w reportażu, reportaż w Polsce po 1989 roku* [Thirty: Poland in reportage, reportage in Poland after 1989], edited by Elżbieta Pawlak-Hejno, Magdalena Piechota (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2020), 15–30.

¹² See Edyta Żyrek-Horodyska, “Reportażowa saga rodzinna. Fuzja gatunków i dziennikarska archiwistyka” [A family reportage saga: the fusion of genres and journalistic archiving], *Zeszyty Naukowe KUL* 4 (2019): 133–148.

¹³ See Edyta Żyrek-Horodyska, “Reporterska gonzo(auto)biografia. O «Królestwie lęku» Huntera S. Thompsona” [A gonzo (auto)biographical reportage: On Hunter S. Thompson’s Kingdom of Fear], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (2023): 139–153.

In light of Paul de Man's theory, virtually every text has an autobiographical dimension to some degree¹⁴, even if it is effectively camouflaged by its author. One manifestation of the personalization of reportage discourse is the mapping, within a journalistic text, of autobiographical places which, on the one hand, may serve as a starting point for the reporter to construct a narrative often of an interventionist character, and on the other, as an important tool enabling the author's presence within the space of the reportage volume. The aim of this paper is to reconstruct, with the aid of geopoetic tools, the most important roles that autobiographical places may play in the work of contemporary reporters, as well as to analyse in detail, within this context, the volume *Detroit: An American Autopsy* by the American reporter and Pulitzer Prize winner Charlie LeDuff.¹⁵ My concern will be to examine how this reportage activates the discourse of autobiographism as a consequence of the reporter's return to his native metropolis. The mediated Detroit – as I initially assume – acquires in this volume the status of an egopolis: a city abandoned and reclaimed, whose biography becomes tightly interwoven with the reporter's autobiography, thereby influencing the identity of the subject who reconstructs it.

Autobiographical places and their reportage realizations

In his 1999 essay *Zagłada gatunków* [The Extinction of Genres], Stanisław Balbus drew attention to the advancing blurring of precise boundaries between literary and non-literary forms of expression – a development he traced to “[...] the settling, within artistic literature, of such forms of practical communication as reportage, biography, and autobiography [...]”¹⁶. Book-length reportage, virtually from the moment of its emergence, was shaped by an autobiographical diction – evident, for instance, in the distinctly personal tone of the works of Egon Erwin Kisch or Melchior Wańkowicz. In late modernity, the genre's autobiographical dispositions acquired yet another important dimension, one stemming from the deepening marketization of reportage prose. The intimization of journalistic discourse and the self-presentational techniques employed by reporters have now become a crucial element of communicative practice and an important component of marketing strategy – key, from the perspective of the contemporary culture industry. In an era of global interest in autobiography, autofiction, and self-reportage, the figure of the creator becomes the primary instance that “binds together” the individual components of the reportage project, which reaches its audience with the status of a brand¹⁷. Ryszard Kapuściński had already written about the author as the central binding force of a reportage narrative:

In all these books, I write about myself, about what has happened to me and about what I have seen. And I do not take a single step beyond that – beyond personal, direct experience. There is

¹⁴See Paul de Man, “Autobiografia jako od-twarzanie” [Autobiography as De-facement], translated by Maria Bożenna Fedewicz, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2 (1986): 310.

¹⁵See Charlie LeDuff, *Detroit. An American Autopsy* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2013). All the cited fragments in English come from this edition [PZ].

¹⁶Balbus, 31.

¹⁷See Dominik Antonik, *Autor jako marka. Literatura w kulturze audiowizualnej społeczeństwa informacyjnego* [Author as brand: literature in the audiovisual culture of the information society] (Kraków: Universitas, 2014).

not a single text there that is not a description of a personal experience, an adventure [...]. Once someone asked me: well, fine, but who actually is the protagonist of *Imperium* [Imperium]? As if there were no protagonist. How can there be no protagonist? *I am the protagonist*. Who is the protagonist of *Heban* [The Shadow of the Sun]? *I am the protagonist of Heban*; I write about myself – this is my story¹⁸.

Drawing attention to the geobiographical dimension of reportage writing seems justified for at least two reasons. First, such a perspective is encouraged by the contemporary “crisis of grand narratives”, observed also within reportage prose, the consequence of which is a strong intimization and personalization of the genre. Without laying claim to a panoramic view of reality, it is often reduced to a private micro-narrative. It evolves into forms described as self-reportage or intimate reportage¹⁹, whose thematic dominant is the foregrounded interdependence of space and autobiography. Second, the topocentric-autobiographical dimension of reportage prose appears to be a result of the changing expectations of the contemporary media audience, who increasingly display voyeuristic expectations toward reportage – expectations manifested in a desire for closer insight into the private life of the reporter.

Tomasz Olczyk, analysing the process by which people in positions of power become celebrities, identified as its components “[...] particular ways of attracting attention, the privatization of one’s image, [and] the construction of intimate bonds at a distance [...]”²⁰. Similar mechanisms can be observed today among many reporters who, to quote Olczyk once again, adapt “[...] those media behaviours of celebrities that they consider effective in the game for attention and the emotional engagement of audiences”²¹. Introducing autobiographical places into journalistic texts thus becomes an important element in the privatization of the author’s image and, consequently, a significant step toward acquiring the attention capital of the contemporary media audience. The effects of this process on reportage prose are, of course, multifaceted. The overrepresentation of the reporter within the text – vividly described by Katarzyna Frukacz as “contamination by the reporter” – for the poetics of the genre signifies both “a manifestation of a subjective point of view” and “a violation of the objectivized convention of reportage”²².

Under the term “autobiographical place”, Małgorzata Czermińska understands a specific territory known to the reader from the given author’s biography – one that exists not only as

¹⁸“Od historii do antropologii spotkania. Z Ryszardem Kapuścińskim rozmawia Gabriela Łęcka” [From history to the anthropology of encounter. An interview with Ryszard Kapuściński by Gabriela Łęcka], *Opcje* 2 (1999): 36.

¹⁹See Beata Nowacka, “Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego reportaż intymny” [Ryszard Kapuściński’s intimate reportage], in: “Życie jest z przenikania...”. Szkice o twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego [“Life is made of interpenetration...”: essays on the work of Ryszard Kapuściński], edited by Bogusław Wróblewski (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2008), 121–128.

²⁰Tomasz Olczyk, “Celebrytyzacja polityki w opiniach wyborców” [The celebrity-ization of politics in voters’ opinions], *Preferencje Polityczne. Postawy, Identyfikacje, Zachowania* 8 (2014): 163.

²¹Olczyk, 163.

²²Katarzyna Frukacz, “Między literackością a podmiotowością: nowy wymiar «skażenia» polskiego reportażu (Na przykładzie «Zapisków na biletach» Michała Olszewskiego)” [Between literariness and subjectivity: the new dimension of the Polish reportage “contamination” (on the example of *Zapiski na biletach* by Michał Olszewski)], *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 1 (2013): 154.

a textual representation but also as a concrete geographical space²³, prompting the reader to seek extratextual references. Although this category was originally intended for the analysis of literary texts, the scholar noted that it may also be extended to other forms of creative activity, such as film, painting, or photography²⁴. Czermińska wrote:

More precisely, what is at stake is the point of contact between a writer's biography and his or her creative work, understood broadly – as the totality of all preserved utterances by a given author. This includes works traditionally classified as literature, together with journalistic pieces, private notes, statements recorded on audio or film media, as well as works in other arts, if the author practiced them²⁵.

According to Czermińska's suggestions, "the condition for a given writer to create an autobiographical place is [...] both his or her inclination to adopt an autobiographical stance and the possession of a well-developed topographic imagination"²⁶. This characterizes creators "[...] endowed with a strong sensory sensitivity, interested in the richness of the concrete, attuned to the significance of material detail"²⁷. In non-fiction writing, the space foregrounded in this way becomes not merely a background but – alongside characters and events – one of the most important components of the journalistic text.

Autobiographical places, according to Czermińska, have an individual, singular character²⁸. This is the case even when the textual representations concern spaces already well known, such as Paris, Rome, or New York. "In the case of places that already possess a distinct cultural symbolism, the image of an autobiographical place belonging to a particular writer grows in part out of the existing tradition, and in part alters and enriches the inherited image with a new, personal tone"²⁹. Czermińska emphasizes that many authors have succeeded in creating a "myth of a place". This is the principle on which Schulz's Drohobych operates, but also – if we attempt to apply this category to reportage prose – the Prague portrayed by the already-mentioned Kisch, which in the self-reportage volume *Jarmark sensacji* [The Sensation Fair] is presented as the territory where the reporter matures into journalism and gets his first editorial experience.

Returns to spaces remembered from childhood or early youth undergo – Czermińska writes – a process of archetypization. Evoking this period activates in the author a work of memory grounded in strategies that either idealize the past or attempt to find a key to its interpretation through the prism of the chronotope. Kapuściński depicts the land of his childhood—Pińsk—on the pages of *Imperium* [Imperium]. As we read in *Lapidaria* [Lapidaria], the reporter even intended to devote a separate publication to this place. In an entry dated 26 September 2004,

²³Małgorzata Czermińska, "Miejsca autobiograficzne. Propozycja w ramach geopoetyki" [Autobiographical places: a proposal within geopoetics], *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2011): 183–200.

²⁴Czermińska, 186.

²⁵Czermińska, 183.

²⁶Czermińska, 190.

²⁷Czermińska, 188.

²⁸Czermińska, 186.

²⁹Czermińska, 186.

he noted: “Other ideas: a book about Malinowski’s stay on the Trobriand Islands and his concept of fieldwork. A book about Pińsk. A book about photography”³⁰. The postponement of these plans was forced upon the reporter by his deteriorating health, and ultimately, their realization was cut short by his death. A space remembered from childhood also inspired the creation of Magdalena Grzebałkowska’s book *1945. Wojna i pokój* [1945: War and Peace], in which the reporter recalls her childhood spent in the Recovered Territories:

I was born in the Recovered Territories 27 years after the war. The houses in my town were German, as were the armchairs in my grandmother’s room, the landscape painting above her table, the crystal decanter. The taps in our Sopot apartment were marked *kalt* and *warm*³¹.

Another strategy for creating autobiographical places is the act of domesticating them – transforming a foreign space into one that is close and significant from the perspective of the reporter’s life trajectory. An example is the image of Africa in Kapuściński’s work, discussed by Czermińska³². Jarosław Mikołajewski captured this attitude in his book *Sentymentalny portret Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* [A Sentimental Portrait of Ryszard Kapuściński], written after Kapuściński’s death. He recalled: “Rysiek often said that in Africa he had found his hometown, and in African poverty the poverty of Pińsk – pre-war, from his childhood”³³.

Czermińska observes that, in the case of autobiographical places, a space may be evoked either through the introduction of specific toponyms or through their omission while nonetheless leaving the reader various textual hints that allow the identification of a particular location. Thus, considering the title of the reportage volume alone, LeDuff’s concrete *Detroit...*, discussed in this paper, may be assigned to the first of these categories. Zbigniew Rokita’s indeterminate *Kajś* [Somewhere], a reportage articulating the author’s Silesian identity, saturated with personal passages, in which autobiographical places play an important role, belongs to the second category. Let us add that situated somewhat between these two poles are the spaces evoked through pseudonymization. This strategy can be observed in Rokita’s *Odrzania* [Odrzania], whose title, on the one hand, conjures a concrete territory of the Recovered Territories, and on the other allows one to think of that terrain as a land delineated by the reporter’s imagination.

Czermińska identifies several types of autobiographical places. The first is defined by the opposition between the place of movement (a chosen place – one that comes into being through being on the road and arriving at a point where one stops; reportage travel writing is certainly a rich reservoir of such places) and the fixed place (the place in which one exists. These are primordial, inherited spaces, often mapped, for example, in self-reportage)³⁴. Czermińska also lists a number of more detailed categories. She mentions observed places –

³⁰Ryszard Kapuściński, *Lapidaria IV-VI* (Warszawa: Agora, 2008), 291.

³¹Magdalena Grzebałkowska, *1945. Wojna i pokój* [1945. War and peace] (Warszawa: Agora, 2015), 72.

³²Czermińska, 191.

³³Jarosław Mikołajewski, *Sentymentalny portret Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* [A sentimental portrait of Ryszard Kapuściński] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2008), 10.

³⁴Czermińska, 192.

spaces that give a sense of rootedness, with which the creator is strongly connected³⁵. Such is the character of the Łódź described by Wojciech Górecki, to which the journalist, born in that city, returns repeatedly in his reportage books (*Łódź przeżyła katharsis* [Łódź Survived a Catharsis], 1998, and *Łódź. Miasto po przejściach* [Łódź: A City Weathered by Hardship], 2020). A reporter employing this strategy of presenting an autobiographical place – being a person raised in a given environment – appears as someone who knows the problems of that place intimately and views it from a perspective shaped by the emotional involvement of the writer. Another category consists of remembered places – once fixed, but lost as a result of escape, growing up, exile, and so on³⁶. An example here may be the Żoliborz *Domeczek* (“Little House”), described with tenderness by Melchior Wańkowicz on the pages of *Ziele na kraterze* [Herbs on a Crater], which was destroyed during the Second World War. In the introduction to the volume, the reporter noted:

I wrote through the prism that is for me the most distinct – my own home. [...] So I would only like the reader, through its story, to glimpse the stories of their own homes and their own families, and for the recollection thus awakened to tear, for a moment, the unbearable sediment of life³⁷.

Another category consists of imagined places – locations not personally known to the author but evoked through family stories³⁸. Such is the character of the descriptions of places based on the architecture of memory, reconstructed from recollections, photographs, and documents in Monika Sznajderman’s *Falszerze pieprzu* [The Pepper Forgers]. Another category comprises shifted places, that is, so-called second homelands, consciously chosen by the reporter³⁹. Within these categories, one may consider, for example, Spitsbergen, where Ilona Wiśniewska—the author of *Białe* [White] – settled after leaving Poland. Czermińska also mentions chosen places, which one does not inhabit permanently but only visits⁴⁰. An example of such a space is the Czech lands of Mariusz Szczygieł, described in his reportage volumes *Gottland* [Gottland] and *Zrób sobie raj* [Make Yourself a Paradise], as well as in the form of *Osobisty przewodnik po Pradze* [A Personal Guide to Prague], promoted with a blurb that foregrounds the reporter’s exceptionally emotional relationship to the Czech capital:

PRAGUE without the Charles Bridge and without Hradčany? Yes! Mariusz Szczygieł will guide you only through his favourite places. If something isn’t here, it means it didn’t seduce me”, he says. “This book is not only a guide; it is a record of my affection for the city and for Czech culture⁴¹.

The last of the categories mentioned by Czermińska consists of touched places – locations encountered most often while travelling, in passing, yet regarded by the author as important

³⁵Czermińska, 193.

³⁶Czermińska, 194.

³⁷Melchior Wańkowicz, *Ziele na kraterze* [Herbs on a Crater] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Literatura, 2007), 9.

³⁸Czermińska, 195.

³⁹Czermińska, 195.

⁴⁰Czermińska, 197.

⁴¹Mariusz Szczygieł, *Osobisty przewodnik po Pradze* [A personal guide to Prague] (Warszawa: Dowody, 2020), tylna okładka.

for various reasons⁴². An example here may be Ziemowit Szczerek's reportage volume *Wymyślone miasto Lwów* [The Imagined City of Lviv], which documents the tension emerging between the geographically real city (one of the many, we may add, that the reporter visits in Ukraine) and its cultural imagination.

Czermińska notes that, in the process of mapping autobiographical places, creators do not have to limit themselves to activating only a single model⁴³. In liquid modernity, where the stability of a settled existence is often replaced by the figure of the nomad, constant movement, so typical of a reporter's work, determines the ever-changing forms of how they situate themselves in the world. "Within a single body of work and a single biography, there usually emerges a hierarchy: one model dominates, others are subordinated to it and complement it or compete with it. There are no rules here anymore, only individual writerly decisions."⁴⁴ This fluidity of categories is perfectly revealed in the topographically oriented prose of Szczerek, the author of, among others, *Paczka radomskich* [A Pack of Radom Boys] and *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajna historia Słowian* [Mordor Will Come and Eat Us, or The Secret History of the Slavs], who, in order to better understand his native Radom, decided to look at it from the distance provided by Ukraine:

Radom [...] is eastern, and perhaps that's precisely what never quite sat right with me. Because I never felt particularly good in Radom, I always felt good in the south, in the pro-Austrian little Galicia. It always seemed warmer to me, more pleasantly nestled into all those little valleys, with its small towns with their squares and town halls. And perhaps that is why I began to feel drawn eastward – to see what this whole business with my native Radom was about. Where this eastern quality of it came from, and what it means in its, let's say, original version. And since Ukraine was relatively the closest and, as it seemed to me then, the most interesting, I started travelling precisely there⁴⁵.

The examples gathered here of the functioning of autobiographical places in reportage prose indicate the possibility of situating it within the framework of the auto/bio/geo/graphy discussed by Elżbieta Rybicka. The connections forming within the genre between autobiography and space make it possible to position the journalist's account of their own life within the context of contemporary issues. As Rybicka states, "this neologism is intended, on the one hand, to refer back to the tradition of autobiographical and biographical writing, and, on the other, to indicate that there exists a kind of personal-document literature in which the history of a human being is understood through geographical places"⁴⁶. This mode of narrating the world may be regarded as an important perspective from the point of view of reportage discourse, allowing the individual to be portrayed on a broader plane—as someone

⁴²Czermińska, 198.

⁴³Czermińska, 199.

⁴⁴Czermińska, 199.

⁴⁵Ewelina Mokrzecka, "Ziemowit Szczerek: Polska czerpie perwersyjną przyjemność, że ktoś jest gorszy" [Ziemowit Szczerek: Poland derives a perverse pleasure from the fact that someone is worse off], <https://zw.lt/kultura-historia/ziemowit-szczerek-polska-czerpie-perwersyjna-przyjemnosc-ze-ktos-jest-gorszy/>, date of access: 11.02.2024.

⁴⁶Elżbieta Rybicka, "Auto/bio/geo/grafie" [Auto/bio/geo/graphies], *Białostockie Studia Literaturoznawcze* 4 (2013): 11.

who remains in interaction with a specific geographical location and subsequently transposes it creatively into the fabric of the journalistic text.

Detroit as an Autobiographical Place in Charlie LeDuff's *Detroit*...

Published in 2013⁴⁷, the reportage volume *Detroit: An American Autopsy* is a narrative enriched with numerous autobiographical traces, whose titular protagonist is LeDuff's hometown – sinking ever deeper into chaos as a result of rising crime, growing unemployment, pervasive corruption, and disastrously mismanaged politics. In this text, the journalist activates the motif of returning to one's family home. Yet in his descriptions of the city, he is far from invoking conventionalized images of an idyllic land of happy childhood. In 2007, having decided to leave *The New York Times* (after ten years of working for the paper), LeDuff takes a job at the *Detroit News*. He explains this decision in detail in the book:

It was time to go home.

Part of it was for my daughter. Back in Detroit, there were grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins. There was a culture. A family.

Part of it was for me [...].

Circling back to Detroit was instinct. [...] Detroit might be the epicenter, a funhouse mirror and future projection of America. An incredibly depressed city in its death swoon.

But it could also be a Candy Land from a reporter's perspective. Decay. Mile after mile of rotten buildings, murder, leftover people. One fucking depressing, dysfunctional big glowing ball of color.

Une unbelievable story after another⁴⁸.

By admitting to the half-private, half-professional motivations behind his return to Detroit, LeDuff appears simultaneously to mark out two main narrative axes of the reportage. The first will centre on autobiographical references, while the second will adopt a strictly reportage-oriented perspective, dominated in turn by two thematic areas: politics (which the journalist discusses by invoking the actions of the city's corrupt authorities) and society (the fates of Detroit's residents: victims of crime and their relatives, factory workers, firefighters, the unhoused). The element binding these two areas together is the author's hometown – presented both from a contemporary perspective (that is, corresponding to the period when LeDuff and his family decided to live there again) and from a retrospective one (activated in the numerous recollective passages of the reportage, in which the journalist returns in thought to his childhood spent near Joy Road, but also to the period of the city's founding).

The image of LeDuff's Detroit mapped in the reportage is a territory I refer to as an *egopolis* – an autobiographical reportage city that activates, within the space of the journalistic text, two discourses at once: the personal and the geographical. In Detroit, as if through a lens, the gravest afflictions of America in the early twenty-first century converge, but also the most powerful traumas that the writer must confront upon returning home. Owing to the book's

⁴⁷The Polish translation was published in 2015.

⁴⁸LeDuff, 24.

enrichment with autobiographical references, the volume discussed here presents itself as an example of clear generic dispersion. By combining within it two overlapping thematic forces—the autobiographical and the reportorial—LeDuff signals this already in the prologue, where he reconstructs the main motivations behind the creation of the book and identifies the key components of his auto/bio/geo/graphic stance:

It is a book of reportage. A memoir of a reporter returning home – only he cannot find the home he once knew. This is a book about living people getting on with the business of surviving in a place that has little use for anyone anymore except those left here. It is about waking up one morning and being told you are obsolete and not wanting to believe it, but knowing it's true. It is a book about a rough town and tough people during arguably some of the most historic and cataclysmic years in the American experience⁴⁹.

The first of the perspectives mentioned above, described as the reportage perspective, is grounded in a detailed presentation of a post-apocalyptic vision of the urban space. The second – memoiristic and autobiographical – arises from the sense of nostalgia accompanying the author. The reportorial image of the “Motor City” thus stretches between the poles of fear and fascination. The notions of the city that were supposed to provide LeDuff with familial stability, rootedness, and a sense of home are continually confronted with the vision of collapsing factories, depopulating neighbourhoods, and the disintegration of all moral principles.

On the pages of the reportage – which scholars and critics often discuss in the context of gonzo journalism – an important, inherently “gonzoid” component consists of the first-person, highly expressive narration; numerous self-referential digressions written in a forceful style laced with vulgarities; and the abrupt collision of low and high linguistic registers. These tendencies are perfectly illustrated in those passages where LeDuff reflects on matters of craft, on the role of contemporary media, or on the aims guiding him in his professional work. Detroit – the city-as-metaphor – produces in the reporter the identity of a fervent activist. It is worth pointing to at least one fragment in which the lofty image of a reporter seeking to bring justice to Detroit is confronted with the “real” challenges of everyday life, captured in a satirical punchline:

I was going to become a real reporter. Someone had to answer for this shit. [...] The people of Greater Detroit deserved better than to be robbed by their leader and forgotten by their neighbors. I threw my cigarette butt into the sewer grate. I looked up into the rain. That's when a bird shit on my face⁵⁰.

Such a mode of storytelling – in which a nostalgic, elevating narrative is repeatedly interrupted by colloquialised passages – may, according to Justyna E. Dąbrowska, be appealing to readers: “its digressive nature makes it possible to situate events within a broader context, which in

⁴⁹LeDuff, 15.

⁵⁰LeDuff, 131

turn enables a deeper and more vivid commentary”⁵¹. The saturation of the reportage with self-referential remarks becomes a technique that enhances the credibility of the stories presented, whose authenticity is guaranteed by the clearly outlined perspective of a witness or participant visible throughout the volume. LeDuff openly reveals to the reader the backstage of his craft, repeatedly returning to the thought of how profoundly his hometown has marked his life.

The strong degree of subjectivisation in LeDuff’s discourse should be viewed as the result of the author’s recourse to colloquial and vulgar language combined with an emotional, highly metaphorical style. In the self-referential passages, the writer uses factual detail sparingly, but readily turns to personal impressions that evoke a quasi-somatic experience of the *egopolis*:

Detroit was beginning to wear my ass out. I didn’t have the usual reportorial detachment anymore. This was my home. This was where I lived. This was where I was raising my kid [...]. I looked out of the window, realizing that Detroit was doing something to me that a story’s never done to me before. It was hurting [...]. Before, when I was in the rough places of desperation, I had a plane ticket out. Now I was living in it, a captive, native son⁵².

I felt bad, hollow. A middle-aged fuckup crumbling under the bulk of a dying city. It had infected my private life, which was no longer separate from my public one. [...] I thought about my little girl and wondered what I had done bringing her back to this shit hole⁵³.

The setting of the book is shaped by a personalised vision of a city coming apart – one that evokes an authentic heart of darkness. It is a place that, on the one hand, “hurts”, “crushes”, and “infects” the reporter, yet on the other – tinged with a certain tenderness – is described as “home”, of which LeDuff remains a “captive, native son”.

LeDuff’s attitude toward this autobiographical place takes essentially two forms: that of ambitious interventionism and that of gonzo-style commercialism. On the one hand, the journalist wants his reportage to attain the status of a text that can “change the world,” dreaming of a reactive publication capable of exerting real influence: “And I made myself a promise. I’d build a castle of words so high on the banks of the Detroit River that they couldn’t help but see it from Times Square.”⁵⁴ On the other hand, LeDuff bluntly calls Detroit a “big glowing ball of color” for a reporter, confessing—with the openness characteristic of a gonzo journalist: “Why not admit it? I am a reporter. A leech. A merchant of misery. Bad things are good for us reporters. We are body collectors of sorts.”⁵⁵

⁵¹Justyna E. Dąbrowska, “Obraz państwa postapokaliptycznego w prozie Ziemowita Szczepka” [The image of a post-apocalyptic state in the prose of Ziemowit Szczepka], *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska* 2 (2016): 188–189.

⁵²LeDuff, 99.

⁵³LeDuff, 133–134.

⁵⁴LeDuff, 25.

⁵⁵LeDuff, 24.

The autobiographical places woven into the reportage function as an affective component – certain kinds of memory generators that trigger in the writer recollections from his early youth. On the reportorial map of LeDuff's Detroit, a prominent place is occupied by the area in the city's east side along East Jefferson Avenue, where the reporter's mother once ran a flower shop. Frequently recalled as well are the Brightmoor neighbourhood, where his beloved sister died, and Joy Road, the street on which the LeDuff family home once stood. It is these locations that seem to delineate most fully the geobiographical framework of the journalist's memory:

My sister, my three brothers and I grew up on Joy Road, the dividing line between Livonia and Westland – two working-class suburbs about three miles west of the Detroit city limits. Our house was an equal distance from the shopping mall and the Ford plant, somewhere between the Jeffries Freeway and the dead Rouge River⁵⁶.

But Joy Road wasn't always so joyful. Sometimes, even with all the love and the best intentions in the world, things get balled up. What happened in the 1970s and early '80s had never happened before in American life⁵⁷.

Paul Ricœur, writing on the processes of emplotting one's life, emphasised the importance of childhood memories – often indistinct and imprecise, yet crucial in the formation of identity⁵⁸. In the case of *Detroit...*, this identity is shaped both by concrete, precisely located points on the city's map and by the deeply rooted individual memories attached to them. Real and imagined autobiographical places become a bridge between the past and the present. It was from these places that LeDuff once set out to travel the world, and to them – full of apprehension and hope – he returned years later. The buildings and streets he observes while working on the reportage serve as effective indices of the past:

We drove past the hulking wreck of the Packard plant – a square mile of dead factory. After a half-century of rot, it still stood as a disgraceful reminder of our great past and sordid present. Its founding president was Henry B. Joy [...].

Now all that was left of his empire was a ruin that burned at least once a month, usually from the torches of scrappers⁵⁹.

Through the metaphorical and personified optics applied to the urban space, a certain degree of subjectivity is granted to it. The journalist undoubtedly restores to the places he describes the ability to bear witness to the past. Referring to the terminology of Stanisław Rosiek, LeDuff's depictions of contemporary Detroit may be described as an urban *necrography* – a posthumous biography documenting the fate of the ruins left after the former glory of the "Motor City," evoking its proud past while also foreshadowing its vanitative future.

⁵⁶LeDuff, 33.

⁵⁷LeDuff, 33-34.

⁵⁸See Paul Ricœur, *O sobie samym jako innym* [Oneself as Another], translated by Bogdan Chęłstowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2003), 190.

⁵⁹LeDuff, 93.

Contemporary Detroit is presented as a post-apocalyptic space – a territory plunged into darkness after a catastrophe, over which hangs an aura of imminent death. Such a vision of a reclaimed yet simultaneously lost autobiographical place triggers in the journalist a series of negative reactions, stripping him of the distance typically associated with the reportorial discourse. The journalist's "affective condition" – to use Michał Paweł Markowski's term⁶⁰ – boils down to an almost somatically experienced sense of loss:

The collapse came on, and it came on quickly. Like a tsunami. I don't know if it was drugs that ruined the neighborhood or civic neglect. Was it the disappearance of the car jobs or the raping of the middle class by Wall Street? Had people just given up? I didn't know. But it hurt to look at it. Vanity. In the end, it was all vanity⁶¹.

LeDuff offers an extensive reconstruction of the "life story" of his hometown. He recounts its eighteenth-century origins while deliberately forgoing a strictly factographic narrative in favour of a historical reconstruction written in a gonzo spirit. For example, when describing Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, who founded the city in the strait (Fr. *détroit*) connecting Lakes Erie and Huron, LeDuff portrays him in the following manner:

Cadillac also illegally trafficked in liquor and furs with the natives and was, for a short time, thrown in prison. That would also make Cadillac Detroit's first dope dealer⁶².

Against this backdrop – and with comparable detail – LeDuff reconstructs his own family's history, tightly interwoven with the fate of the city. It is worth noting that at this point, the generic boundaries of the reportage become blurred once again. He incorporates into the book extensive fragments of a journalistic family saga. Inserted as digressions, the personal, retrospective narrative is meant to show how, for many generations, the wild stories of the gonzo reporter's relatives have been bound to Detroit's turbulent past:

And thus Detroit was born in July 1701.

My family was here from the earliest days. It began with my ancestor Joseph Chevalier, a Frenchman from Normandy who came to Montreal to carve a life out of the wilderness.⁶³

Let us add that the reporter's effort to reconstruct Detroit's biography takes on an almost detective-like quality. Moving through a thicket of details, the journalist becomes a meticulous investigator of his autobiographical place, revealing to the reader the backstage of his material-gathering process and assessing the reliability of his sources.

In the reportage volume under discussion, all three autobiographical stances identified by

⁶⁰Michał Paweł Markowski, "Emocje. Hasło encyklopedyczne w trzech częściach i dwudziestu trzech rozdziałach (nie licząc motto)" [Emotions: an encyclopedic entry in three parts and twenty-three chapters (not counting the motto)], in: *Pamięć i afekty* [Memory and affects], edited by Zofia Budrewicz, Roma Sendyka, Ryszard Nycz (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2014), 350.

⁶¹LeDuff, 291.

⁶²LeDuff, 137.

⁶³LeDuff, 137.

Czermińska coexist⁶⁴. The strategy of testimony, focused on documenting the city's current and historical circumstances, dominates the passages that are reportage *par excellence*. The stance of confession, approaching the mode of intimacy, is clearly visible in the numerous autobiographical fragments in which the reporter speaks of the emotions and sensations accompanying his return to his hometown:

I've been most everywhere on the planet: war zones, deserts, the Arctic Circle, campaign buses, opium dens, even Albuquerque, but I've never returned to that section of Detroit called Brightmoor. I was afraid of it and would drive miles to avoid it. The memories are too hard⁶⁵.

Brightmoor – treated until now as an “empty” place, erased from family narratives – re-materializes on the pages of the reportage. What helps the reporter recover the memory of his sister's death is a trip to the Detroit neighborhood where the woman spent the last moments of her life (the Flame bar, the abandoned lot). In doing so, LeDuff shares with readers an abundance of intimate details from her turbulent biography (prostitution, drug abuse, and the abandonment of her daughter are only some of the topics he discusses with meticulous attention). At this point, a kind of gonzo-reportorial exhibitionism becomes apparent. The intimist discourse he activates makes it possible to view his autobiographical stance also as a tool designed to affect the reader's attention, offering numerous points of access to the difficult, shameful, and often shocking stories from the reporter's life.

The third narrative strategy – also strongly marked throughout *Detroit...* – is the “challenge” described by Czermińska. In LeDuff's book, this challenge is tied to the gonzo convention he adopts, which sanctions acts of self-creation while also drawing the reader into the narrative frame through the many direct addresses woven into the text, introducing elements of interactivity into the otherwise linear narration:

If a suburban prosecutor and a suburban reporter fear for their lives, imagine what it's like to live in the rough Detroit neighborhoods.⁶⁶

Come to Detroit. Drive the empty, shattered boulevards, and the decrepitude of the place all Rolls out in a numb, continuous fact. After enough hours staring into it, it starts to appear normal. Average. Everyday.⁶⁷

The complex image of the city presented in the reportage makes any attempt at neatly classifying LeDuff's Detroit within one of Czermińska's types of autobiographical places highly problematic. The city functions for the reporter as a place of permanence (where he grew up and where his roots lie), but also as a place of movement (LeDuff left Detroit and later chose to return). It is an observed place, where the journalist currently lives and with which he remains emotionally entangled, but also a remembered place (the author frequently

⁶⁴See Małgorzata Czermińska, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt. Świadectwo, wyznanie, wyzwanie* [The autobiographical triangle: testimony, confession, challenge] (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

⁶⁵LeDuff, 113.

⁶⁶LeDuff, 254.

⁶⁷LeDuff, 14-15.

reaches back to childhood memories from Joy Road). By reconstructing the history of his family against the backdrop of Detroit's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century past, he simultaneously activates the notion of an imagined place, summoned into being through the work of memory and the family stories passed down from generation to generation. At the same time, he incorporates into this auto/bio/geo/graphic universe his own vision of the future when, in the final sentence of the book, he addresses his daughter – the representative of the next generation of LeDuffs – urging her not to forget that rootedness fosters a sense of belonging: "Claudette: remember where you come from, girl. Sometime in her life a bird needs to circle home."⁶⁸

Conclusions

To conclude, it should be emphasized that contemporary reportage prose is permeated with autobiographical undertones. The genre analyzed here, shaped by the author's biogeographical dominant, gravitates far more clearly toward subjective narration than toward an impersonal journalistic discourse. As Bernadetta Darska writes, adopting such an optic may require confronting numerous limitations: "there arises the possibility of censoring certain experiences, failing to activate processes of memory, and selecting recollections according to a personal hierarchy of significance"⁶⁹. The world depicted from the vantage point of personal experience is often fragmented, grounded in the repetition of the reporter's individual memories, with the writer becoming, de facto, the protagonist of his own story. As the analyses presented in this article have shown, this tendency manifests itself with particular intensity in the gonzo variant of the genre, which by its very nature remains especially susceptible to the workings of the autobiographical impulse.

In the book *Detroit: An American Autopsy*, two overarching categories come to the fore: autobiographicality and reportoriality. Their interweaving demonstrates clearly that, in contemporary reportage, the space of the big city – marked by the authorial signature of *egopolis* – no longer serves merely as a backdrop but becomes a fully fledged protagonist of the narrative: foregrounded in the very title of the reportage volume, presented in the text through personifying techniques, and endowed with its own "biography," which the author painstakingly reconstructs. This space, constituting the core of the reporter's private world, emerges as a powerful generator of memories. In the case of *Detroit...*, the story of the reporter's hometown is inextricably entwined with LeDuff's family history, delineating the two main thematic axes of the work.

As Dominik Antonik observes, in autobiographical writing "the point is not merely the act of writing but, above all, the act of self-reflection that accompanies it – the transformation

⁶⁸LeDuff, 10.

⁶⁹Bernadetta Darska, *Czas reportażu. O tym, co działo się wokół gatunku po 2010 roku* [Time of reportage. On what happened around the genre after 2010] (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego, 2023), 230.

of one's own being into a communicable text.”⁷⁰ In reportage as well, autobiographization may – of which LeDuff's book is an excellent example – be bound up with the journalist's deployment of various self-fashioning strategies. Their presence in non-fiction can be read as an attempt to reach the contemporary reader who, as Kamila Augustyn notes, has grown weary of “the repetitive structure of reportage and its uniform accounts, [...] craving, from time to time, a measure of variation, novelty and extraordinariness, even a certain eccentricity.”⁷¹ Journalists who successfully navigate today's celebrity culture, mapping autobiographical places in their texts and freely sharing details of their private lives, offer the reader a story crafted not by a detached observer but by an engaged witness and participant. With his distinctive personality, recognizable writing style, and boots in the colors of the American flag, LeDuff is undoubtedly a perfect embodiment of these tendencies.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

⁷⁰Dominik Antonik, “Przemysł autobiografii. Ghostwriting, kultura sławy i utowarowienie tożsamości” [The autobiography industry: ghostwriting, celebrity culture, and the commodification of identity], *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2019): 83.

⁷¹Augustyn, 109.

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KEYWORDS

autobiographical places

CHARLIE LEDUFF

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

ABSTRACT:

The aim of this article is to reconstruct – using a geopoetic analytical framework – the key functions that autobiographical places may perform in reportage prose. The study examines *Detroit: An American Autopsy* (2013), by the American reporter and Pulitzer Prize winner Charlie LeDuff's. The analysis shows that the mediated image of LeDuff's Detroit in this book emerges as an egopolis: a city abandoned and later reclaimed by the journalist, whose "biography" is tightly interwoven with the author's own life story, shaping his identity in the process.

autoreportage

reportage

DETROIT

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