

# Considerations about the ‘right to a biography’: Saints and intellectuals in contemporary culture

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**Abstract:** Taking its cue from Juri Lotman’s essay “*Pravo na biografiju*”, this paper re-formulates the categories proposed by Lotman in relation to the two models of the saint and the modern intellectual, the former exemplifying the perfect realization of the norm and the latter the rejection of the norm in the name of an individual rule. These two models are considered with reference to two case studies from contemporary culture, respectively provided by the Catholic saints and by intellectuals – especially semioticians. The argument in the former case, which also takes into consideration other fundamental essays by Lotman, shows that contemporary Catholic culture challenges the identification of sanctity with the ideal of perfect adherence to the norm. This notion is apparently applicable only to hagiographies seen as part of a mechanism of stabilization by which the dominating religious culture tames the explosive potential of the saintly figure. In the latter case, reflection on the theoretical and autobiographical production of several authors related to the field of semiotics shows that a third model can be added to the two identified by Lotman. This third model consists in acquiring the right to biography and carrying out autobiography not in contrast with the norm, as the modern writers studied by Lotman did, nor by dissolving oneself into the norm, but rather by dissolving oneself into the Other, that is, by opening one’s mind so as to allow the Other to become an integral part of oneself. This model is exemplified by the work by Julia Kristeva, in particular *Teresa, My Love* (2008), in that it overcomes the distinction between biography and autobiography and describes an intellectual and a saint who become “roommates”.

**Keywords:** saints; biography; autobiography; semioticians; exemplarity; mechanism of stabilization; norm

## 1. Introduction

In his essay “*Pravo na biografiju*”,<sup>2</sup> Juri Lotman (1985: 181) claims that each culture develops models of “people with a biography”, namely people whose life

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<sup>2</sup> The essay was composed in 1984 and first published in Italian as “*Il diritto alla biografia a. Il rapporto tipologico fra il testo e la personalita dell’autore*”.

stories are deemed worthy of being remembered. The “right to a biography” is reserved to individuals who follow a rule of behaviour that diverges from the habitual model prevailing in their social context. Such lives are worthy either by virtue of embodying the full realization of a cultural code, thus representing the perfect adherence to a norm or, on the contrary, by virtue of representing an exception that challenges and transgresses the established cultural code. Adopting either model – or, we might say, narrative programme – is the result of a free and active choice, but they are opposed to each other in terms of their relationship to a norm established by an external Sender (be it God or society): while the former model entails perfect conformation to a norm to such a degree that the self is dissolved into the norm, the latter is based on rejecting the shared norm in the name of creating and adhering to a personal rule, with this rule serving as the basis for defining an original and unrepeatable self. Subjects endorsing these narrative programmes must exceed ordinary behaviour either quantitatively or qualitatively. While the former model entails a quantitative criterium (respecting the norm *to an extraordinary degree of perfection*, unattainable by ordinary people), the latter instead entails a qualitative criterium (inventing and practising a *different* rule, a new form of life). In order to illustrate these two models, Lotman uses two opposing examples: the figure of the medieval saint and that of the modern (romantic) hero.

Regarding the modern model, Lotman focuses in particular on writers’ self-affirmation, showing how they progressively claimed and gained the right to biography in Russian cultural history. In this context, their role was related firstly to religious and then to civil institutions and, due to historical and political changes, their credibility was less and less acritically related to their socio-cultural status, but had to be affirmed through the construction of a public profile: this need for legitimization led to the creation of an increasingly important bond between authors’ biographies and the way their texts were received by their cultural group.

Regarding the model of the saint, the reflections in Lotman 1985 should be read in connection with his thoughts on the same subject presented in Lotman 1977. Here, Lotman observes that, in Medieval Russian culture, the norm of correct Christian behaviour was superior to all the other social norms governing the lives and behaviour of people of different statuses. The fully correct realization of this norm, however, was achieved only by rare individuals, namely saints. Generally, such correctness could be perceived from the outside, thus giving rise to public recognition of the saint as such. However, a different kind of individual, the *jurodivyj*, also enjoyed great respect and a reputation for holiness. This second model of sanctity consisted in the exterior reversal of the correct behavioural code:

the saint simulates a behaviour that contrasts with the Christian ideal, taking on the appearance of a sinner or a mad or possessed man. In so doing, the saint takes on a role that humiliates him and that, by reversing the correct Christian norm and its superiority over social norms characterized by mundane vanity, affirms it even more forcefully. According to Lotman, the *jurodivyj* is surrounded by a sacred micro-space inside which he reverses "normality". Despite its apparently subversive nature, this model is coherent with the idea of the saint as embodying perfect respect for the norm: the dissolution of the self in the norm takes on an oxymoronic character but the norm nonetheless holds valid. The *jurodivyj* does not really intend to live according to a new and individual norm, but simply to simulate a break with the norm in order to demonstrate its absolute correctness.

As these considerations show, Lotman's thought on the subjects in question is based on quite neat oppositions: there is the norm and the reversal of the norm, the dissolution of the self into the established norm and the affirmation of the self in relation to the established norm. While this dualism is suitable to account for the culture investigated by Lotman, the landscape of contemporary Western culture is more nuanced in many aspects. In this context, the oppositions identified by Lotman appear instead as the poles of several fields of tension.

The aim of this essay is therefore to rethink Lotman's categories by applying them to contemporary culture. In particular, I will compare Lotman's thought about saints to the contemporary idea of sanctity in Roman Catholicism, and Lotman's reflection on the intellectuals' conquest of the right to a biography to the tendency to autobiographic writing among authors connected to the contemporary discipline of semiotics. These case studies have been chosen because they are related to key factors in both the construction of culture and the development of semiotic thought: on the one hand, the problem of legitimizing the author and the relationship between the author and the text; on the other hand, the issue of constructing cultural models of behaviour, managing "explosive" elements inside a culture, and constructing subjectivity. Moreover, considering these different case studies suggests that there is also a third model, one that blurs the border between 'the saint' and 'the modern intellectual', thereby reconciling – almost providing a synthesis of – the two models identified by Lotman.

## 2. Saints between norm and exception

In Catholic culture, a saint can be considered a model of life perfection proposed to the faithful worldwide and, more generally, a component of the shared culture, that is, the common *encyclopedia* (Eco 2007) belonging to both believers and non-

believers.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, however – as is well known to scholars dealing with saints from a plurality of humanistic disciplines – saints represent an unsolvable paradox the comprehension of which can be improved by applying Lotman's theory.

A first paradoxical dimension of sanctity lies in the fact that saints are exceptional individuals, often endowed with extraordinary spiritual gifts and miraculous powers that cannot be imitated. At the same time, however, they are also represented as exemplary models for the faithful to imitate. Many liturgical and devotional texts, such as the martyrologies and the homilies, recommend meditating on their lives and deeds and imitating them in daily life. Exceptionality – sometimes even extravagance – is therefore the other side of the coin of the saint as the perfect incarnation of a code. As Consolino (1994: 19) observes, there is “an intrinsic contradiction in the very attempt to norm exceptionality”.

A second paradoxical aspect involves the fact that, on the one hand, saints are generally considered the most perfect realization of the imitation of Jesus Christ, seen as the “model of models”: in this sense, they embody the definition of the saint as representing an example of adhesion to an established cultural code (Lotman 1985: 182). Theologian Christian Duquoc explains this concept by affirming that the Old and New Testament provide “imperatives” which “are evident at the level of a general theory of the imitation of God's action, but are not pertinent anymore when we must search for a rule of daily action” (Duquoc 1979: 15). Sainthood models thus stem from the necessity of mediation, the need to fill “the gap between the imperative and the concrete action” (Duquoc 1979: 15). Saints' life stories are a compelling communicative device with the power to arouse the imagination and elicit empathic identification among their recipients (Cooper 1994: 109; Leone 2010: 1). As such, they convey a specific code of values and behaviours in a given culture.

On the other hand, however, saints often also represent revolutionary elements in the framework of the religious (namely ecclesiastic, institutional) and/or socio-political context in which they act. In this second sense, they challenge Lotman's typology. For instance, many saints have to face forms of hostility from ecclesiastical and/or civil institutions before their sanctity can be officially recognized. This was the case of the martyrs from the first centuries who were persecuted by the Roman Empire, for instance. In other cases, the ecclesiastical authorities themselves were hostile toward individuals who were later celebrated as examples of religiosity. For example, great mystics such as Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) and Saint Pio of Pietrelcina (1887–1968) had a conflict-ridden

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<sup>3</sup> This is the perspective adopted by the project NeMoSanctI (see Acknowledgements).

relationship with the Holy Inquisition and some representatives of the Church, while Johan of Arc (1412–1431) was condemned to death by both civil and ecclesiastical authorities. Her reputation was restored only after her death: the prevailing opinion on her character underwent a slow process of revisionism, and was eventually reversed so radically that the Church finally canonized her in 1920. She is now venerated as a saint.

Saints can therefore represent factors generating a more or less radical explosion and introducing a new dynamic and new laws (Lotman 2009: 115) inside the culture in question. One famous example of this role is Saint Francis. Carlo Ginzburg (1972), applying Bakhtin's theory about Carnival as the momentary reversal of the social order in the Middle Ages, observes that St Francis' life style was "carnavalesque", as was his emphasis on cheerfulness and several episodes of his life that systematically overturned habitual codes of behaviour: "The originality of Francis' religious genius consists precisely in this: the attempt to identify the carnivalesque paradox with the Christian paradox" (Ginzburg 1972: 165). Building on Ginzburg's insight, Maria Corti (1989: 25) emphasizes that St Francis represents a complete behavioural and ideologic reversal, thus constituting an "antimodel, absorbed and mimed on the other front with all its transgressive power". It is no coincidence, Corti (1989: 25) suggests, that this reversal lasted for such a short time – the duration of "an exceptional life" – after which the Franciscan order soon returned to the rigid "hierarchic-sacral model" only rarely unsettled by the memory of the "sublime extravagance of its founder".

According to Lotman (1977), traditional Russian culture does not admit the carnivalesque: there is a binary opposition between the sacred and the sacrilegious, while the utopic and alternative space of the Carnival, which suspends the norm, is granted no space in this culture. Even the overturned behaviour of the *jurdivyj* does not provide a third, carnivalesque alternative; on the contrary, it *embodies* this dualistic categorization. If Ginzburg (1972) and Corti (1989) are right in recognizing this carnivalesque component in the Catholic idea of sanctity, this constitutes a further difference between the cultural model investigated by Lotman and the one considered here, a difference that deserves further consideration.

Indeed, a component of explosivity, understood as a challenge to the established norm, can be detected in the life story of every saint. As Di Nola (1973: 818) observes, by representing "the ideal of a human condition religiously transformed", the saint "fully realizes the instance of alienation from reality that belongs to each society". As a consequence, "each epoch has its ideal of sanctity, which reflects precisely the psycho-ideological structures of alienation from the different social and cultural contexts" (Di Nola 1973: 818). In particular, Di

Nola distinguishes between two religious models in relation to the wider culture. One is characterized by negation of and opposition to the dominant culture: the ideal of sanctity connected to this model entails de-historicization and a salvation postponed to a transcendent dimension. The other religious model, on the contrary, reflects “even in its utopic form, exasperate or eschatological, the ferment of renovation and the dynamic transformations” characterizing a culture (Di Nola 1973: 819). This second model can be connected to an identification between religion and culture or even the desacralization of religious status, with this being inserted into mundane reality not perceived as the opposite of religion. In this model, saints can take an active part in changing reality and promoting an ideal of historical transformation of their time: according to Di Nola, the saints, in this case, lose their sacredness in the traditional sense and instead take on the role of the model of a person of their time, expressing the anguishes and needs of the historical moment. In other words, saints often embody what Victor Turner (1974) calls a “social drama”. As I have argued before (Ponzio 2018: 518), it is significant that, in order to explain this concept, Turner devotes a substantial section of his essay to the history of Thomas Becket and his conflict with King Henry II: Becket, who is venerated as a saint by Catholics, embodies the model of the martyr. This role is intrinsically connected to a social drama, since martyrs are perceived as subversive individuals who threaten the social (and cultural) stability of the dominating political institutions.

According to media historian Peppino Ortoleva (2019: 33), “modern myths pin down a figure which seems to embody a point of tension”. In the contemporary age, models of sanctity have undergone significant changes and saintly figures can be compared to other types of cultural myths, celebrities or icons in mediatised society. From this perspective, we could say that saints still take on the role of modelling behaviour and embodying a social drama but, in contemporary culture, this role is to be understood in a larger context in which different models coexist and religious models compete with secularized ones.

One of the main differences distinguishing saints from other kinds of models, however, is the specific ‘mechanisms of stabilization’<sup>4</sup> that the cultural system develops and applies to regulate how the memory of them will be constructed after their deaths. The first of these mechanisms is one of the most peculiar traits of the Roman Catholic codification of sanctity, namely the ‘cause for canonization’. Indeed, the Catholic Church has formulated a unique judicial procedure for regulating the ‘right to biography’. While in the first centuries of Christianity the

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<sup>4</sup> Understood as cultural processes to assimilate the other erupting inside the semiosphere (Lotman 2009: 8).

proclamation of saints was spontaneous and stemmed from local cults venerating martyrs, the Catholic Church soon began to try to control these spontaneous cults and “grammaticalize” the official recognition of sanctity. Especially in the modern era, this effort to exercise control led the Catholic Church to define a sophisticated procedure that can be defined as a post-mortem legal trial in which the life, writings and reputation of the candidate to sainthood is scrupulously evaluated according to a detailed set of normative criteria (Ponzo 2020; Criscuolo, Ols, Sarno 2014).

The second mechanism of stabilization involves narrating the life of the saint through hagiographic texts. In these biographical accounts, the exceptionality and potential explosivity of the life of a saint are “neutralized”, so to speak, in the sense of being corralled into the pre-established framework of a highly codified and stereotyped textual genre consisting of recurring rhetorical devices and standardized narrative programmes. Through this delimitation and codification, the dominating culture absorbs and incorporates the Other, thus attenuating its explosive nature. Andrea Battistini (1986: 16), inspired by authors such as Italo Calvino, Henry Troyat and Massimo Romano, defines the biographer as a vampire “who, sucking the Other’s blood, assimilates them to their organism, altering the original physiognomy with a new emotive and intellectual symbiosis”. This definition, as picturesque as it may seem, is quite applicable to the hagiographer seen as a biographer of saints, a biographer who assimilates the explosive Other in a reassuring, stereotyped narrative scheme as part of a mechanism of stabilization by means of which the Other is incorporated into mainstream culture.

Therefore, Lotman’s idea of the saint as an example of an individual gaining the right to a biography by flawlessly embodying a norm is perfectly consistent with the figure of the saint as seen in hagiographies (a genre Lotman explicitly references). We must keep in mind, however, that – at least in the culture under consideration here – this hagiographic character is often the result of applying a mechanism of stabilization, an auto-conservative strategy the dominant culture employs to narrate in an acceptable, absorbable way the life of an individual that could instead be the vehicle of an explosion. This explosive potential must be mediated and narrated so as to be made acceptable and included inside the culture without destabilizing it excessively.

In the 20th century, and especially during the Second Vatican Council, the Church was more emphatic than ever before in stressing the idea that sanctity can be achieved by any individual of any status (Ponzo, Rai 2019). Based on the distinction proposed by Di Nola (1973), the model of sanctity that emerged in the 20th century was surely one of social and cultural engagement, involving the “desacralization” and historicization of saints. This tendency was also connected

to a shift in which the model itself underwent fragmentation, differentiation and multiplication. For example, theologians Molinari and Gumpel (1979: 488) claim that the Church has canonized “people who represent the most different forms of life and who mirror the inexhaustible range of human possibilities in a surprisingly rich way. However, [...] the officially canonized saints constitute only an infinitesimal part of those who are saints *de facto*”.

This proliferation of models was fuelled in part by a reform of the procedures for canonization carried out under John Paul II’s pontificate. By making it faster and easier to canonize saints while also fostering a more inclusive canonization policy, this reform led to an exponential multiplication of saints and blessed: whereas in some centuries only a few new saints were proclaimed, since the pontificate of John Paul II hundreds of new saints and blessed have been offered up to the veneration and imitation of the Roman Catholic faithful. Unprecedented attention was devoted to models of lay sanctity: for instance, the blessed spouses Quattrocchi were proposed as models of married life, Gianna Beretta Molla as a model of contemporary motherhood (Ponzio 2022a; Turco 2022), and the judge Rosario Livatino as a model of administering earthly justice in harmony with religious values. Moreover, while in the past most saints had lived in Italy or Europe, in the 20th century an unprecedented number of new saints and blessed who had lived in non-European countries were proclaimed, thus also demonstrating a spatial openness toward the less central regions of the Catholic religious semiosphere and meeting the Church’s growing desire for universalism.<sup>5</sup> A further development contributing to the proliferation of models was the recent introduction of a third basis for canonization. Traditionally, the Church had recognized two potential paths for becoming a canonized saint, namely martyrdom and the heroic practice of virtues. In 2017, however, the *motu proprio* letter *Maiorem hac dilectionem* signed by Pope Francis<sup>6</sup> stated that the Church recognized a third narrative programme that can be identified as the realization of the ideal of sanctity. This path, the so-called ‘offering of life’, consists in sacrificing one’s life to save someone else’s life in the name of Christian charity (Ponzio 2020).

These considerations lead to reconsidering Lotman’s classification of the saint once more. A first aspect is that this multiplication of saintly models challenges the stereotyped nature of hagiography, because nowadays the lives of saints display a wider variety of cases, consequently entailing a proliferation of narrative programmes. Hagiography also requires more varied and less fixed rhetoric

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ponzio 2022c. Regarding new models of sanctity, see also Ciciliot 2018.

<sup>6</sup> The document is available on the Vatican website: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio\\_20170711\\_maiorem-hac-dilectionem.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio_20170711_maiorem-hac-dilectionem.html).

schemes to respond to the proliferation of new media, which in turn involves integrating new languages to narrate the lives of saints (Santi, Solvi 2019). A second and more important aspect is the fact that these changes entail a significant shift in the gnoseological method underlying the typology practised by the culture under consideration. Indeed, according to the Catholic tradition, there exists a cultural code that finds its expression or concrete application in the life of some exemplary individuals. This principle is clearly expressed, for instance, in Catholic theological literature (see e.g. Duquoc 1979). It also informs Lotman's thought: according to Lotman, there exists a cultural code and some individuals acquire the right to a biography either because they perfectly embody it or because they challenge and break it. However, the recent cultural tendency I have described seems to reverse this trend. The traditional thought governing the typing of saints as human types functioned on a deductive basis (a general norm or type served as the basis for evaluating and classifying particular cases or tokens). In contrast, the present tendency seems oriented towards an inductive taxonomical methodology instead: tokens or individual cases, which are becoming more and more numerous, are the starting point for defining a general norm, an ideal of sanctity more and more deeply rooted in the specific socio-cultural context (and therefore subject to variation in time and space; Ponzo 2022c).

Rather than emphasizing the extraordinary lives of some individuals, this tendency leads to an actual *taxonomy* of human types (Ponzo, Marino 2021) to which Catholic culture grants a positive value sanctioned through canonization causes, thereby conferring the right to biography on some representative individuals.

### 3. Semioticians, saints and autobiography

Lotman's essay about the right to a biography concludes with a short remark about the fact that – in the modern model – people with a biography grant themselves the right to have one. In some cases this is by narrating their own lives by themselves (Lotman 1985: 198–199). In fact, this brief note points to a crucial issue. In general, autobiography appears as a key strategy for gaining the right to a biography. In the context of contemporary culture, however, it would be problematic to consider autobiography a prerogative of the model of the individual gaining this right in opposition to the established norm.<sup>7</sup> This point is evident, for instance, if we take

<sup>7</sup> And not only in the context of contemporary culture: in the Late Middle Ages, for instance, many mystical women wrote "auto-hagiographies", namely autobiographic texts – often dictated to or revised by their confessors or spiritual directors, however – that changed the features of the traditional hagiographic genre, cf. Del Corno 1999.

into consideration a specific practice of autobiography enacted by 20th-century intellectuals, a practice that in Ponzio 2022b I termed ‘intertextual autobiography’. This practice gives rise to a hybrid textual genre combining both biographical and autobiographical texts.

Intertextual autobiography should be considered in light of the wider cultural context. Western culture of the 20th century displays an intense interest in defining personhood and constructing subjectivity. There is the pervasive idea that self-knowledge depends on one’s relationship with the Other. According to Jacques Derrida (1988), for instance, specularity is the basis for any act of comprehension, and of course self-comprehension as well. Roland Barthes (2016: 11) claims that the pleasure of the text lies in letting the text – namely, the writing of the Other – enter one’s life so deeply as to generate co-habitation, and that true thought consists in thinking in the others’ head and allowing others to think in our heads (Barthes 1981: 185). This perspective entails a subject that is deconstructed and lacking in a fixed foundation – what I propose to call a ‘*diffracted self*’ (Ponzio 2022b) – and that overcomes the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity. These theoretical ideas find expression and practical application in Barthes 1975, an autobiography involving the hybrid interweaving of different textual genres (e.g. essay, novel, comics) in which the narrator defines himself as a set of characters.

A similar practice can be found in Julia Kristeva’s work.<sup>8</sup> Kristeva, the main theorizer of the idea of intertextuality (Kristeva 1967), practises a kind of autobiography that appears closely connected to intertextuality in that it entails deep adhesion to and empathy with other authors. These other authors *enter into* her writing and her life in a regime of co-habitation. Particularly representative of this kind of autobiographic practice is Kristeva’s book *Teresa, My Love* (Kristeva 2015[2008]). This text is interesting for my purposes here in part because it brings into close relationship a famous Catholic saint, Teresa of Avila, and an intellectual who undoubtedly gained her right to have a biography, thus representing the two categories mentioned by Lotman (1985).

Julia Kristeva studied the work of Teresa of Avila for many years,<sup>9</sup> and *Teresa, My Love* expresses the deep knowledge that Kristeva has acquired about the life and thought of the saint. It is a monumental work that mixes novel, autobiography, biography, essay, correspondence and theatrical writing. Julia Kristeva hides and reveals herself in the character of the psychologist Sylvia Leclercq, protagonist

<sup>8</sup> Kristeva was a student and friend of Barthes; the similarities can be attributed, to a certain extent, to the fact that they belonged to the same cultural milieu.

<sup>9</sup> Reference to the saint can be found in several of her essays, e.g. Kristeva, Clément 2015; Kristeva 2006.

and narrator of the main narrative level. Sylvia describes in particular her relationship with Teresa of Avila, built through studying the saint's writings and entailing a deep personal engagement. The biographical component is represented precisely by the narration of and commentary on numerous episodes from the life of the saint, while the essay genre is evoked by the author's critical, erudite, psychoanalytic approach to Teresian thought.

By applying a principle similar to Barthes's idea of cohabitation, Kristeva's narrator calls Teresa her "roommate" (Kristeva 2015[2008]: 7). Even as the narrator absorbs Teresa's thought, she is also absorbed by the saint in a relationship evocative of the idea of vampirism proposed by Battistini: "As if Teresa had just installed herself inside me, suddenly, *by default*, as the software manuals call it: from now on, automatically, as soon as your mental programs are booted up, before you've thought to modify this ineluctable presence by recustomizing your habits or traditions of thought, there something or someone *is*" (Kristeva 2015[2008]: 8).

Kristeva builds a thick intertextual network in such a way that her autobiography is scattered throughout her works, thus constituting a sort of metatext. The result is a diffracted self who builds herself through a game of mirrors by reflecting herself in the Other while also welcoming and absorbing the Other. This self is expressed in fragments arranged in a set of texts that overcome the traditional typology of genres. From the perspective considered herein, Kristeva is representative of an intellectual figure gaining and exercising the right to a biography not in opposition to an established norm, but rather by dissolving her individuality in her relationship with the Other (or, more precisely, the text of the Other) in a way of living subjectivity that is fundamentally relational and dialogical and cannot be disjoined from the idea of intertextuality.

The intertextual autobiography requires us to rethink the dualism of Lotman's distinction between the medieval and the modern models, by adding a third model. In this third model, the self is neither defined in contrast with the established norm nor dissolved into the norm itself. Rather, the self is dissolved into the Other, thus making the Other an essential component for defining the self. In this case, the right to a biography ceases to be applicable to single individuals and instead can only be exercised *with* others, thereby acquiring a relational, almost collective, nature. In reality, Lotman himself showed an increasing recognition of the importance of the dialogical dimension, at least since the publication of his essay on the semiosphere (Lotman 1984). This recognition can also be detected in his concept of 'autocommunication' (Lotman 1990) and the distinction he makes between 'I' as a pronoun and 'I' as a proper name (Lotman

2009: 147–149).<sup>10</sup> In fact, it is precisely this emphasis on the dialogical dimension that drives us to rethink the distinction between the two models, at least in order to account for contemporary – post-modern – culture.

Beside Barthes and Kristeva, several intellectuals connected more or less closely to the field of semiotic studies have produced autobiographic texts in which personal memory and theoretical reflection are connected, such as Jacques Derrida (1990), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955), Juri Lotman<sup>11</sup> (1994) and Charles Morris (1948). Morris' work displays some similarity with the theory of the right to biography proposed by Lotman (1985):

There are persons who flow along through life like a river in a meadow, following effortlessly the contours and the channels marked out by the things and people in the social countryside. There are other persons whose lives resemble a rushing waterfall which breaks barriers and carves into new forms the mountain of social history. It is only a few individuals who affect in a momentous manner the course of mankind. Most persons play a humbler role, adopting the ideas, the inventions, the manners of life which others have constructed. Yet the difference remains one of degree, for even to adopt as one's own something built by others is to choose to admit it into one's self; and such admission involves at least some minimum of scrutiny and appraisal, some element, in short, of the self determining what it is to be. Without such acceptance the innovations of those who have more largely made themselves remain only personal achievements. The history of mankind is a history of all men's self-makings, small and great. (Morris 1948: 9–10)

This similarity should be interpreted in the framework of the above-mentioned 20th-century interest in the issues surrounding the definition of subjectivity and the relationship between the individual and the norm. The autobiographical component of Morris's book (Morris 1948), as well as the relatively numerous autobiographical writings by 20th-century authors, suggest that further attention should be devoted to the relationship between autobiography and theoretical reflection, especially in semiotics. In this and other scientific and academic fields, this kind of writing challenges the traditional idea of the legitimation of the author. The scientific approach adopted by mainstream humanities considers objectivity and impersonality as foundational criteria for establishing the credibility of scientific discourse. In contrast, the use of first-person discourse and inclusion of narrative segments constitutes an alternative style based on a

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the concept of autocommunication and its application to Barthes's thought, see Han 2014, who also observes: "Thus, individual memory appears to be a '*déjà vu*' (and '*déjà lu*') text characterized by '*mise-en-abîme*', a mirror reflecting countless mirrors" (Han 2014: 526).

<sup>11</sup> For a comparison of Lotman's and Barthes's autobiographies, see Pezzini 2016.

different relationship between the author and his or her text, as well as a different methodological approach that does not altogether reject the relevance of personal experience.

#### 4. Conclusion

While this paper takes into consideration two specific case studies (saints in contemporary Catholic culture and intellectuals, in particular in contemporary semiotics), similar trends can be found in other sectors of contemporary culture as well. For instance, in the context of the digital media star-system, a growing plurality of individuals embodying different life models gain the right to biography. This right is established not through a cause for canonization, of course, but rather through the popular judgment of internet users.<sup>12</sup> As the Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk claimed in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2019, “we live in a reality that is based on first-person polyphonic narratives. [...] The first-person narrative seems typical of our contemporary perspective, the one in which the individual assumes the role of the subjective center of the world”.<sup>13</sup> Autobiography, in all of its variants enabled by digital media, seems to have acquired unprecedented importance in the contemporary mechanisms underlying the attainment of the right to be remembered. This entails the risk of solipsism, of increasing self-referentiality; at the same time, it also calls into question the parameters at the basis of the social authorization granting or negating such a right, for instance in terms of morality. A possible antidote, an alternative model that seems to counter this trend, can be found in practices such as the intertextual autobiography exemplified by Julia Kristeva’s work. Such practices challenge the traditional border between biography and autobiography because the definition of the self necessarily takes place through ‘cohabitation’, that is, through engagement with and absorption of the Other. This model can also be considered an alternative to the two models identified by Lotman in that the intellectual gains the right to a biography not by opposing or fully surrendering to a norm, but by engaging in a constructive dialogue with the Other. This kind of practice is somewhat reminiscent of the Christian idea of surrendering the self

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<sup>12</sup> By the way, despite the variety of ideologies underlying these new models, it is not uncommon for representations of them to make use of an iconography and imagery that can also be found in the representation of saints (see e.g. Violi, Cosenza 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Tokarczuk, Olga 2019. Nobel Lecture (Nobel Prize in Literature, 7 December 2019. Swedish Academy, Stockholm) can be accessed at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/>.

in order to gain deeper knowledge and experience the sacred understood as fully Other. It is perhaps no coincidence, moreover, that an effective representation of this concept appears in a text in which a non-believer intellectual welcomes into her mind and life (nonetheless retaining her individuality and her own ideas) the life and thought of a saint, one of the main mystics of Catholicism.

As for the idea of sanctity in Catholicism, it is true that the figure of the saint conveyed by hagiographic accounts represents, as Lotman notes, an exemplary model gaining the right to a biography due to perfect adherence to the norm. However, this codification of the figure of the saint is a key part of a cultural strategy aimed at taming the explosive potential and intrinsic paradoxical nature of the saint: the figure of the saint constructed by hagiography can be interpreted as the result of a deeply codified stabilizing mechanism. From this perspective, it may be useful to consider the tripartite distinction proposed by Lotman between the ‘fool’, the ‘smart person’ and the ‘madman’. The latter, characterized by insane behaviour, “benefits from additional freedom in his violation of the rules and is therefore able to achieve forms of behaviour forbidden to ‘normal’ people. This lends an unpredictable character to his actions” (Lotman 2009: 38). Some saints are “mad”, and hagiographic accounts absorb their revolutionary potential by inserting their figure into a well-codified narrative pattern, thus incorporating it inside the norm as much as possible yet without wholly overcoming their exceptional nature.

The ways in which people gain the right to a biography, the role of autobiography in defining this right, and more generally the relationship between the narrative genres used to tell life stories and the definition of the self in relation to the established norm and other selves, are all key issues in the definition of a given culture’s auto-model (Lotman 1971). They are particularly key in the definition of *posterity*, understood as a dimension “in which the future and the past not only encounter, but define each other: only the future allows the past to continue, only the past allows the future to disclose” (Lorusso 2020: 313). The construction and transmission of exemplary models vary across cultures, and should be conceptualized as a complex field of tensions in which the parameters for assigning the right to a biography are constantly negotiated and competing models, based on different axiologies, coexist.

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### **Riflessioni sul 'diritto alla biografia': santi e intellettuali nella cultura contemporanea**

Prendendo spunto dal testo di Lotman "Pravo na biografiju", questo saggio riformula le categorie proposte da Lotman in relazione ai due modelli del santo e dell'intellettuale moderno. Il primo esemplifica la perfetta realizzazione della norma, mentre il secondo il rifiuto della norma in nome di regole individuali. Questi due modelli sono considerati in relazione a due casi di studio tratti dalla cultura contemporanea e riguardanti santi cattolici e intellettuali, specialmente semiotici. Nel primo caso, l'argomentazione, che prende in considerazione anche altre fondamentali opere di Lotman, dimostra che la cultura cattolica contemporanea sfida l'identificazione della santità con l'ideale di perfetta adesione alla norma, ideale che pare riguardare soltanto i racconti agiografici, visti come parte di un meccanismo di stabilizzazione con cui la cultura religiosa dominante neutralizza la potenziale esplosività della figura del santo. Nel secondo caso, la riflessione sulla produzione teorica e autobiografica di alcuni autori legati al campo della semiotica mostra che un terzo modello può essere aggiunto ai due identificati da Lotman. Questo terzo modello consiste nell'acquisizione del diritto alla biografia e nel produrre testi autobiografici non in contrasto con la norma, come gli scrittori moderni studiati da Lotman, e neppure dissolvendo se stessi nella norma, ma piuttosto dissolvendosi nell'altro, ossia aprendo la propria mente e permettendo che l'altro diventi parte integrante di se stessi. Questo modello è esemplificato dall'opera di Julia Kristeva, in particolare *Teresa, mon amour* (2008), in quanto supera la distinzione tra biografia e autobiografia e descrive un'intellettuale e una santa che, seppur vissute a secoli di distanza, diventano "coincubine".

### **Arutlused „õigusest eluloole“. Pühakud ja intellektuaalid nüüdiskultuuris**

Lähtudes Lotmani esseest „Õigus eluloole“, sõnastab käesolev kirjutis Lotmani pakutud kategooriad ümber seoses kahe mudeliga – pühadusega ja kaasaegse intellektuaaliga, millest esimene kujutab endast normi täiuslikku teostamist ja teine normist loobumist individuaalse reegli nimel. Neid kahte mudelit vaadeldakse kahe nüüdiskultuurist pärit juhtumianalüüsi valguses, mis keskenduvad vastavalt katoliku pühakutele ja intellektuaalidele – eelkõige semiootikutele. Esimese juhtumi argument, mis võtab arvesse ka teisi Lotmani põhjanevaid esseid, näitab, et tänapäeva katoliku kultuur

vaidlustab pühaduse samastamist ideaaliga, milleks on normi täiuslik järgimine. Selline arusaam tundub olevat rakendatav ainult hagiograafiate puhul, mida nähakse osana stabiliseerimismehhanismist, mille abil domineeriv religioosne kultuur vaigistab pühaku kuju plahvatuslikku potentsiaali. Teisel juhul näitab arutelu mitmete semiootikaga seotud autorite teoreetilise ja autobiograafilise loomingu üle, et Lotmani poolt tuvastatud kahele mudelile võib lisada kolmanda. Kolmas mudel seisneb selles, et õigus eluloole omandatakse ning autobiograafiat teostatakse mitte normile vastandudes, nagu seda tegid Lotmani uuritud moodsad kirjanikud, ega normis lahustudes, vaid pigem lahustades end Teisesse, s.t avades oma meeled nii, et Teine saab Ise lahutamatuks osaks. Seda mudelit illustreerivad Julia Kristeva teosed, eelkõige „Teresa, mu arm“ (2008), milles ületatakse eluloo ja autobiograafia vaheline eristus ning kirjeldatakse intellektuaali ja pühakut, kellest saavad „toakaaslased“.