WHAT IS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

This handout is intended to briefly help you define what an autobiography is and get a sense of what kinds of questions the genre uniquely raises for our reading and critical thinking. As always, feel free to adapt or change to use as a hand-out with your students, with due credit given to Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith’s Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives, Minnesota UP, 2nd Ed, 2010, from which the below has been taken.

Definitions – or Why an Autobiography is not a Novel

Life Narrative
A life narrative is any kind of writing that takes a life as its subject, from biography to autobiography (Smith, Watson 3).

Examples: Rousseau’s Confessions
Leo Damrosch, Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius

Biography
Biography is a term for a life narrative that is narrated by someone other than the subject of the narrative (Smith, Watson 3-4). A biography will most often aim for a historically accurate, multi-faceted portrait and assessment of the subject’s life.

Examples: Leo Damrosch, Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius
Maurice Cranston, Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Early Years

Source of Information: Letters, historical documents, memoirs written by persons who knew the subject, photographs; other archival material.

Novel
A novel shares some of the same characteristics of an autobiography, such as plot, setting and characterization, but it is not an autobiography. Many novels are, like autobiographies, narrated in the first person; some, such as Jane Eyre, even present themselves as autobiographical narratives. But they are not.

Examples: Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre
Salinger, Catcher in the Rye

Source of Information: The writer’s imagination. A novelist is not bound by time and place or by the rules of evidence that in a life narrative necessarily links “the world of the narrative with the historical world outside the narrative” (Smith, Watson 13).

History
A life narrative, such as Rousseau’s Confessions, may contain “facts” and information about life, government and society in eighteenth century Europe. But it cannot be reduced to the historical record: an autobiography is not a factual history.
Source of Information: Historians rely on a vast array of historical documents, from letters to memoirs, maps to census figures, in order to assemble an objective, analytical portrait of the events, forces and conditions of a particular time and place.

Autobiography

Autobiography is a “term for a particular practice of life narrative that emerged in the Enlightenment and which has become canonical in the West” (Smith, Watson 3, italics mine).

Examples: Rousseau’s *Confessions*

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Source of Information: Personal memory is the primary archival resource that the autobiographical writer relies on. Autobiographical writers will sometimes include letters (as Rousseau does in Part II of *The Confessions*), photographs and other personal memorabilia to supplement their narrative, but memory remains the primary source of narration and of the truth claims an autobiographer advances about his or her life. This means that, unlike a novelist, an autobiographical writer is bound by his or her lived experiences in a particular time and place. And unlike a historian, an autobiographer is only interested in the larger forces, conditions or events of a historical time-period in so far as these impact his or her own story. The autobiographer is always the center of his or her own narrative, while a historian places him or herself outside of the narrative in order to attempt to ensure the assembling of objective historical fact.

In conclusion, an autobiography is...

...Not a novel, biography, or species of historical record. It is a “historically situated, highly subjective practice of self-representation” (Smith, Watson 14).

What This Means for Readers

Autobiographical narrators establish for their readers a different set of expectations, a different pact, than the expectations established in the verisimilitude or suspension of disbelief of the novel, or the verifiable evidence of biography and history writing (Smith, Watson 12). Autobiography therefore raises a series of questions that are important to keep in mind when we read. These include:

- What is the truth status of autobiographical disclosure or “confession”?
- How do we know whether and when a narrator is telling the truth or lying, and what difference would that make?
- What are the politics of memory? That is, what does the narrator remember and why?