

# LS 810: Self and Society – Studies in Autobiography

Spring 2020 | Dr. Stephen Duguid

## Course Description

The idea of autobiography is in trouble. Born in a triumphant, truth-seeking and enlightened modernity celebrating the singularity of the self, many scholars now argue that “...the concept of selfhood, far from being linear, consistent and continuous throughout the ages, is historically and culturally determined....the centralized, territorialized, rational, methodic, self-sufficient, free, responsible and contractual selfhood so essential to the discourse of modernism is....overturned by what seems to be a new conception of subjectivity...”. \* This seminar will explore this point in some detail, first by a close reading of a sample of autobiographies, then by an exploration of current thinking about the self, and consciousness, and finally by each student examining in more detail an autobiography of their choosing – including perhaps their own. Of particular concern will be the issue of the ‘death of autobiography’ that some claim is inevitable in an intellectual culture increasingly grounded in subjectivism. Thus Rousseau’s naïve-sounding claim to offer a “...portrait in every way true to nature...” will be tested against the autobiographical despair of Michel Leiris: “I line up sentences, collect words and figures of speech, but what gets caught up in each of these traps is always the shadow and not the prey.”

\*R. Elbaz, *The Changing Nature of the Self: A Critical Study of the Autobiographic Discourse*, London, 1988, p. vii.

## Textbooks

Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives become Stories* (Cornell Univ. Pr., 1999)

isbn 978-0-8014-8598-5

Michel Leiris, *Manhood: A Journey from Childhood to the Fierce Order of Virility* (Univ. of Chicago Pr. 1984)

isbn 0-226-47141-1

Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*

(Harvest Books, 1985) isbn 0-15-661918-0

Rousseau, *The Confessions* (Penguin, 1953)

isbn 0-140-44033-X

Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (Harvest Book, 1985)

isbn 978-0-15-658650-4

Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks* (NY: Vintage Books, 1998)

isbn 0-679-76645-6

Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Harvard Univ. Pr. 1972)

isbn 0-674-80861-4

## **Seminar Schedule**

1. Intro to seminar – Discussion of Book 1 in Rousseau's *Confessions* (35 pp)
2. Rousseau's *Confessions*, Books 2-4 (120 pp)
3. Rousseau's *Confessions*, Books 5-6 (86 pp); Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 'Introduction' and Reminiscences' (50 pp)
4. Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 'A Sketch of the Past' (100 pp.)
5. Michel Leiris, *Manhood*, 'Foreword' by Susan Sontag, 'Prologue' and 'Chapters 1 – 5' (110 pp.)
6. Michel Leiris, *Manhood*, 'Chapters 6-8 plus 'Afterword'. (75 pp.)
7. Mary McCarthy, *Memories of A Catholic Girlhood*, pp. 1-126.
8. Mary McCarthy, *Memories of A Catholic Girlhood*, pp. 127-245.
9. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, (172 pp.)
10. Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks*, 'Chapters 1-6' (126 pp.)
11. Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks*, 'Chapters 7-9 (57 pp.); Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 'Chapter 1' (43 p.)
12. Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 'Chapter 2-3 (100 pp.)

13. Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 'Chapter 4' (44 pp.)