

LT245 Autobiography and/as Fiction

Course times: Mondays and Wednesdays 2.00-3.30 pm

Instructor: Laura Scuriatti

Email: lscuriatti@berlin.bard.edu

Office hours: Thursdays 1.30-3.30 pm, office 004, P98A

Course Description

What do we read when we read autobiographies, and why would we want to read them? What status does autobiography as a literary genre in the present moment, in which the autobiographical mode and the need for self-presentation dominate new media? The course focuses on the literary genre of the autobiography, exploring the way in which the self is constructed in literature and narrative form, asking questions about the relationship between truth and fiction in narrative, reflecting on problems specific to the genre, such as the working of memory and the tension between invention and disclosure. Starting from early examples of self-narrative, students will examine canonical texts, such as Saint-Augustine's *Confessions*, Rousseau's *Confessions*, Montaigne's *Essays*, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, and modernist and contemporary autobiographies and works of autofiction. Students will also engage with critical works on the genre and reflect on the ideological and historical meaning of autobiographical forms.

Course texts

Students are expected to own or borrow the course texts. Shorter texts will be uploaded on the course's electronic website. All other texts should be bought by students or borrowed from the library.

The library owns a few copies of the course texts that can be consulted or borrowed by students. A reserve shelf with relevant texts and suggested readings will be available for study and research connected to the course.

Please make sure you buy or borrow the following texts:

Augustine, *Confessions*

Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*

Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*

Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?*

Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle*, vol. 1

Requirements

Attendance and participation

For this class attendance is mandatory, and active participation in discussions will be an essential part of the course. Participation consists in contributing productively to class discussion in a respectful manner, and in demonstrating a sound knowledge of the texts assigned. Readings should be done in advance of the class for which they are assigned.

Participation also requires coming to class with the relevant texts and seminar materials.

Please note that NO COMPUTERS OR TABLETS allowed in class.

Texts which are made available in digital format should be printed for use in class.

All assignments must be completed in order to pass the course.

More than two absences (that is, absences from two sessions of 90 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the participation grade for the course.

Please refer to the Student Handbook for regulations governing periods of illness or leaves of absence.

Assessment

Participation

Students should arrive to each class on time and prepared. Being prepared means (1) having completed the assigned reading (in the specific editions indicated above), (2) bringing to class a non-electronic copy of the assigned reading, and (3) being ready to initiate and to contribute to discussion.

Engagement in class discussion should be regular as well as productive; quantity will not be valued over quality.

Writing Assignments

Required assignments for the course are: **ONE WRITTEN EXAM**, **ONE ESSAY** (2500 words) and **ONE SHORT PIECE OF CREATIVE WRITING** (1000 words): the latter will be an autobiographical piece from the point of view of an assigned character to be handed in at a chosen time during term.

Policy on late submission of papers

From the Student Handbook on the submission of essays:

Essays that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline and cannot receive a grade of higher than C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.

Grade Breakdown

Class participation: 30%

Exam: 30%

Creative assignment: 30%

Response paper: 10%

Schedule

Week 1– Introduction to the course: Biography/Autobiography/Autofiction/Biofiction

Please note: For the first seminar please prepare a short autobiographical piece (in any format you may choose, including digital ones) to read/show in class.

Monday 3 September:

Adriana Cavarero: “On the Outskirts of Milan” and “In a New York Bookstore”, in *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*

Alexandra Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman* (selection)

Wednesday 5 September:

Paul-John Eakin, “What are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?”

Jean Starobinski, “The Style of Autobiography”

Week 2– A Sort of Beginning: Saint Augustine, *Confessions*

Monday 10 September:

Augustine, *Confessions*, Books I-II

Wednesday 12 September:

Augustine, *Confessions*, Books VIII and X

Week 3 – Fragments of Autobiography: Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*

Monday 17 September:

Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Book I: “To the Reader”, Essays 1-3 and Essay 9 “On Liars”

Wednesday 19 September:

Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Book I: Essay 21 “On the Power of Imagination”, Essay 55 “On Smells”

Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Book II, Essay 1 “On the Inconstancy of Our Actions”

Week 4 - Autobiography as Confession and as Moral Example: Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Monday 24 September:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, Books I-III

PLEASE NOTE: NO CLASS on Wednesday 26 September

Week 5 – Narrative Structures and the Autobiographical Form

Monday 1 October:

Monika Fludernik, “The Structure of Narrative”, in *Introduction to Narratology*
Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (selection)

Wednesday 3 October: FEDERAL HOLIDAY – NO CLASS

Week 6 – First Person Narratives and the Birth of the Novel

Monday 8 October:

Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*: “Preface by the Editor”, “Contents”, Volume I, letters I-XX

Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*: “Author’s Preface” and pp. 7-31, 280-295

Wednesday 10 October:

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*: “Preface”, pp. 27-41

Week 7 – Self-Narrative and Psychoanalysis

Monday 15 October and Wednesday 17 October:

Italo Svevo, *Zeno’s Conscience* (selection)

Suggested extra reading: S. Freud, “The Rat Man”

Week 8 – Modernism, (Auto)biography and the Novel I

Monday 22 October:

Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, in *Moments of Being*
Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography”

Wednesday 24 October:

WRITTEN EXAM

FALL BREAK: 29 October- 4 November

Week 9 – Modernism, (Auto)biography and the Novel II

Monday 5 November:

Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (selection)

Wednesday 7 November:

Adriana Cavarero, “The Necessary Other”, in *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*

Week 11 - Questioning the Self and the Genre

Monday 12 November:

Judith Butler, “Giving an Account of Oneself”

Wednesday 14 November:

Felicity Nussbaum, “The Politics of Subjectivity and the Ideology of Genre”

Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”

Weeks 12 and 13 – Autofiction I

Monday 19 November – 28 November:

Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?*

Weeks 14-15 – Autofiction II

Monday 3 December and Wednesday 12 December:

Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle*

Lecture: Catherine Toal on Karl Ove Knausgård

Week 16 – Make-up class

Monday 7 December: Open session

FINAL ESSAY deadline: Thursday 20 December, 23:59 hr