

IMAGINING THE SELF

Spring 2010
MW 11-12:15
Room TBA
Fulfills requirements: LIT, CUL

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Office hours: M 1-3 and by appt.

In this course, we will take a close look at the construction of the self in texts written in a variety of genres, languages, and eras, drawing comparisons among different literary forms and cultural traditions, and paying special attention to the tensions inherent in self-narration: self-invention vs. self-disclosure, design vs. "truth," memory vs. imagination, etc. Beginning with some of the earliest texts in which a character tells stories of himself, we will examine the various ways in which the narrating self is formed and deformed by the literary conventions that define him, including certain typical plots of the life story, such as the trip to the Underworld, the childhood epiphany, the voyage of discovery, sin and redemption. We will also read some seminal texts from the theoretical literature on autobiography and discuss the ways in which theory both informs and complicates our reading of self-narratives.

Among the questions we shall ask of our texts are the following: What are the risks and rewards of self-narration? Why do we read the "selves" of others? What tools do authors use to turn their lives (or imaginary lives) into narrative? Is the impulse to self-narration universal, or must one be 'extraordinary' to feel it? Is there any such thing as a strictly 'autobiographical' narrative, and if so where do we draw the line? What do we do with texts, like *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, in which the main character tells her story "in her own words" via a narrative actually penned by someone else? Conversely, what do we do with texts, like Dante's *Inferno* and Wordsworth's *Prelude*, in which the author and protagonist are "the same," but the events described are clearly not literally "true"? And how do these questions of genre and form affect our reading of fictional "autobiographies," like Tolstoy's *Childhood*, Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time*, or Nabokov's *Lolita*?

BOOKS:

The following books are available at Book Culture, 536 West 112th Street (between Broadway and Amsterdam), and on reserve in Butler Library. You are welcome to look for cheaper used copies, but please be sure to get the editions listed below. Readings marked in the schedule with an asterisk (*) will be distributed in a course reader.

- Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford)
- Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Bantam)
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. Angela Scholar, ed. Patrick Coleman (Oxford)
- Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Barry Windeatt (Penguin)
- Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov (Everyman's Library)
- Rigoberta Menchu et al., *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (Verso)
- Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Vintage)
- Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (Vintage)
- Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography* (U. of Minn.)

GRADING:

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| ▪ Class discussion | 20% |
| ▪ Journal ¹ | 25% |
| ▪ Paper(s) (1 x 10pp. OR 2 x 5pp.) ² | 30% |
| ▪ Final exam | 25% |

¹ In keeping with the subject matter of the course, and especially with our sub-topic "The Self as Reader," you will be asked to keep a **journal** reflecting on your reading, and to hand it in every

two weeks (on paper or electronically; you may instead choose to keep a blog, and send me the URL). You should use your journal

- (a) to reflect on your own reaction to the assigned texts;
- (b) to examine *why* you respond to each text the way you do – i.e. what your response reveals about **the way the text works** and/or about you as a reader; and
- (c) to identify questions or topics that you plan to bring up in the class discussion.

Your journal entries may be as long or as short as you wish. The only requirement is that they be genuinely thoughtful. Expressing boredom is both valid and acceptable, as long as you also reflect on *why* you are bored and what it is about the text that fails to inspire or attract you. Your reasons might be personal, cultural, theoretical, mysterious, or any combination of the above.

² You may choose whether to write two five-page papers (due on March 5 and May 3, respectively), or undertake a more ambitious project culminating in one 10-page paper (due May 3). I will suggest some topics, but you should feel free to modify these or write about something completely different that interests you. However, please consult me before you begin working on a paper topic of your own devising! If you choose to write the ten-page paper, you should include a research component, i.e. consult and acknowledge, as appropriate, any theoretical and critical texts of direct relevance to your topic.

SCHEDULE:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Topics and Readings</u>
<u>January</u>	Introduction.
Wed 20	The problem of autobiography. “Design” vs. “truth”; authenticity and invention. <u>Theory</u> : Smith and Watson, Chapter 1: “Life Narrative: Definitions and Distinctions”
	I. Self-narrative in antiquity: epic travelers
Mon 25	*Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> : Books 9-12. <u>Theory</u> : Smith and Watson, Ch. 3: “Autobiographical Acts”
Wed 27	*Vergil, <i>Aeneid</i> : Books 2-3
<u>February</u>	II. The reading self: textual and spiritual travelers
Mon 1	(St.) Augustine of Hippo, <i>Confessions</i> : Books 1-5 <u>Theory</u> : Smith and Watson, Ch 2: “Autobiographical Subjects.”
Wed 3	Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> , Books 6-9 → <i>Hand in journals</i>
Mon 8	Dante Alighieri, <i>Inferno</i> : Cantos 1-12
Wed 10	<i>Inferno</i> : Cantos 13-24
Mon 15	<i>Inferno</i> : Cantos 25-34
Wed 17	Margery Kempe, <i>The Book of Margery Kempe</i> : Proem to Chapter 25 (pp. 33-96). → <i>Hand in journals</i>
Mon 22	<i>The Book of Margery Kempe</i> : Chapters 26-35 (pp. 96-125), 42-49 (pp. 137-158), 61-67 (pp. 187-205), 78-81 (pp. 224-238), 86-89 (pp. 250-261). → <i>Suggested paper topics handed out</i>
	III. Selves in the making: the discovery of childhood
Wed 24	Jean-Jacques Rousseau, <i>Confessions</i> , Foreword and Books 1-2 (pp 3-85)

March

- Mon 1 Rousseau, *Confessions*, Book 3.
Theory: Smith and Watson, Ch. 4: "Life Narrative in Historical Perspective" (pp. 85-96 only)
 *Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" (excerpt)
- Wed 3 Rousseau, *Confessions*, Book 4 and Appendix ("Neuchâtel Preface")
Theory: Smith and Watson, Ch. 5: "History of Autobiography Criticism, Part 1")
 ➔ *Hand in journals*
- Fri 5 ➔ **5-page papers due at 5pm; please email as an attachment in .doc or .rtf format.**
- Mon 8 * William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1799); possible excerpts of 1805/1850 versions TBA.
Theory: Smith and Watson, Ch. 4: "Life Narrative in Historical Perspective" (pp. 97-109).
- Wed 10 *Leo Tolstoy, *Childhood*
- Mon 22 *Marcel Proust, *The Way By Swann's*, Ch. 1.
- Wed 24 *Isaac Babel, "Childhood," "The Story of My Dovecote," "First Love," "In the Basement,"
 "Awakening"
 *Theory: Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact"
 ➔ *Hand in journals*

IV. The stolen self: Forms of ventriloquism

- Mon 29 Rigoberta Menchu et al., *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* : Translator's note, Introduction, and Chapters I-VII; also skim Chapters XII-XXI
Theory: Smith and Watson, Ch. 6: "History of Autobiography Criticism, Part 2"
- Wed 31 *I, Rigoberta Menchu*: Chapters XXIV-XXXIV
 *Criticism: **articles TBA**

April

- Mon 5 Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*: "Bela," "Maksim Maksimych," "Taman"
- Wed 7 *A Hero of Our Time*: "Princess Mary," "The Fatalist"
 ➔ *Hand in journals*

V. Self under a microscope: Vladimir Nabokov as case study

- Mon 12 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*: Foreword and Ch. 1-5.
Theory: Smith and Watson, Ch. 7: "A Tool Kit"
 ➔ *Suggested paper topics handed out*
- Wed 14 *Speak, Memory*: Ch. 6-9.
- Mon 19 *Speak, Memory*: Ch. 10-15.
- Wed 21 Nabokov, *Lolita*, pp. 1-97 (including "Foreword" by "John Ray Jr.")
- Mon 26 *Lolita*, pp. 97-166.
- Wed 28 *Lolita*, pp. 166-247.
 ➔ *Hand in journals*
- Fri 30 **Second 5-page paper OR single 10-page paper due at 5pm; please email as an attachment in .doc or .rtf format.**

May

- Mon 3 *Lolita*, pp. 247-309, and Afterword (pp. 311-17).

Date TBA Final Exam