

SPRING 2011.....TTh 5-6:30p..... GAR 1.126

Autobiography: A Modern Literary Species

AFR 374 (30460), CL 323 (33995), MES 322K (42130), WGS 340 (47641)

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Spring 2011 office hours: TTh 11 am–12:30 pm and by appointment

Much of the literary world is participating in a golden age of auto/biography. Because the very word "autobiography" only came into the English language in the early 19th century and because some scholars hesitate to apply the term to writing before Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782-9), the form would appear to embody values and deal with issues particular to modern humankind. Consequently, the study of literary autobiographies might reveal salient and distinctive features of modern perspectives and world views. Contemporary notions of "intellectual" (Edward Shils) and "individual(ity)" (Karl Weintraub) are two. Because some rich literary cultures around the world do not have literary auto/biographical narratives (as distinguished from life stories in general) as a major literary form, the study of autobiography might highlight cultural differences among otherwise "modern" perspectives in different cultures. The idea of "the modern" (Irving Howe) may prove a Western notion in such terms.

Course work involves the close reading of classic and other autobiographical writings, presented in chronological order after a look at biography, seen as an essentially different literary species. The reading focusses both on specific theoretical and literary critical issues introduced in class and discussed in *Reading Autobiography* (2010, second edition) by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson and on literary qualities of the writing as narrative. Students also keep a journal devoted both to their responses to the readings and to their perceptions of their own individuality and life stories.

The required **course texts** are: *Reading Autobiography* (cited above), *The Autobiography* by Benjamin Franklin; *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou; *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath; *A Stone on a Grave* by Jalal Al-e Ahmad; *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez—An Autobiography* by Richard Rodriguez; and a recent book-length memoir which course participants choose. In addition, "Autobiography: A Course Packet" (available for purchase at Paradigm Books by the second class session) contains relevant chronologies, a course bibliography, several essays on autobiographical writing, "Autobiographical Poems and Letters" by Emily Dickinson, "Forty Poems" by Forugh Farrokhzad, Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, Zora Neale Hurston's "Drenched in Light," *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot, and self-contained sections from *Confessions* by Augustine of Hippo, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, *Essays* by Montaigne, *The Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and other classic autobiographies.

Grading: The bases for course grades are (1) preparedness for and participation in class discussion (30% of the course grade); (2) an autobiographical journal, four-page sections of which are critiqued as writing at four points during the course (40% of the course grade); and two review tests (15% of the course grade each). The grading scale used in the course is: A (93-100), A- (90-92), B+ (87-89), B (83-86), B- (80-82), C+ (77-79), C (73-76), C- (70-72), D+ (67-69), D (63-66), D- (60-62), and F (0-59). The course has no final examination.

About the Instructor. Michael Craig Hillmann (M.A., Ph.D., The University of Chicago) concentrated on autobiographical writing in his graduate study of English literature at Texas State University at San Marcos (M.A., 1997) and has published essays on autobiographical writing by Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Maya Angelou, Forugh Farrokhzad, Sadegh Hedayat, and Zora Neale Hurston. Hillmann has also authored two autobiographical narratives, *From Durham to Tehran* (1991) and *From Classroom to Courtroom* (2008), and is at work on *To and From a Village in Maine*, the final volume in the trilogy.