Writing the Self: Autobiography and/as Fiction?

Seminar Leader: Laura Scuriatti
Course times: Mondays and Wednesdays 10.45 – 12.15 in Laura Scuriatti’s office (room 004, Platanenstr. 98a)
Email: l.scuriatti@berlin.bard.edu

Course Description

What do we read when we read autobiographies, and why do we read them? The course focuses on the autobiographical writings and their history, asking questions about whether autobiography can be considered a literary genre, exploring the way in which the self is presented, shaped and even institutionalised by different literary and narrative forms, probing the relationship between truth and fiction in narrative, reflecting on issues 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*, Dante's *Vita Nuova*, Rousseau's *Confessions*, Montaigne's *Essays*, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, as well as modernist and contemporary autobiographies, including texts which question the boundary between autobiography, literary criticism and fiction. During the course students will be asked to reflect on the relationship between the texts and the historical period and cultural environment in which they were produced, and will read relevant critical texts on narrative theory and autobiography.

Requirements

Students are required to come to class prepared, that is, to have read the assigned reading for each session and being ready to discuss it meaningfully.

Attendance

Attendance at ALL classes is expected. More than two absences (that is absences from two sessions of 90 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the grade for the course. Absences are registered in all classes, and lateness influences the class performance grade.

Assessment

Students will be assessed on the basis of two papers (please see below for details), an oral presentation (details below), and participation during class.

Writing Assignments

Students are required to submit two response papers and two essays.

Response papers are short pieces of writing in response to a reading assignment. At the beginning of the course each student will choose two texts to respond to. Response papers should be sent to Laura Scuriatti per email before class starts. Length: approx. 700 words
Mid-term essay
Due date: on 27th October 2014, 23.59 hrs
Length: approx. 2500 words

Final essay
Due date: on 17th December 2014, 23.59 hrs
Length: approx. 3000 words

Essay topics
Students will receive in due time a list of prompts, but essays can also be based on the student's oral presentation. Students are also encouraged to write their own questions, after consultation with Laura Scuriatti.

Oral presentation
Each student will be in charge of an oral presentation. For the oral presentation, students will bring to class one or more pages of written notes with questions and bullet-points intended to introduce the assigned reading and to facilitate the discussion. These notes will be handed to Laura Scuriatti at the end of the class and will be part of the presentation grade.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers
All written work must be submitted electronically and on time.

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 performance: 20 %
Oral presentation: 25 %
Mid-term paper: 25 %
Final paper: 30 %
Schedule

Mondays and Wednesdays 10.45 – 12.15 in Laura Scuriatti’s office (room 004, Platanenstr. 98a)

Week 1 – Introduction to the course

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

Readings for Monday:
Primo Levi, “Autobiography” (Reader)
Adriana Cavarero: “On the Outskirts of Milan” and “In a New York Bookstore”, in Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood (Reader)

Readings for Wednesdays:
Paul-John Eakin, “What are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?” (Reader)

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

Readings for Monday:
Books I-II

Readings for Wednesday:
Books VIII and X

Week 3 – The Poet’s Self. Poetry and Autobiography I: Dante’s Vita Nuova

Readings for Monday:
I-XVI

Readings for Wednesday:
XVII-XVIII and XXIII-XXV

Week 4 - Fragments of Autobiography: Michel de Montaigne, Essays

Readings for Monday:
Book I: “To the Reader”, Essays 1-3 and Essay 9 “On Liars”

Readings for Wednesday:
Book II, Essay 1 “On the Inconstancy of Our Actions”

Week 5 - Autobiography as Confession and as Moral Example: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The
Confessions and The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus

Readings for Monday:

Readings for Wednesday:
The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus: chapters I-II, chapters IX-X, XIII, XXIII and XXVII

Week 6 – The Artist as a Subject: Artists’ Lives and Self-Portraiture

Readings for Monday:

Monday:
Guest lecture: Geoff Lehman (Bard College Berlin) on (Self-)Portraiture in the Renaissance

Readings for Wednesday:
Benvenuto Cellini, The Life of Benvenuto Cellini (selection)

Week 7 - First Person Narratives and the Birth of the Novel

Readings for Monday:
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

Readings for Wednesday:
Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe: “Preface”, pp. 27-41, 81-118

Week 8 - The Poet's Self. Poetry and Autobiography II

Reading for Monday:
William Wordsworth, Prelude (selection)

Reading for Wednesday:
Paul de Man, “Time and History in Wordsworth” (Reader)
Paul de Man, “Autobiography as Defacement” (Reader)

Essay due on 27th October, 23.59 hrs!

Week 9 – Self-Narrative and Psychoanalysis I
Reading for Monday:
Sigmund Freud, “The Ratman”

Reading for Wednesday:
Sigmund Freud, “An Autobiographical Study”

Week 10 – Self-Narrative and Psychoanalysis II

Reading for Monday:
Italo Svevo, *Zeno’s Conscience* (selection)

Reading for Wednesday:
Italo Svevo, *Zeno’s Conscience* (selection)

Week 11 - Modernism, (Auto)biography and the Novel I

Readings for Monday:
Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, in *Moments of Being*

Readings for Wednesday:
Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography”

Week 12 - Modernism, (Auto)biography and the Novel II

Reading for Monday:
Adriana Cavarero, “The Necessary Other”, in *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood* (Reader)

Reading for Wednesday:

Week 13 – Questioning the self

Reading for Monday:
Judith Butler, “Giving an Account of Oneself” (Reader)

Reading for Wednesday:
Philippe Lejeune, “Le moi est-il international? / Is the I international?” (Reader)

Week 14 – (Auto)biography as Method and Politics

Monday:
Guest lecture: Dr. Regina Knapp (Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig) on “Self-Narration and Biography in Anthropology”
Wednesday:
Jamaica Kincaid, The Autobiography of My Mother (selection)

Week 15 – Completion week

Final essay due on 17th December, 23.59 hrs!