

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# ENGLISH AUTOBIOGRAPHY

## **Course Description**

British Autobiography explores the diverse autobiographical writings in England and the British Empire together with their contexts and position within generic traditions. The course begins with early English writings done in medieval times, through the twentieth century.

## **About the Professor**

This course was developed by Robert Sayre, Ph.D., professor emeritus from the University of Iowa.

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James Boswell (1740-95), *Boswell's London Journal*  
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Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), *A Room of One's Own*  
Robert Graves (1895-1985), *Goodbye to All That*  
Vera Britain (1896-1970), *Testament of Youth*  
George Orwell (1903-50), *Homage to Catalonia*

Secondary Readings:

Anthony Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World* (2002)  
John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678)  
Claire Tomalin, *Samuel Pepys: The Unequaled Self* (2003)  
James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791)  
Frederick Pottle, *James Boswell: The Early Years* (1966)  
James Olney (ed.) *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980)  
Jack Stillinger, *The Early Draft of John Stuart Mill's Autobiography* (1961)  
Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960)  
Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (1972)  
Roger Porter, *Bureau of Missing Persons: Writing the Secret Lives of Fathers* (2011)  
Paul John Eakin, *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004)  
Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Women's Autobiography: Theory and Practice*

Brief Description:

The course will take up the thirteen authors listed above in chronological order, in the process covering the many kinds of autobiography written in Britain from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and giving a broad panorama of the genre's evolution over the course of five periods of British History: the Medieval and Early Modern, the Enlightenment, the Romantic, the Victorian, and the Modern. There will be thirteen weekly reading assignments, with a one to two page introductions to each assignment or book. It will be followed by three or four questions designed to help the reader better review and assimilate major issues and themes in the book. There will also be assignments, with a choice of topics, for 1,000-word papers in the sixth and eleventh weeks and a 3,000-word paper in the sixteenth week.

Period I: Medieval and Early Modern  
(Margery Kempe, John Bunyan, Samuel Pepys)

Week 1: Margery Kempe

Margery Kempe was born in Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn), a small but busy seaport at the mouth of the River Ouse on the east coast, about half way between London, in the south, and York, in the north, probably in 1373. Her father was John Brunham, a prosperous merchant who also served as mayor and a member of Parliament. At age 20, she married John Kempe, also a merchant. Despite her social status, she like other women of her time never learned to write. As a result, she had to dictate her story to amanuenses, speaking at different times to different ones, which makes it hard to follow. There are no dates, and the chronology is often uncertain. What is also unusual, compared to other autobiographies, is that the complete manuscript, which was copied by another scribe at a later date, after her death, was not found until 1934, in the library of a family living in Pleasington Hall, an estate in Lancashire. But since then it has been widely praised for its unusual insight into medieval English life and religion. It also is a story with which many modern feminists identify. She had 14 children, had difficulty reconciling her and her husband's sexual desire with her religious calling to celibacy, tried to establish careers as a brewer and a miller, and was occasionally arrested and imprisoned for what was believed to be her religious fanaticism and other unusual behavior. She also traveled widely--in England, Europe, and to Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

For all its interest and striking modernity, however, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, as the manuscript was called, is not an easy read. Margery Kempe spoke in Middle English, the language of Geoffrey Chaucer, whose dates, 1343-1400, make him a fairly close contemporary. Thus, though we read it in translation, the grammar and word order are unfamiliar, and the vocabulary is often mystifying. There are archaic words like "grutching" (complaining and accusing) and "houseselled" (to serve the eucharist to). There are also common words whose meaning have changed. To Kempe "dalliance" and "dally," for example, did not mean sexual play or to loaf and delay, but intimate and informal talk. For other words the reader should consult the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). Another problem for some readers is that Margery is repeatedly referred to a simply "this creature," which seems like an excessively humble name for such an amazing person.

It is useful, therefore, to know some of the book's historic context, especially in regards to religion and gender roles.

Margery Kempe lived over a century before the Reformation. England was a Catholic country and the church was hierarchical. Nevertheless, there were some portents of change. John Wycliffe (1328-84), a professor at Oxford, had translated the New Testament into English, believing that its stories and teachings should be available to ordinary people rather than only scholars and priests. He also believed that priests should be poor and associate with common people, like the disciples and early Christians. His followers were called "Lollards," a name derived from the Dutch word for mutterers and mumblers, and thus heretics. Kempe is often accused of "Lollardy," but denies it. She seems to have been proud of her social status and, after all, she could not read Latin or English. But it is understandable that her repeated weeping and crying and belief in her personal visitations from Jesus, Mary, and the "ghostly father" were easily associated with the Lollards' mumblings and radical views.

The sexual stereotypes of Kempe's time were a mixture of Biblical teachings and medical lore. Women, it was believed, were less rational than men and more moved by their emotions and sexual desire. An illustration is Chaucer's lusty Wife of Bath, in his *Canterbury Tales*, who has had five husbands and says that a woman's secret goal is to dominate men. They dominate by attracting men physically and then procuring their sperm as a source of greater reason and strength. Consequently, men must control women and women must obey their fathers and husbands and their priests. St. Paul's rule that women should not preach was universally accepted. It was common belief that women were to submit to their husbands sexually, and yet also a religious teaching that chastity was morally superior – a contradiction that underlies Margery's conflicts with her husband John. At first she says that "the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that she would rather...have eaten or drunk the ooze and muck of the gutter than consent to any fleshly communing, save only for obedience." (p. 31) But eventually she wishes that they take vows of chastity, and John eventually agrees, as he also does to her wish that they fast on Fridays.

The authority that Margery Kempe has for her resistance to her husband and her departure from the social and religious values of her time come directly from her visits from Jesus, Mary, and God. As early as chapter 8, Mary appears to her as she is praying and says, "Daughter, blessed may thou be, thy seat is made in heaven, before my Son's knee, and Whom thou wilt have with thee." (p. 42) Such visitations and "dalliance" occur again and again, throughout the *Book*, until they seem commonplace, even though each was also miraculous. The basis of most of the conflicts in her life is that many of Margery's contemporaries did not believe her. Thus one of the purposes of the *Book* is to relate the other events that prove her sincerity by showing how divine powers have instructed her, protected her, or intervened in her behalf. In chapter 9, for example, we are told that "on the Wednesday in Easter week, after her husband would have had knowledge of her, as he was wont before,...she said: 'Jesus Christ, help me,' and he had no power to touch her at that time in that way, nor ever after with any fleshly knowledge." In the next two paragraphs is the story of how at another time she was at Mass and heard "a great noise, and a dreadful" and was afraid that people would say "God should take vengeance on her." But she knelt down, "praying Our Lord Jesus Christ for grace and mercy." A three-pound stone and a six-pound beam end land on her head and back, and she fears she will die. She cries, "Jesus, mercy!" and the pain is gone.

Such miracles occur over and over. They are compelling stories and are told to prove her divine authority. They are also the condensed essence of her autobiography: a story of conflicts between a devout woman and her society that justifies her behavior and survival in these conflicts, and therefore testifies to the power of Christ, the Virgin, and the Holy Father.

#### Questions and Subjects for Further Study:

1. Describe three more incidents, from the beginning, middle, and end of the *Book*, which illustrate "this creature's" devotion and prove the divine guidance and protection that she receives for her devotion.
2. Why does the person who wrote Margery Kempe's life, presumably from her dictation, always refer to her as "this creature." Is it ironic? Was it at her request? Is it falsely humble?

3. In Ch. 30 Christ promises to “bring thee in safety to Rome and home again into England without any villainy to thy body, if thou wilt be glad in white clothes, and wear the as I said to thee whilst thou wert in England.” Why does Christ ask this and what are the effects, good or bad?

### Week 2: John Bunyan

John Bunyan is most famous for his once extremely well-known and widely-read allegory of a Christian's quest for redemption, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1675). For years it was like a companion to the Bible (which it frequently quoted). Later it was sometimes joked about (Mark Twain has Huckleberry Finn describe it as “a book about a man who left his family it didn't say why”) but it had left its mark on the English language. Its names and places like “Mr. Worldly-Wise Man,” “the slough of despond,” and “Vanity Fair” are used by millions of people who no longer know their source. His *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) is not so famous, but it nevertheless has been called “one of the most enthralling autobiographies in the language.” Bunyan is the archetypal sinful poor boy who finds religion and then struggles, with the help of God and the Bible, to become a true Christian.

He was born in a village in Bedfordshire, the son of a chapman, or peddler-trader, who also mended pots and pans. As he says in *Grace Abounding*, “My descent was of a low and inconsiderable generation, my father's house being of that rank that is meanest and most despised of all the families of the land.” He had a simple grammar school education and became a tinker, like his father. He swore a lot, hung out with rough young men, and had no concern for religion. His mother died. His father remarried. And in 1644, age 16, he joined the Parliamentary army, aligning himself with the Puritans and enemies of the king and Anglican church. Leaving the army after the Civil War, he returned to his trade and his profanity and impiety. In 1650 he married a young woman whose father had left her an inheritance of only two books, the *Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and the *Practice of Piety*. They led him to religion and to try to become a Christian. But it was difficult, as his autobiography explains at length. Nevertheless, in 1655, thanks in part to the teaching of his pastor, John Gifford, he began preaching.

As an unlicensed preacher, he became very popular, but also controversial for his unorthodox views and style and supposedly immoral life. He was arrested, but still managed to stay out of jail, until 1660, when the restoration of the monarchy, under Charles II, and the re-establishment of the Anglican Church made it illegal to conduct divine services other than Anglican and for non-Episcopal ministers to preach.

Thus began Bunyan's nearly twelve years in jail. He supported himself and his large family by weaving shoelaces and preaching to other prisoners. He also wrote *Grace Abounding* and other books and entertained himself and others by making and playing a violin he made out of tin and a flute made from a chair leg. He was briefly released in 1666, but soon arrested for again preaching. His release in 1672 followed King Charles's issue of the Declaration of Religious Indulgence. He again became a popular preacher, but in 1675 was imprisoned again for six months with the revocation of the Declaration of Religious Indulgence. After that his immense popularity as a preacher and writer saved him from further arrest.

These facts and dates are important to know, but *Grace Abounding* goes far deeper into Bunyan's life. It is spiritual autobiography in the fullest sense. It is concerned less with his physical state than the state of his soul, less with his arrests than with the arresting thoughts and fears that seem to hold him

suspended between heaven and hell, with only God's grace to depend on. Thus there is drama and conflict as Bunyan converses with the "Tempter" and battles with Satan. It can also be called intellectual autobiography, as when Bunyan describes his evolving interpretations of many passages from the Bible and importance to him of reading Martin Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*.

One of the many interesting differences between this autobiography and Margery Kemp's is the reliance that Bunyan places Biblical verses, compared to her reliance on her visitations and instructions from Jesus, Mary, and God. She seems barely to have known the Bible. It was just being translated by Wycliffe, and copies were only in manuscript, print not yet having been invented. But Bunyan knew the English Bible intimately. Living after the introduction of print and the publication of translations, he was also at the end of the Renaissance and in the continuing controversies of the Reformation in England. For Margery Kempe authority was personal, from her mystical encounters with Jesus and Mary; for Bunyan authority is in the words of Jesus, the Old Testament prophets, and the disciples, as preserved in the Bible. Such authority was to him and his readers more objective. It could be read by all. It did not need, like hers, to be proven by miracles, which themselves had to be proven and attested to and ultimately written down by a third party. But the objectification of Bunyan's authorities left all the more room for his expansive descriptions of his doubts, fears, guilt, anxieties, exultations, and other mental conditions.

The fact that Bunyan is writing in the first person singular intensifies these descriptions of his inner life. He can quote a verse from the Bible or a sentence from another book, such as "Man knows the beginning of sin, but who can tell where it will end?" and then tell how, "For whole days at a time it caused my mind to shake and totter under the sense of the dreadful judgment of God that I was sure was upon me. And I felt such heat at my stomach, by reason of my terror, that it felt as though my breast bone would split apart;..."

Passages such as these are typical. Bunyan makes emotion physically real as few other writers do. In *Grace Abounding* he turns the Christian experience of conversion into a vivid drama of one man confronting his Devils and his God. It is indeed "enthraling autobiography."

#### Questions for Further Study:

1. Bunyan wrote *Grace Abounding* in prison. Many autobiographers also wrote in prison or about prison. How do you think his time and experience there affected what he wrote?
2. Do you think Bunyan exaggerates his sins and his sense of guilt? If so, why? What are the rhetorical and moral advantages of such exaggeration?
3. Read *Pilgrim's Progress* and compare the Bunyan of *Grace Abounding* with the Pilgrim.

#### Week 3: Samuel Pepys

Samuel Pepys and John Bunyan were close contemporaries. But it is hard to think of two more different men, more different lives, and more different books. Pepys (pronounced "Peeps") was born in London on February 23, 1633, five years after Bunyan, the son of a London tailor. He went to St. Paul's School and later to Cambridge University, where he did well and might have become a lawyer. But through his father's ancestors, he was distantly related to Sir Sidney Montagu, whose son Edward, eight years older than

Pepys, later employed the young Cambridge graduate as his private secretary. Montagu, at that time a supporter of Cromwell, became a member of Parliament and accepted other roles in the Puritan government; and Pepys took on other duties for him. Later, after Cromwell's death in 1658, Montagu switched his allegiance to Charles II, and as Montagu rose in the restored monarchy, Pepys rose with him. In 1660 (the year Bunyan went to jail), Pepys was given an important post in Navy Board. He rose further and was ultimately responsible for major improvements in the administration of the Royal Navy. He also grew very wealthy. Superficially, about all that Bunyan and Pepys had in common was a love of music. But Bunyan played his prison-made violin and flute, while Pepys played more aristocratic instruments, sang, and attended musicales.

Nevertheless, there is a profound connection. Bunyan represents the pious, evangelical face of Puritanism. Pepys represents its dutiful, practical, book-keeping and worldly side, for although he gave up his early support of Cromwell and the Puritan revolution and became a nominal Anglican, he retained a certain amount of Puritan character. So Bunyan wrote a great spiritual autobiography, intensely focused on the state of his soul, and Pepys wrote one of the world's greatest diaries, intensely focused on the daily—from his sexual affairs to affairs of state and from the mundane and trivial to the catastrophic, like the Great Plague of 1665-6 and the Great Fire of London in November of 1666.

Pepys began his diary on January 1, 1660, with the appropriately ordinary fact that he got up and got dressed. He ended it on May 31, 1669, nearly 10 years later, saying he could write no longer, "having done now so long as to undo my eyes almost every time that I take a pen in my hand."

So how is one to read such a long diary, or "journal," as he called it? The most recent and most complete edition fills nine volumes. It also contains many footnotes, maps, and lists identifying the people Pepys referred to in each volume—all of which are very helpful. Without them one feels as if one has suddenly dived into a totally alien world. But no one can read all nine volumes in a week! So one alternative is to read a book of selections, but that too is unsatisfactory. It lacks continuity, and most shorter editions lack the necessary aids. So the best course is to try to find the complete edition and then read it selectively. For example, read the endings of years, like the entry for Dec. 31, 1667, where Pepys reveals a lot of his personal character. He woke up, he says, "with a full design to mind nothing else but to make up my accounts for the year past." So he dutifully went around paying his bills and then recorded his year's income and expenses and added up his net worth. He also noted, prophetically, that his eyes were very sore "with overworking them." Then he wrote a short, pessimistic description of the condition of the city, parliament, and the "sad, vicious, negligent Court," saying that "all sober men there [are] fearful of the ruin of the whole Kingdom...." It was not all that different, you might say, from what a thoughtful man might write in many years, which is one of the interesting features of diaries. They remind us that the more things change, the more they are the same. Finally, Pepys' very last words for 1667 were about his now owning enough silver to serve two and a half dozen people! His own wealth was secure, as many people would also like to believe at a year's end.

Or read his descriptions of the fire of London and the Great Plague. Find his references to his extra-marital affairs and compare them to his accounts of his arguments with his wife and his praises of her. Read his entries for different days, like Christmas, Easter, or your own birthday. Read all of the entries for a month in each of the years he wrote. It also helps to read some of

Claire Tomalin's excellent biography, *Samuel Pepys: The Unequaled Self*, especially her account of the operation he underwent, without anesthetics, to remove a kidney stone. This was before he began the diary, but it is very revealing in many ways.

Finally, read enough to answer all of the following questions.

Texts:

Robert Latham & William Matthews (eds.), *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*. 9 vols. Univ. of California Press, 1970-76.

Richard Le Gallienne (ed.), *Passages from the Diary of Samuel Pepys*. New York: The Modern Library, 1959.

Questions for Further Study:

1. To write his diary, Pepys adapted a version of shorthand, making it very difficult to read (and for editors to transcribe into English print). What evidence do you find for his reasons for doing this?
2. The English Restoration was a time of much drunkenness, philandering, gambling, and general lewdness, personified in the stereotype "Restoration Rake." To what degree was Pepys one?
3. Using Pepys as your example, what are the character traits of a diarist? Regular habits? Discipline? Self-absorption? Introspection? A strong sense of history? Lively interests in one's friends, work, and surroundings? Something else?

Period II: Enlightenment  
(Boswell and Gibbon)

Week 4: James Boswell

For many years Boswell's fame rested on his biography of Samuel Johnson, which was considered one of the greatest biographies in English. He had known Johnson well for nearly three decades, traveled with him, and recorded his brilliant conversation so faithfully that Johnson seemed to come alive on every page. Yet because of the biography's greatness, a kind of counter-image of Boswell developed as only a recorder of Johnson and not a great writer himself. At worst, he was satirized as a young toady who played up to Johnson, flattering him and sometimes maneuvering him into situations which Boswell could then exploit.

This all changed in 1950 with the publication of Boswell's London Journal.

It and many more of his own journals and papers had been found in the 1920s in Malahide Castle in Ireland, but were known only, in parts, to a tiny group of scholars. (The full story of their recovery can be read in the introductions to the Yale University Press edition.) In it Boswell emerges in his own right. He is twenty-two years old, bright, ambitious, and delighted to have left his home in Edinburgh and be on his own in London, with a "small allowance" from his father and time to go to plays, study and write, pursue women, and meet the city's literary and social elite. It was an opportunity many young men dream of.

This is only half of what makes the Journal so interesting, however.

Boswell was also a highly self-conscious modern man who was very aware of

his social image. He often refers to "Mr. Addison," the author of *The Spectator*, the very popular magazine that was then the guide to London culture, manners, and morals, on whom he is trying to model himself. He is very self-critical. He is pleased when he is both a good speaker and good listener; he is displeased when he and his friends "were very genteel and very dull" (p. 49) He tries out different "diversions" and carefully records his reactions.

About all of this he is painfully honest. He records both his shame and his smugness in his encounters with London's prostitutes. He dramatically describes his progress in seducing Louisa, the actress he has chosen as his potential mistress; then describes his dreary months recovering from gonorrhea. He also records his slow realization that he does not really want to become an officer in the Guards, the aristocratic military unit he had come to London wanting to join.

But the Journal is more than just the honest record of these experiences and lessons. It is an essential agent. As he writes at one point, he wants it to "contain a consistent picture of a young fellow eagerly pushing through life." (p. 206) He lives an active, self-conscious life not just for its own sake but also to have it to write about and so make an interesting Journal. When his life has been dull, he laments that the Journal is dull. When it has been sophisticated and engaging, he is both pleased with himself and with the Journal.

The climax of these themes comes with his meeting Samuel Johnson. By 1763 Johnson was the most famous of London's men of letters: a literary critic, a biographer, a journalist, and the author-editor of the first great dictionary of the English language. No one, not even David Garrick the actor and theater owner-manager or the novelist-poet Oliver Goldsmith, both of whom Boswell had also met and befriended, had so much stature. Yet Johnson took to this young unknown Scot like a father to a son, and Boswell took to Johnson as a new father. They would not meet again until 1766. But from then on the qualities he had developed so conscientiously as an autobiographer – his skill in conversation, his self-consciousness, his skill as a writer and as a listener, even his skill at "nettling people"—would make him Johnson's great biographer.

#### Questions for Further Study:

1. In what ways did Johnson become a father figure for the young Boswell?
2. To whom, besides himself, do you think Boswell wrote, intentionally and unintentionally?
3. To what extent do you think Boswell tried to shape or structure his Journal? What effects was he seeking?
4. Compare Boswell as man and writer with Bunyan and Pepys.

#### Week 5: Gibbon

Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is one of the greatest works and of the 18th-century Enlightenment and a landmark in historical writing. Its thesis that the introduction of Christianity was the cause of Rome's decline was immediately controversial, but did not stop it from being widely read and admired. Today it is still admired for Gibbon's research and learning and his powerful, balanced prose style. But his much shorter

*Autobiography* is now far more approachable.

Even so, it too may appear forbidding. It has many long footnotes, some of which are in Latin or French; and roughly the last third of it is made up of letters by Gibbon to Lord Sheffield, his friend and literary executor. How can a reader today deal with this baroque text of a very upperclass English gentleman? For that matter, why should a reader today want to?

But the title, the *Autobiography of Edward Gibbon*, was not his. Gibbon himself called his manuscript not an autobiography but his "Memoirs of My Life and Writings." It was Sheffield who added many of the long footnotes and over a hundred pages of letters and an account of "Gibbon's Last Days," and then supplied the new title, when publishing it 1795, more than a year after Gibbon's death in January, 1794. And it was a new title in two senses, for at that time the very word "autobiography" had barely entered the English language. The older word "memoir" was in many ways simpler and more specific. With its connection to the word "memory" it generally was of a life or work or event or journey and not to be confused with a whole life or life story. The "autobiography" was the rather pretentious new kind of "biography" (life-writing) that was "self-life-writing." Since then "autobiography" has usually been defined as something longer, more comprehensive and complex. This distinction, although not absolute, can be said to have begun right here, with Lord Sheffield's incorporation of Gibbon's shorter, more direct memoir into a longer, more complicated and varied autobiography.

So the first way to make Gibbon less forbidding is to focus first on his Memoirs and not to be distracted by the long footnotes and letters added by Lord Sheffield. The second is to try to accept the three standards that he sets for himself in the opening paragraph: one, that "Truth, naked, unblushing truth...must be the sole recommendation of this personal narrative"; two, that the "style shall be simple and familiar"; and three, that "my own amusement is my motive." By both accepting these points and also going on to ask what Gibbon meant by them, reading his Memoirs can become a delightful and instructive experience.

An example of his telling the "naked, unblushing proof" is fulfilled in his story of how he became a pleasure-seeking playboy while at Oxford and also "bewildered myself in the errors of the Church of Rome." (p. 46) This so shocked his father that he was sent to Lausanne, Switzerland—the center of Calvinism—for the next five years to complete his education. There he again shocked his father by falling in love with Susan Curchod, the bright and virtuous daughter of a minister. "The report of such a prodigy awakened my curiosity; I saw and loved," Gibbon writes. But his father "would not hear of this strange alliance, and...without his consent I was myself destitute and helpless." This leads to one of the most quoted sentences in the book and one that is a good example of how "style is the image of character." "After a painful struggle I yielded to my fate: I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son." (pp. 83-4) It is not a long and complex sentence, like many of Gibbon's. But by opposing the two images of himself—"a lover" and "a son" and linking the one with romance ("sighed") and the other with duty ("obeyed") he clearly illustrates his character. There is also something very self-consciously operative in this man and his language, in his style. Although the Memoirs are professedly a review of "the simple transactions of a private and literary life," (p. 1), he nevertheless loves to strike poses and call attention to himself.

This could be what Gibbon really meant when he wrote that "My own amusement is my motive, and will be my reward." He did not, like Boswell, write as part of his education and self-improvement. He was not a young man. He was a world-famous historian who was enjoying the fruits of

his achievement, some of which were fame itself. So he performed, not just to "some discreet and indulgent friends" but to the whole educated world.

Recognizing this quality of Gibbon's book may lead us to think further about the possible differences between memoir and autobiography. Maybe memoirs are not simpler and more modest. Maybe Gibbon only chose the word because his readers would think so, thus allowing him to play the role of the private writer and then stun us by frequently breaking out of it, to become a grand public figure. If so, then Lord Sheffield was quite justified in adding more material and adding the new, somewhat more pretentious title: *The Autobiography of Edward Gibbon*.

Questions for Further Study:

1. The 18th-century is often called "the age of reason," because of its opposition to superstition and ignorance and emphasis on science and learning. How does Gibbon embody such enlightenment? How does he not?
2. Imagine a conversation between Gibbon and Boswell. How are their books similar and different? What would they like and not like about each other? Whom do *you* like more?
3. At the end of his memoirs Gibbon expressed his gratitude for having "drawn a high prize in the lottery of life." (See pp. 217-8) Is this offensively self-satisfied, or is it something that a fortunate, successful man like him should say?

Week 6: First Paper

1. Compare and contrast the autobiographies of Margery Kempe and John Bunyan, focusing on their religious experiences, their reasons for recording their experiences, and the effects of her dictating her story and his writing it himself. What are the additional differences resulting from difference in sex and literacy?
2. Contrast Boswell's *Journal* and Gibbon's *Memoirs*. Which is the more "enlightened" document? How different were their uses of their books?
3. As noted before, Bunyan and Pepys were close contemporaries. How do you account for the great differences between them and between their books? Which man is more sympathetic. Is a religious conversion narrative or a diary more intrinsically sympathetic?

Period III: Romantic  
(Wordsworth)

Week 7: Wordsworth

Wordsworth's *Prelude* is an autobiographical epic poem. Subtitled the "Growth of a Poet's Mind," it was begun in 1798 and addressed to his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in the same year that they published *The Lyrical Ballads*, their revolutionary first book of poems. It was to be a prologue to a longer three-part epic called *The Recluse*, which Wordsworth described as "having for its principal subject, the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement." But in the later years he wrote only parts of the longer poem, and for this and other reasons *The Prelude* was not published until after his death in 1850. Critics estimate that if the entire project had been completed, it would have been three times the length of Milton's great epic about the Creation and the Fall of Man, *Paradise Lost*.

Nevertheless, *The Prelude* alone is of epic length and a demonstration of how the romantic sensibility viewed the growth of a poet's mind as a subject of epic importance and grandeur. In so doing it also celebrates many central romantic subjects: childhood, nature, revolution, and the god-like power of the individual imagination.

In structure, the poem follows Wordsworth's development from early childhood and "School-Time" (Books 1 and 2); to his studies, vacations, reading, and travel while at Cambridge (Books 3-6); his contrasting experiences afterwards in London and the country (Books 7 & 8); and his residence in France during the French Revolution (Books 9-11). It ends in his later, mature years with philosophical reflections on "Imagination and Taste" and the poetic imagination (Books 12-14).

What distinguishes *The Prelude* from what could be many other accounts of an English life in the same years are Wordsworth's blank verse and his presentation of outstanding moments in his experience as powerful epiphanies that somehow transcend their more or less ordinary surroundings. An early example comes in the middle of Book One. "Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear" (ll. 301-2) he writes, before describing how when he was ten he liked to go out at night snaring woodcocks. But he then confesses that he sometimes stole birds that had been caught in other people's traps, only to hear "among the solitary hills / Low breathings coming after me, and sounds / Of undistinguishable motion, steps / Almost as silent as the turf they trod." (ll. 322-5) This sensation is soon followed by the longer description of his stealing a "little boat tied to a willow tree" (l. 358) on a summer evening. He rows away, looking at a hill astern in order to hold to a straight line, when "a huge peak, black and huge, / As if with voluntary power instinct, / Upreared its head." (ll. 378-80) This "huge peak" that had previously been out of sight behind the lower hill grew taller and darker the farther he rowed, making him feel more and more guilty. It continued to haunt him for days and nights, and was evidence of nature's moral teaching.

Thus does Wordsworth illustrate how nature had a moral presence and power and how such experiences have stayed with him. They are epiphanies, or "spots of time," that arise in the ordinary but also transcend it.

A more famous example comes in Book 6, as he and friends are climbing in the Alps. They stop to eat "Their noontide meal" and fall behind their guide. Then, in attempting to catch up, they climb higher and higher, becoming more and more frightened, only to have a peasant tell them that instead of climbing they "must descend, and there should find the road,..." (l. 579) Without

knowing it, "*we had crossed the Alps.*" (l. 591) This experience devastatingly illustrates the power of "Imagination – here the Power so called / Through sad incompetence of human speech,..." (ll.592-3) It was like both an "unfathered vapour" that rose from "the mind's abyss" and also the moment when "in such strength / of usurpation, ... the light of sense / Goes out," and a flash reveals "The invisible world." Here "doth greatness make abode,..." (ll. 599-602).

The young Wordsworth was a restless traveler and seeker, and after college he tried living in London, where he found amusement in its endless sights and diversions. But he also found them trivial, appeals only to what he called "fancy," as opposed to "imagination." So after escaping back to the country, he next went to France, which was in the midst of its revolution. He also took up with a French woman, Annette Vallon, with whom he had a daughter, although this is not revealed in the poem. Instead, he describes the hopes and horrors of the revolution, saying, at one point, when its hopes and promises were greatest, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!" (Bk., 11, ll. 108-9).

The last three books, being more philosophical, do not reveal as much about his immediate life, except for the account in Book 14 (ll. 1-129) of his climbing Mt. Snowdon, which is the last of his great epiphanies. But unlike the experience of crossing the Simplon Pass in Book 6, it has no elements of awe and terror (what the Eighteenth Century called the Sublime). It even begins very prosaically, including a description of the dog that belonged to his and companion's guide teasing a hedgehog. Then, as Wordsworth sees the ground in front of him appear to brighten with each step, he looks up to see the moon "naked in a firmament / Of azure without cloud, and at my feet / Rested a silent sea of hoary mist." (ll. 40-2) Beyond are the "dusky backs" of hills, and farther off is the Atlantic Ocean, all majestic in the moonlight. The scene, which must be read carefully, is a great romantic moment, where Nature and a man's higher sensibilities merge in the "highest bliss / That flesh can know...." (ll. 113-4).

#### Questions for Further Study:

1. Compare Wordsworth's descriptions of London in Book 7 with Boswell's experiences in his *London Journal*. What do the differences reveal about their different character and values and the purposes of their autobiographies?
2. Gibbon spent many years in Switzerland, but says little or nothing about its mountains. Wordsworth makes the crossing of the Simplon Pass an epiphany. What does this tell you about their different sensibilities? About the "Age of Reason" and the "Romantic Age"?
3. *The Prelude* is often slow going and its blank verse hard to follow. Is this a defect or the inevitable consequence of Wordsworth's sometimes ineffable experiences and epiphanies? Could the same story be told in prose?

Period IV: Victorian  
(Newman, Mill, Gosse)

Week 8: John Henry Newman

Newman was one of the most controversial Victorians. After an elite education, he graduated from Trinity College, Oxford, and became a fellow of Oriel, a sister Oxford college. There he and three other young fellows, John Keble, Edward Pusey, and Richard Henry Froude, became engaged in studies of religion and church history that led to their eventual espousal of Anglo-Catholic doctrines. They published their views in a series of "Tracts for the Times" that defined what soon became known as the Oxford Movement. In "Tract 90," published in 1841, Newman argued for the compatibility between the "Articles of Religion," the core beliefs of the Church of England, and Catholic theology – a radical position that led to an official ban of the Tractarians and Newman's resignation from the Oxford church where he had been the vicar since 1828. In 1845 he became a Catholic. In 1846 he went to Rome and was ordained as a priest. Returning to England in 1847, he began preaching in Birmingham. And in 1854 became the rector of the new Catholic University of Dublin, although he later became disappointed with the university and the Irish Catholic clergy and returned to England.

His *Apologia pro Vita Sua* first appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1864. Charles Kingsley, an Anglican priest and author of many popular novels and stories, had written a pamphlet attacking Newman titled *What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean*, accusing him of inconsistency and lack of respect for truth. The *Apologia*, which should not be thought of as an apology, was Newman's answer. His purpose was not to express regret or say he was sorry. Quite the opposite, it was "a defence of myself." (p. 189) As such, it has become a classic intellectual and spiritual autobiography, admired for the author's sympathetic self-presentation and rhetorical strategy by readers who may or may not agree with Newman's religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, the modern reader may get impatient with Newman's many references to church history and teachings, his Latin quotations, and the doctrinal issues that no longer seem as important as they did to Newman and his friends and opponents. What is "Evastianism" (the union of church and state)? Who were the Monophysites (defined by the dictionary as Syrian and Coptic Christians who believed that "in the person of Jesus there was but a single divine nature") and why were they important? What was the doctrine of the *Via Media*? What was meant by "Liberalism" in Newman's time?

Questions like these, however, should not prevent us from appreciating Newman's skill in defending himself. He was not just a learned man. He was a very thorough man who could quote at length from his earlier writings. He had great respect for his friends and was warm and generous in his praise of them. He had written lovely hymns as well as sermons and tracts. "Lead Kindly Light," which he wrote in 1833, while traveling in Italy and France, is still sung in many churches. And he is very modest in speaking of himself and the difficulties of recounting his experience. As he asks in the beginning of Chapter III, "For who can know himself, and the multitude of subtle influences which act upon him?" (p. 81)

Questions for Further Study:

1. Examine carefully how Newman describes one of his teachers and associates (e.g. Pusey, Keble, or Froude). How does his praise of them reflect on him?

2. He describes the years up to 1841 as "the happiest time of my life." (p. 69) Why were they? How important are the Biblical echoes, like "seven years of plenty," in his saying this? Also note his skillful use of images and analogies, like the one of house and furniture?
3. Do you sense a change of tone in the concluding pages of the *Apologia*, when Newman examines why the English distrust Catholics and quotes from the "Catechism of the Council of Trent"? Is the change effective?

### Week 9: John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill's autobiography is remarkable in many ways, beginning with its story of his education by his father James Mill (1773-1836), the follower and associate of the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and the economic philosopher David Ricardo. A serious, free-thinking, conscientious Scotsman, James Mill recognized his little son's brilliance and began teaching him early. "I have no remembrance of the time when I began to learn Greek," Mill says on the third page. "I have been told it was when I was three years old."

His education continues to be the primary subject, which is part of what makes his autobiography so different. Until Mill's time, most autobiographies were stories of religious experience and conversion, in the traditions of Kempe and Bunyan, or records of the writer's works and achievements, like Gibbon's and Benjamin Franklin's. (It should be noted that though we think of Franklin's as a great American autobiography, he actually began it while he was living in England and was a British subject.) To be sure, education is inevitably an element of these earlier autobiographies, but Mill's education was entirely secular, not religious, and was a goal in and of itself, not a means to other goals like wealth or fame or good works. Chapter II continues with his moral education, still under the influence of his benign and yet and strong-minded father, and Chapter III is titled "Last Stage of Education, and First of Self-Education."

The fourth chapter describes some of the ways in which he put his education to use in promoting utilitarianism and political reform. But this work was now his effort to educate others, as he readily admits in the first two words of the title, "Youthful Propagandism."

It is Chapter V that describes the most surprising turn in his education. For many years, from 1821, when he was fifteen, he had so devoted himself to the cause of reform that "My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object." But by "the autumn of 1826," when he was still only twenty, he had reached a "dull state of nerves" in which his life had become joyless and he felt "insipid or indifferent." So he asked himself how he would feel if all the "changes in institutions and opinions" which he was working for were suddenly accomplished. Would that bring "great joy and happiness"? "And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!'" The result was an even greater dejection that he describes as lasting for two years, during which he continued to examine himself and look for other sources of happiness. But he did not begin to recover until the fall of 1828 when he began to read Wordsworth's poetry. He had earlier read Coleridge and Byron and other poets, but Wordsworth restored or gave birth to his "feelings." And thus began a further education that his father had not given him. He began to read romantic

poets and philosophers and to see relationships between history and political institutions that he had seen before and to see errors in his father's philosophy.

He goes on to describe his friendship with Harriet Taylor that began in 1830. She was married, and remained married until her husband's death twenty-one years later, but they enjoyed a platonic relationship all that time. She united feeling and intellect and helped Mill to do so too and thus had a powerful influence on his later writing. He acknowledges this not only in the *Autobiography* but in his great essay, *On Liberty* (1859), which is famous for its advocacy of free trade and laissez-faire economics, but which also argues for the rights of the individual by saying that society as a whole profits from the freedom and diversity of all its members. Although he was already an advocate of women's rights, she was also an obvious influence on his *The Subjection of Women* (1869), another essay for which he is still famous. He protested that a woman's subjection to her husband made her legally no better than a slave, and as a member of parliament, Mill supported women's suffrage. He even wanted the word "man" replaced with the word "person" in the Reform Bill of 1867.

Thus Mill's reputation as a political philosopher and feminist continues to be very strong. But he also holds a very important place in the history of autobiography. He secularized it and emphasized the writer's education and intellectual history more than fame and works. Born in 1806, he looked back to Wordsworth (born in 1770) and looks ahead to Edmund Gosse (1849), who would also write a story of education and the influence of a very strong father.

#### Questions for Further Study:

1. Mill and Newman were almost exact contemporaries, and both wrote intellectual autobiographies, although otherwise very different ones. Which do you find more interesting and compelling. Why?
2. In describing his depression in the fall of 1821 (Ch. V), Mill compares it to "the state...in which converts to Methodism usually are, when smitten by their first 'conviction of sin.'" This suggests that his *Autobiography*, even though secular, is also a conversion narrative, like Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*. Compare the two books.
3. In *The Education of Henry Adams* (note the title), Adams refers to Mill a number of times and even describes arguing with him one night at a party in London over the advantages of protectionism vs. free trade. But he also describes Mill as "timid," adding that "timidity...is high wisdom in philosophy." This is an interesting comment, and Mill was a philosopher. Is his *Autobiography* timid? In what ways—style, argument, presentation of self, or some other feature?

#### Week 10: Edmund Gosse

Although Edmund Gosse was a prolific author of biography and literary and dramatic criticism, *Father and Son* (1907) is his most engaging book and the book for which today he is best known. It has also been called the first psychological autobiography.

Gosse's father, Philip Gosse, was once a very prominent zoologist, as Edmund shows in the first part of the book. A contemporary of Charles Darwin and the geologist Charles Lyell, he was highly respected for his detailed

descriptions of sea anemones and the other life in tidal pools. But he was also a stern evangelical Christian who refused to believe in evolution and doggedly defended the Biblical account of creation. His argument was that God had created the world, Adam and Eve, and all the plants and animals in just six days but with all the evidence in it of an older evolution, such as fossils and geological strata. He expounded this theory in 1857 in his book *Omphalos* – named for the argument that Adam and Eve had navels. But the book was ridiculed (“defined by a hasty press as being this—that God hid the fossils in the rocks in order to tempt geologists into infidelity,” says Edmund, pp. 77-8), and it was rejected by all sides. In the same year Gosse’s wife, Edmund’s mother, died of breast cancer.

As a result of these crushing blows and losses, Philip took Edmund and a nurse-housekeeper to live in a seaside village in Devon, where he became a minister to the Plymouth Brethren, his Puritan sect. The remainder of *Father and Son* describes Edmund’s education by his father, who wished to raise him as a perfect embodiment of Christian virtue. His father led him in long prayer sessions. He was forbidden to read anything but the Bible and religious tracts. He did not go to the theater or look at art. And his father baptized him and had him admitted as an adult member of his father’s church when he was only ten.

Gradually Edmund rebelled. But the rebellion was painful to both father and son, and Edmund describes it with careful reconstructions of the feelings and behaviors of both. Edmund’s admission into the church, for instance, was orchestrated by his father so as not to antagonize the adult members. Edmund sensed this and behaved with great piety, intelligence, and restraint. However, once admitted he did become proud and acted very childish sometimes, even to sticking out his tongue at other boys who were not yet baptized. In another scene Edmund wants to go to a party that his father does not want him to. So they pray together, with his father expecting that he will hear the voice of God telling him not to go, and with Edmund silently becoming resolved to rebel and to go. When the praying is over and he says, “The Lord says I may go to the Browns,” his father has no answer. “He was caught in his own trap,” writes Gosse, “and though he was certain that the Lord had said nothing of the kind, there was no road open for him but just sheer retreat.” (pp. 173-4; ch. XI)

Edmund gains an ally when his father marries an attractive, educated, and cultivated Quaker, Eliza Brightwen. She introduces poetry and even the fiction of Charles Dickens into Edmund’s education, using her Quaker tact and gentleness to overcome Philip Gosse’s rigidity. She even gains Edmund the right to look at books of art and classic statuary.

The psychological subtlety with which Gosse describes and comments on each character and incident is what keeps the reader engaged. It also raises the book far above many other accounts of a child’s conflict with a stern parent. Gosse seems anxious to respect all parties. He exposes his father, but he is ready, too, to expose and criticize himself. “At this time I was a mixture of childishness and priggishness, of curious knowledge and dense ignorance,” he says of himself at another point. (p. 185, ch. XI)

Still, one can wonder about his fairness. His “priggishness” and “dense ignorance” always seem finally to derive from his father’s character and the prejudices and limitations of the education his father has forced upon him. Is the book primarily a biography of the father or an autobiography of the son? One answer comes towards the end when Gosse passes quickly over his experiences at a boarding school that he later was sent to, writing, “But this is not an autobiography, and with the cold and shrouded details of my uninteresting school life I will not fatigue the reader.” (p. 192, ch. 12) Yet neither is it only the biography of his father, of whom he actually had written a

biography shortly before. So the best answer is that it is both. It is *Father and Son*.

Questions for Further Study:

1. Compare the childhoods and educations of John Stuart Mill and Edmund Gosse. Which father is more likeable? Which is presented more sympathetically? How do the sons reflect the character of the fathers?
2. Near the end of the Epilogue Gosse writes, "what a charming companion, what a delightful parent, what a courteous and engaging friend, my Father would have been, would pre-eminently have been to me, if it had not for the stringent piety which ruined it all." (p. 223) Is this possible? If his father had been all these things, would Gosse have written the book?
3. Read the last paragraph of the book, ending with "he [Edmund] took a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself." Do all human beings really have this "privilege," or is it only in societies where people can break with their families, clans, social classes, and traditions? Is there autobiography without an "inner life"?

Week 11: Second Paper

1. Using Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Mill's *Autobiography* as your examples, what is the difference between a romantic and a Victorian education? It is often said that it was the romantic poets (particularly Wordsworth) who "discovered childhood"—that is, recognized the importance of childhood to a person's later development and character. So consider the two men's different childhoods and teachers.
2. One of the major features of Victorian culture was its earnestness. People were expected to be hard-working and serious, and there was little time for play and joy. Is this what Newman, Mill, and Gosse have in common? If so, why was each man so earnest? What does their earnestness have to do with their all writing autobiographies?
3. Compare the meaning and importance of women in the lives and autobiographies of Mill and Gosse.

Period V: Modern  
(Woolf, Graves, and Orwell)

Week 12: Virginia Woolf

In 1940 Virginia Woolf remarked to her friend Ethel Smyth, "There has never been a woman's autobiography." The remark has puzzled and provoked many readers, since in the simplest sense it is historically wrong but also because it is strictly true of Woolf herself. She never wrote an autobiography. And yet she was often very close to it, in her novels, her approximately 4,000 letters (six volumes of them published in 1975-80), and her powerful personal essays. Moreover, her father was Leslie Stephen, author of biographies of major English authors and editor of twenty-six volumes of the highly respected *Dictionary of National Biography*. Life-writing was keenly interesting to her, as was all writing and women's writing in particular.

All this comes together in her brilliant personal essay, *A Room of One's Own*, which is based upon two lectures Woolf gave at Newnham and Girton colleges in Cambridge University in October, 1928. She had been asked, she says, "to speak about women and fiction"), and the title comes from her basic argument that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." (Ch. 1) So in the six chapters she expands on these two needs: the humiliations women have been subjected to historically, partially as a result of lacking them; how women have been portrayed in literature by men; how women have written about themselves; and how women can now use the greater opportunities they have today.

The first chapter focuses on women's lack of access to money, when their property, if any, was managed by their husbands, who therefore used it mainly for themselves and their sons. Universities such as Cambridge and Oxford, which she lumps together as "Oxbridge," were endowed with rivers of gold and silver and were only for sons. Without directly mentioning her own family, she could be referring to how her brothers were sent to fine schools and colleges, while she and her sisters were not. Her father thought education was for men. In one heart-breaking incident she tells of how she wished to see Milton's manuscript of "Lycidas" in an "Oxbridge" library, but could not. Women could enter only with men.

In the second chapter she, as a representative woman, goes to the British Museum in London and looks up subjects like "Women and Poverty," only to find a long list of sub-topics leading to books written by men. For an explanation, she turns to men's anger at women and the men's egos. The paradox, developed in chapter three, is that for centuries male writers, from dramatists like Sophocles, Shakespeare and Racine, to great novelists like Tolstoy have nevertheless created very great female characters. But what women characters might women have created if they had ever had the opportunity? What, she asks, would Shakespeare's sister have written?

Chapter four is more like a critical essay on the great women writers of the past and surveys of women writers today. But the critical comments are still very personal because of the profoundly immediate importance of these writers to Woolf. In chapter five she opens saying that women's writing has become much more various, on archaeology, aesthetics, travel and diplomacy, and is becoming more artful and subtle. "The impulse towards autobiography may be spent," she writes, thus admitting the opposite of her remark in 1940, but also implying that autobiography as such is primitive and artless. So she metaphorically pulls a new novel off the shelf, "*Life's Adventure*," by a "Mary Carmichael" to see how it advances the cause. (There was indeed a Marie

Carmichael Stopes (1880-1958), an advocate of birth control, who published a novel called *Love's Creation* in 1928, using only her first and middle names.) In it Woolf finds (or imagines) the sentence "Chloe liked Olivia," which leads her to the heretofore forbidden, but to Woolf very immediate, topic of lesbianism. "Sometimes women do like women," she says frankly and rather disingenuously, going on to argue that women should now write about this and other once suppressed topics.

In these ways Woolf clearly writes about herself and intimate, important issues in her life without writing long, full-size autobiography. At other times, she is also more outspoken than in the quasi-invention of "*Life's Adventure*." At the end she returns to her basic argument that to write a woman needs money (500 Pounds a year, which she says she has been willed by an aunt, as the minimum) and a room of her own. She then quotes from the famous anthologist Arthur Quiller Couch, editor of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, writing that most of the great English poets of the Nineteenth Century had had enough money to go to universities and obtain the leisure to write. For this Woolf has sometimes been attacked as an elitist. Alice Waters, for instance, has pointed out that Harriet Jacobs ("Linda Brent"), author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, had no such middleclass security and privacy. But Quiller Couch acknowledged a few exceptions to his generalization, e.g. John Keats, and so implicitly does Woolf. Woolf was writing an artful personal essay, about the primary conditions of her own life, and for women essentially like herself. Simultaneously, she was arguing for all women's rights and their equality with men – economic, political, and literary.

#### Questions for Further Study:

1. Quentin Bell says in *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* that "in *A Room of One's Own* one hears Virginia speaking," that in it "she gets very close to her conversational style...the conversational voice is there." Select several passages that seem to you to illustrate this and explain why you think so.
2. In the beginning of Chapter 6 Woolf muses that on an ordinary day in London, "Nobody cared a straw" for "the development by the average woman of a prose style completely expressive of her mind," and that she didn't blame them. But she herself obviously does care. Why is this so important?
3. Woolf and her husband Leonard were the founders of the Hogarth Press, which they ran out of their own house and which published books by themselves and many of their very talented friends. It took a lot of work and distracted them from many other projects. But she once wrote in her diary, after turning down a book she did not think was very good, that she could write a better book on the same subject herself, "off my own bat, for the Press if I wish!" "Yes," she concluded, "I'm the only woman in England free to write what I like." How does *A Room...* possibly fulfill that freedom?

#### Week 13: Robert Graves

World War I (or The Great War, as it was first called) not only brought new freedom and opportunity for British women, as Virginia Woolf wrote, it was a watershed event for the whole country, and Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* is the literary testimonial that shows why. His gruesome descriptions of the trenches, poison gas, military arrogance and bungling, atrocities, and

occasional heroism and sacrifice, preceded by his critical descriptions of Charterhouse, his boarding school, and upperclass snobbery, gave English readers a new image of the war and the moral failures of the dominant Edwardian culture. It has been called one of the 100 most important non-fiction books of the Twentieth Century.

But it is also unusual for many more reasons. Graves's mother was German, and his memories of his five summers with her relatives in Bavaria are sensuous and colorful. His German ancestry did not make him sympathetic to the German enemy, but it did make him sometimes an outsider at Charterhouse School, and make some people suspicious of his loyalty. He was also an outsider because of his interest in poetry and literature and because he did not play football or rugby, the most popular sports. Instead, he became a skilled boxer. But a source of relief from school was mountain climbing in Wales, with his teacher George Mallory, who later died climbing Mt. Everest. (By Graves' time mountaineering had become more of a dangerous and challenging upperclass sport than the spiritual experience it was for Wordsworth.)

His love of Wales and the Welsh continued with his volunteering in the summer of 1914 for the Royal Welch Fusiliers, and he became very proud of the regiment's traditions (expressed even in the distinctive spelling of the name). But how ironic it was, he notes at the end of chapter eleven, that the men knew more about regimental history "then they did about the fighting on the other fronts or the official causes of the war." (p. 89) They were therefore unprepared for the horrors of the front. The heart of the book is Graves' stories of battles, deaths, suicides, desertion, pettiness, lying, shooting of prisoners, and wounds, ending with Graves' own last wound in 1917, when a piece of shrapnel penetrated his lung. He was hospitalized in England, and in January, 1918, he was married to Nancy Nicholson, the daughter of a painter.

He did not go back to the war. But he remained haunted by it. On Armistice night in 1918 he did not join the hysterical celebrations but went "walking alone along the dyke above the marshes of Rhuddlan (an ancient battlefield, the Flodden of Wales) cursing and sobbing and thinking of the dead." For years he could not use a telephone because of an electric shock he had had from a trench phone. The smell of flowers could bring back his fears of poison gas. He also had difficulties adjusting to postwar university life (difficulties that he shared with his new friend T.E. Lawrence and his fellow war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen) and supporting his wife and family. When he gave a reading of his and their war poetry at a village church near Oxford, poems that were not about "the glorious dead" but "about men dying of gas-poisoning and about buttocks of corpses bulging from the mud," the villagers were "scandalized." (pp. 289-90)

His "war horror" continued all through the 1920s, though he tried to cure himself by studying psychology and in many kinds of writing. Finally, he and his wife were divorced, and he began an affair with the American poet Laura Riding. He also wrote a popular biography of T.E. Lawrence.

Readers should also know a little of the publishing history of *Goodbye to All That*. The first edition came out in 1929 and became an instant success. In April, 1929, Laura Riding had tried to commit suicide, and Graves wrote the book in only three months, hoping to earn enough money for them to move to Majorca, Spain, which they did. He then began a successful literary career, writing the historical novel *I, Claudius* (1934), *The White Goddess* (1948), and over a hundred other books. But having been written so hastily, *Goodbye to All That* had many inaccuracies which he tried to correct in a second edition published in 1957. That edition so softened his criticisms of the war and British

society, however, that the book lost the qualities that had made the 1929 edition so powerful. Therefore his grandson, Richard Percival Graves published a third edition in 1995, using the 1929 text but with 56 pages of annotations that note its errors and many of the differences between it and the 1957 text. Reading all the annotations and the text at the same time is complicated and, for most people, not necessary. But reading some of them is instructive. It is rare for some one to write an autobiography when he is only age 34, as Graves was in 1929. It is also rare, but understandable, for some one to then "correct" it at age 62. But his grandson gives readers to opportunity to study the results.

#### Questions for Further Study:

1. Graves returned from World War I with what was then called "shell-shock." Veterans of World War II were said to suffer from "battle fatigue." Today the more scientific-sounding term is "post traumatic stress syndrome." The condition is not easy to diagnose precisely and treat. How would you describe Graves' condition?
2. On p. 172 (ch. 17), Graves says, "There was no patriotism in the trenches." Earlier, however, in chapter 11 and elsewhere, he describes soldiers' great pride in their regiments. What is the difference? How does Graves himself show his own regimental pride and scorn for patriotism?
3. Graves' portrait of Charterhouse school and his fellow students must have been especially shocking to his British readers in 1929 because it was so different from the images of British schools that they knew from books like *Tom Brown's School Days*. (Americans of the 1920s and '30s had blythely acquired comparable positive images from books like *Dink Stover at Yale*.) Contrast Graves' "school days" with what you know or can imagine are the opposite.
4. Despite Graves' rejection of schoolboy snobbery and upperclass elitism, he still has many upperclass traits and manners. What are they and how do you sense them in him?

#### Week 14: Vera Brittain

Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) is a much longer autobiography than Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* but it too is dominated by the Great War. "When the Great War broke out," it begins, and the next two chapters, describing her sheltered life as the daughter of a prosperous paper manufacturer in Buxton, in England's midlands, are essentially just a preface to the long middle of the book which describes her wartime activity. She left Oxford, where she had started as a promising poet and student of literature, to become a nurse-assistant in the Voluntary Aid Detachment, or "V.A.D." She could not bear to be cloistered in St. Mary Hall, the University's small women's college, while her brother was training for the army and her boyfriend, Roland A. Leighton, was at the front. She served from the summer of 1915 in various military hospitals in London, Malta, and France, and finally in a civilian hospital back in London until the War's end. But meanwhile her boyfriend Roland, who had become her fiancé, was killed in France, and later her brother Edward, to whom she was devoted, was killed in Italy. These two devastating losses left

her so broken and depressed that it was very difficult for her to go back to Oxford and start a post-war life.

In fact, the War changed her whole life. At Oxford she changed her subject from literature to history, hoping to understand the origins of the War. After Oxford she and her close feminist friend Winifred Holtby became aspiring journalists and novelists in London, but her keener interest was as a volunteer lecturer for the League of Nations Union. She also attended League conferences in Geneva. Still later, after *Testament* was published, she became a leading pacifist, though she did support World War II to the extent of leading food drives and serving as an air raid warden. But her dedication to pacifism was proven by the discovery in 1945 of her name on a German list of the 2,000 people the Germans would execute if they occupied England. She died in 1970. Her life, as represented in *Testament* and her other volumes of autobiography, has since been made into a film and a Masterpiece Theater series.

What further distinguishes *Testament of Youth* is its immediacy and her passion for life. Although she presents herself as just a bright middleclass girl from the provinces who loves her family and sports (especially tennis), she clearly had an exceptional interest in preserving every possible record of her life, her times, and her friends. Most notably, she kept a diary. She also saved her friends' letters and sometimes copies of her own letters to them. Thus she can, and does, quote from all these at length, as well as from her and her friends' poetry. The result is a very long book, but such detailed documentation lets the reader know exactly what she said and felt. Brittain is not quite Tolstoian, but she wants to be.

Somewhat paradoxically, she is also sometimes shy. While frankly saying of her work nursing that she became quite unashamed of seeing and touching all parts of the naked male body, she never describes her intimacy with her fiancé Roland. Carefully chaperoned, as proper young girls and boys then were, they never even seem to kiss. Brittain's admirers have been still more curious to know of her relationship with Winifred Holtby. Were they lesbian lovers? During college they became very close, as two very talented older students who had little to do with either men or the younger women who had not served in the War. Afterwards, they lived together for long periods, until Holtby's death in 1935. The man Brittain did marry is coyly referred to only as "G." But he too was unusually talented. His name was George Catlin, and he was born in England, but moved to the United States after serving in the War and became a professor of Political Science at Cornell University. They were married in 1925 and had two children, but had a trans-Atlantic marriage. She did not like the isolation of Ithaca, New York, and so lived mostly in London, where Winifred helped raise the children. He divided his time between the United States, Canada, England, and extensive travels. He was reportedly very jealous of Vera's close relationship with Winifred.

#### Questions for Further Study:

1. Compare Brittain's and Graves' experiences in the War and after. Which is the more vivid writer? Who presents the more sympathetic picture of the problems they had readjusting to civilian life and at college?
2. Study the poems that Brittain quotes. Some are chapter epigraphs; many more are included in the text. Who are they by? How do they add to the autobiography?

3. What are the possible reasons for Brittain's not giving "G.'s" full name and background?

### Week 15: George Orwell

Although Orwell is best known for his political fable *Animal Farm* and his dystopian satire *1984*, his first books were autobiographical essays, journalism and fiction.

He was born Eric Blair, the son of an minor official in the Indian Civil Service, but after age four he was raised and educated in England. "George Orwell" was a pen name that he used on his first book, *Down and Out in London and Paris*. It was about his experiences as a dishwasher and in other menial jobs, and at the time it came out (1933) he had become a school teacher. It was followed by two novels and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), his personal examination of working class living conditions in depression-era England. *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) is based on his experience fighting for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. He was there only from late December, 1936, until being shot in the neck in June, 1937, and returning to England, but *Homage* is one of the most vivid and realistic books on that war.

What makes it so good is Orwell's very direct and unpretentious account of his own experiences and feelings. He did not go to Spain as just a reporter, as a great many other writers from America, England, and the rest of Europe did. He went to fight. He became a private and then corporal in the P.O.U.M. (Workers Party of Marxist Unification), which was one of the left-wing factions supporting the Spanish Republic against the Fascists and Colonel Franco, who eventually became the winner and dictator. So, although he was a reporter and kept a diary, he wrote not only as an eye-witness but as a human participant, registering his own aches and pains and frustrations.

The language is simple and frank. "We were near the front line now, near enough to smell the characteristic smell of war—in my experience a smell of excrement and decaying food." (p.16) It is lucid. The first Fascists that he saw were far in the distance, "tiny as ants, dodging to and fro behind their parapet." And it is shockingly honest, as when eventually he shoots at one of the dot-like "ants." "The dot disappeared. I hoped it [the bullet] went near enough to make him jump. It was the first time in my life that I had fired a gun at a human being." (p. 21)

But he can also be very clear and impersonal in describing the many political factions which made up the rag-tag, badly armed and poorly organized Republican army. He must do this frequently, because they change and he moves among different units, but an example is the long introduction to them in the beginning of Chapter V. After ten or eleven pages of it, however, the first person "I" returns, as in "I found myself in the middle of a political discussion that practically never ended." The readers can now understand--and sympathize. They have had enough too! But Orwell is still objective. He does not take sides—until, a couple of pages later, he comes out. "It is easy to see why, at this time, I preferred the Communist viewpoint to that of the P.O.U.M....What clinched everything was that the Communists—so it seemed to me—were getting on with the war while we and the Anarchists were standing still." Later yet, he really speaks his mind, in attacking the propagandists back in England. "The people who write that kind of stuff never fight;... It is the same in all wars; the soldiers do the fighting, the journalists do the shouting, and no true patriot ever gets near the front-line trench, except on the briefest of propaganda-tours." (p. 66)

Even so, simple and direct as this seems, one must also keep in mind that Orwell was a kind of propagandist himself. He had a political position—anti-Stalinist Communist in Spain but working-class Laborite or Social Democrat in England—that he wanted to persuade his readers to support too, and to realize that Fascism must be defeated in Spain or it will have to be fought everywhere. Thus the voice or persona that he repeatedly returns to is a friendly, familiar one that for many of his readers would have brought back memories of the Great War, as when he describes life in the trenches –

In trench warfare five things are important: firewood, food, tobacco, candles and the enemy. In winter...they are important in that order, with the enemy a bad last. Except at night, when a surprise-attack was always conceivable,... (p. 23)

Or when he quotes old army songs—

There are rats, rats,  
Rats as big as cats,  
In the quartermaster's store! (p. 78)

This author may not be "George Orwell" but the underlying Eric Blair. Or, conversely, it may be the most persuasive George Orwell, who liked his pseudonym for the very reason that it sounded really round and English.

In any case, we hear this voice again and again when he refers to English stereotypes of Spain and Spanish culture – trains that don't run on time and a people who can't be disciplined. And we hear it loud and clear in the final chapters of *Homage to Catalonia* when, weary and recovering from the bullet in his neck, he is returning to England and "the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policemen—all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs." (p. 232)

Questions for Further Study:

1. Do you think Orwell had read *Goodbye to All That*? Why or why not? In what ways is his book like Graves'?
2. Virginia Woolf and George Orwell both wrote with definite rhetorical purposes: they wanted to persuade readers of a cause. How are their techniques both similar and radically different?

Week 16: Final Paper

1. How are the structures of conversion narratives and autobiographies of education similar to war stories? How are they not? Answer by writing about at least one religious conversion narrative (Kempe, Bunyan, or Newman), one "education" (Wordsworth, Mill, or Gosse) and one war autobiography (Graves, Brittain, or Orwell).
2. What are the uses of autobiography to the writer's own psychological health, education, or development? Choose four of the following autobiographers (Pepys, Boswell, Wordsworth, Graves, Woolf, and Brittain) and consider such matters as why they wrote, whether they published their books, and how they were or were not changed by the experience.
3. Several of the autobiographers you have read were already famous public figures at the time they wrote. For example: Kempe, Gibbon, Newman, Mill, and Gosse. Why did they write and what else do they have in common? Consider such matters as style, their self-images, and techniques of self-presentation.
4. Vera Brittain's title, *Testament of Youth*, is unusual. It has obvious biblical echoes, and also legal ones as in "my last will and testament." Are there others? But youths do not write the latter, although the subject of youth has been an important subject of many autobiographies. Compare her tone and selfhood in her "testament" with the treatment of youth in three other autobiographies.