

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

GREEK AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Overview of Autobiography in Classical Greek Literature

Classical culture in the West is divided into two separate but jaggedly continuous parts: Greek culture and Roman culture. The origins of Greek culture take us back to the Mycenaeans, the Phoenicians, and Ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian culture; culture worlds of which we know more all the time—from archeology and epigraphy-- but which still remain outside the founding presence of our own culture. That Western founding level continues to be the Greco-Roman, which pervades our references and institutions.

What we find, when we enter Greek culture at the historical level of Homer (9th/8th cent. B.C.)—or of the contemporary Greek sculptures of the Cycladic period, or of the architecture of Crete or Mycenae—is imaginative creation we can relate to from where we are today, in our contemporary world swirling with the new but with a capacity for hearing its own past inside it. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, therefore, remain the great autobiography of the Greek people. But that is autobiography in the widest possible sense, and not in the narrower sense relevant for the present syllabus. In the widest sense all great literature is someone's autobiography.

Ancient Greek culture presents no easily identifiable set of self-awareness skills, and hardly produces a text we would today call autobiography in the commonest sense of the word. (However many Greek writers hold the mirror to their faces and in those glimpses, sometimes prolonged, we can discern the profiles of our forefathers' bony images.) As we will see, in the following samples, life-writing might often be a more comfortable description than autobiography for what the Greeks give us as self-image; indeed the Romans too, who divide our syllabus with the Greeks, will rarely give us full face-portraits, but rather, as in the case of the lyric poets of both Greece and Rome, intense cameos of feelings in action. (It will not be until the *Meditations* of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.) and the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (354-430 A.D.) that we begin to see full length self-portraits which are deeply intelligible to us.) Greek culture, in particular, needs careful scrutiny to bring out its self-reflective, or self-revealing traits, and, because that culture was 'plastic,' as deeply as it was verbal, we should ideally employ our perceptiveness for portrait sculpture as richly as our inner literary ears, when we go out to recapture the Greek experience of self.

Another challenge to thought—as we construct this syllabus-- is that which leads us out of the classical age altogether into the heady air of a new cultural expression. The transition from the 'old' classical world (both Greek and Roman) into the more familiarly subjective world we know today, is heralded by the writing and thinking of Marcus Aurelius, whose *Meditations* open up the page to a mature human, at the crosshairs of world history, subtly portraying himself as a texture of concerns, anxieties, and moral convictions. (We will have to feel, already here, an intimacy to us which is new among the texts we will have so far read in this course.) With Marcus Aurelius we encounter a spiritual guide no less modern, and far more subtle, than the latest self-help book in Barnes and Noble. That text opens the first dawn of modernity. That is a beginning. But only a beginning. Saint Augustine, two centuries later, is the first Christian in our study, and a founder, in the tradition of Platonic and neo-Platonic thinking, of the deepest themes of a new religion. His small book, *The Confessions* (397 A.D.), distills the intensity of a new life perspective, opens a vibrant and penitent person to us, and gives us the sense, for the first time, that the ancient classical world is the other. With Augustine we open onto the kind of autobiography to which the western tradition is now accustomed—the opening of the heart, the disclosure of personal details, the personal response to the impersonal world.

Readings: Mary Beard and John Henderson, *Classics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2000)

Hesiod Works and Days; Theogony (7th century B.C.)

While the shadow of Homer lies over all subsequent Greek culture, and indeed over the entire Western tradition, we can hardly begin with him in a history of Ancient Classical Autobiography. Were we to do so we would need to approach with great subtlety, watching how Homer the blind bard characterizes blind bards, in his poetry, or how Homer nods his head to the reader with a wise aside like 'men always love to hear about the newest and freshest events to come to their ears.' Or we could go to the opposite extreme, and see in Homer's whole epic achievement, which embraces the canvas of human experience, a kind of autobiography, a 'writing of himself by Homer.' With such a broad perspective as that, of course, we would lose any definitional crispness for the term autobiography. We would be no better off than if we were gathering disparate fragments of hints, from an author, about the nature of himself. Both of these interpretive extremes, the macroscopic and the indirective, come into play in our syllabus discussions, but we will try directing our attention to firm and substantive expressions of self. We will, so far as possible, be looking for autobiography in the sense the West has preferred to give it, a 'disclosure or presentation of self, embedded in a life world.'

So what will Hesiod offer us, that we could not have extrapolated from Homer? We will have to read both short epics—The Works and Days, an old farmer's Almanac, instructive for the Boeotian peasant life; The Theogony, a narrative account of the generations of the Gods of 'Greek myth'-- to get a sense of Hesiod's self- presentation. (We will need to consider that Hesiod, like all the Greek and Latin poets considered here, creates in what seems to us a formal stylized prosody—it is called dactylic hexameter, in the case of epic poetry—and that he, thus, thinks, feels, and sings in conventions in which his creative language is embedded. You will note, in the bibliography, reference to Halporn, et. al., The Meters of Greek and Roman Poetry. It is highly recommended, here at the start of this class, that you at least introduce yourself to this important issue, of the kind of language in which classical poetry was created.) In order to analyze autobiographical material up close, in these epics, you will want to look at the few and cursory 'concrete events' that Hesiod offers us in commenting on the quarrel between his brother and himself, in The Works and Days ll. 27-41, and in recounting his 'encounter with the Muses', ll. 22-35 in The Theogony. We will have recourse to finicky detective work, in uncovering the *autos*, the self, in these autobiographies. In one of our readings—the historian Herodotus, Week 4--close attention to language issues will be our only key to the autobiographical theme. There will be little concrete self-presentation, but much of that self-positioning in language by which we present ourselves as identities. That is, we will in a few cases, throughout this syllabus, not be dealing with full face autobiography, or even with life-writing, but with the intricacies of the language by which we establish ourselves as persons in a literary text. It will be one of your challenges to determine whether this kind of analysis is an encounter with autobiography.

Reading: Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days

Suggested Translation: Richmond Lattimore, Hesiod Works and Days; Theogony, The Shield of Herakles (Ann Arbor, 1991).

Questions:

1 Hesiod, like all the Greek epic poets, composes in a highly stylized meter, the dactylic hexameter. Of what relevance is that fact to the kind of autobiography Hesiod constructs for himself? Are we accustomed to verse autobiographies today? Can you name one?

2 Hesiod believes that man's condition is getting worse all the time; his own Age, the Age of Iron, is a dark one. How does Hesiod's view of the human condition as a whole impact Hesiod's view of himself as a person? Do we know him as one who considers himself part of the Age of Iron?

3 Autobiography is a portrayal of oneself in language. When you consider how you speak and how you present yourself verbally to others, do you feel that those zones of your behavior are where an interested person should go to find your autobiography? Is autobiography that tightly linked to the language act?

Sappho, Archilochos, Solon Lyrics (6th century B.C.)

With the emergence of these three characterful individuals (and a number of others), speaking in their own voices about their hopes, responsibilities, and loves, we are snatched away from the relative facelessness of the narrator of epic (Homer, Hesiod), and immersed in the human voice, shaped in melodic and intricate poetic structures—now we are in 'lyric,' now 'epic' metrics-- telling of the person behind them. (Each of these poets has his/her own thematic: Sappho reports passionate longing for her female lover, and at the same time portrays what seems to be a coterie of sophisticated ladies in whose company she lives on the island of Lesbos; Archilochos, by career a mercenary soldier, reports a world full of masculine pleasures and daring, yet threads his disciplined lyrics with his own passages of hot anxiety; Solon, the first law giver for Athens and its greatest early statesman, writes about the legal protections and governing attention he provided for the Athenian people in this formative period of the city-state, while at the same time he is reflecting on himself, and introducing a new level of conscious self-awareness into the early Greek lyric. (This kind of self-awareness from within the lyric, as we see it in Solon, is different from the self-dramatization peculiar to the writing of Sappho and Archilochos.) Rich and self-expressive lyricists like these three speak of a world transition from the epic into the beginnings of a new social and cultural world: the world of the polis, with its democratic values, its stress on the individual, and its new 'freer-market' economic traits.

Reading:

Lyrics of Sappho, Archilochos, and Solon

Suggested Translations:

Diane Rayor, *Sappho's Lyre: Archaic Lyric and Women Poets of Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, 1991). Contains translations of Sappho, and at the time of newly discovered texts of Archilochos and Sappho.

Guy Davenport, *7 Greeks* (New York, 1995). Contains translations of Archilochos and Sappho, among others.

John Lewis, *The Poems of Solon of Athens*, 2006: online.

Questions:

1 Do you think it likely that the development of lyric poetry is related to the conditions of the society in which it takes place? What exactly changed, in sixth century B.C. Greece, that enabled a new genre, lyric poetry, to come to the fore of the culture?

2 We in the West, especially since the Romantic Movement, are used to lyric poetry as an expression of emotions. Do you see that trait of lyric poetry in the poems we have read this week? What emotions are expressed by the three poets we are reading? How are these emotions expressed?

3 Were the lyric poets of Ancient Greece performers of their work, and if so in what settings? (You might want to do some research on this question.) What role do you think musical accompaniment played in their work? Dance? What is the significance, to the autobiographical dimension of these poets' work, of the multiplicity of art-skills incorporated into their work?

Herodotus (484-425 B.C.) *The History* (5th century B.C.)

The first historian/anthropologist to have come down to us from Greek literature, Herodotus was born in Halicarnassus, on the coast of Turkey—and was thus, at that time, a citizen of the Persian Empire. Though we know little about the details of his life we can deduce, and back up, facts about his travels in Egypt and Babylon, and about his unsuccessful efforts later in life to become an Athenian citizen.

The work he creates from his life is what in Greek means 'an inquiry'—*historieuo* is the Greek verb for 'to inquire' and 'historia' is a broad inquiry—thus a work less fact-fettered than what we would mean by a 'research study,' and open to the discovery of philosophical implications in the world it reveals. That kind of wide ranging work is just what we find in this only writing left to us from Herodotus. As an 'inquirer' he ranges widely through the world of his time, with particular attention both to the events of the Persian Wars (499-449 B.C.) , in which the Greeks first defined themselves as a vigorous and unified culture, and to the character of the cultures in which the Greeks and Persians, and other residents of the Eastern Mediterranean, found themselves at Herodotus' time. Herodotus at once regales and instructs us with stories of Kings and concubines, seers and fakirs, bizarre and fascinating cultural insights from throughout the Eastern Mediterranean; while at the same time he develops a philosophy of history, primarily based on the notion of cyclical repetitions, as cultures come into conflict and replace one another through the processes of revenge and retaliation.

In the course of this large text Herodotus is not voluble about himself, but in the verbal maneuvers by which he narrates his history he turns himself into a distinctive individual talking about himself; by such minimal strategies as we tracked in Hesiod, a self-directed remark here, another there, Herodotus is building toward the full fledged notion of autobiography.

Readings: Herodotus, *The History*.

Suggested Translation: David Grene, *The History of Herodotus* (Chicago, 1987).

Questions:

1 Herodotus, as we said above, writes into his history many bizarre and fascinating Eastern Mediterranean episodes, which establish him as a kind of anthropologist/historian. Does his use of narrative tales, which entertain and also support his account, mean that he is still, basically, working in the tradition of epic poetry? Or has he broken through the 'epic veil' to address us as 'fellow persons'?

2 Herodotus describes his work as an inquiry, a *historia*. Does this description, as we use the term 'inquiry' today, seem to fit what Herodotus created? Or do you view his history as a work of art? Does his history resemble what we customarily view as history today?

3 Herodotus narrates his entire history as a friend to Athens and a critic of Persian culture. How does this intrinsic bias pervade the self-image Herodotus is constructing through this

inquiry/autobiography? Does his 'bias' play a role in the construction of an autobiographical personality?

4. Ancient Greek culture is considered a major foundation of later Western culture—in literature, philosophy, social organization, plastic arts and architecture—and yet, as Misch observes (in his *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*), the Greek tradition in autobiography is weak. The Greeks—and Misch puts it this way—have great sense for the general, the universal, but a deficient sense for the individual, which results in a weakness in the self-expressive mode that generates literary autobiography. What do you think of Misch's view?

5 In the introduction we alluded to the questions of genres, as formative factors in literary creation. We have, to this point in our quest for autobiography, been confronted with two epic texts, extensive pieces of lyric poetry, and a vast history of the known world. Has the autobiographical element in each of those texts been determined or shaped by the genre of the text? Is there a profound link between one's preferred genre and one's self-image?

6 What do you think of the flexible use we are giving to the term autobiography? (We are taking the term in both the broadest sense, to cover any expression of the self in language, and in the most detailed sense, to cover the fine points of linguistic expression by which we represent our distinctive personalities, by which we mark off whatever is ineffably us.) Do you think this 'flexible approach' enables the term autobiography to retain its usefulness?

Xenophon (430-354 B.C.) Anabasis (399-375 B.C.)

Xenophon was born near Athens, into an aristocratic family. This was at a moment of anxious peace in the polis, after the Athenians' brilliant victory in the Persian Wars—recounted by Herodotus—and near the start of the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404), which will be the theme of the history of Thucydides. Unlike these two other historians, however, Xenophon was essentially a soldier and writer of diverse texts—on topics as widespread as hunting, royal pedagogy, political philosophy, romance fiction, and military strategy. Of his many works the most widely read is the *Anabasis*. Schoolboys, then as now, got their first taste of literate Greek prose from this text; only scholars range far out from this text, into the wide and fascinating range of Xenophon's whole oeuvre.

In Xenophon's *Anabasis*, written in the first quarter of the 4th century B.C., and concerning events from 400 B.C., we hear a field general and adventurer reporting at length on a mercenary expedition to help Cyrus, claimant to the throne of Persia, to recover his royal power. This report reads like lengthy but dramatic exhortations to the Greek troops, as Xenophon prepares to lead them first to Persia and then from Persia back to Greece through the mountains of Armenia to the Black Sea and finally to the Mediterranean. Not only do we tap into an epic adventure tale, a 1500 mile march over rough terrain—but every step of the way involves the narrator's presentation of himself as narrator. This of course is where the autobiographical element of the text enters. In the course of many reported conversations—reported by himself—Xenophon skillfully comments on himself, establishing a zone of self-consciousness which draws us into him. You will want to analyze that zone of self-consciousness, for it is where we as readers feel in the presence of a narrator. (We have already discussed, in connection with Herodotus and especially Hesiod, the way in which an aspect of autobiography is created by the way the narrator manipulates language about himself.) You will want to look closely at some of the many passages in which Xenophon's manner of speaking about himself reveals him as a person. A kind of example could be *Anabasis* III, 1, 1-19, in which Xenophon presents to us the despondent mercenary army on the brink of defeat by the Persian monarch, wondering desperately

where to turn and how to get home. In Section 4 Xenophon writes that 'there was a man in the army named Xenophon,' a stiff and mechanical approach to bringing forth his own identity. (I think of the kind of defamiliarization of self we sense when a painter like Breughel includes himself as a tiny figure in the lower corner of one of his canvases.) Then Xenophon recounts his discussion with Socrates about the kinds of sacrifice to the gods Xenophon should now arrange, in order to further a propitious return of the army to Greece. Xenophon the narrator is talking about himself in an important negotiation, as though he was both a teller and the one told about at the same time. (Georg Misch, as we noted in the previous week, says that the Greeks, unlike the Romans, had no sense of the concrete individual, but directed their thought and feeling toward the general, the 'abstract.' Do you see any grounds for that view, as you look into a Greek autobiography like Xenophon's?) It is particularly interesting to note Xenophon's account, in sections 11-12, of the dream in which he became convinced that he and his men need to move fast in order to avoid annihilation. 'It seemed to him that there was a clap of thunder and a bolt fell on his father's house, setting the whole house ablaze.' How disturbing the dream's disclosure, yet how dispassionate the narrator's account of the disturbing dream.

Readings: Xenophon, *Anabasis*

Suggested Translation: H.G. Dakyns, *Xenophon, The March up Country* (available on line or in many commercial editions).

Questions:

1 Herodotus and Xenophon both write extensively about human affairs—political-social-military affairs—and in doing so each writer infuses his own 'personality' in his text; though neither of them enters into anything like a discussion or display of personality. Which author do you come to know best, as a shaping force in his text?

2 Does Xenophon have a sense of the concreteness of the individual—the unique traits that make a person what he/she is, and that make fictional characters like those of Charles Dickens burst into life from their first appearance on the page? What kind of fullness of personality does Xenophon himself acquire in his own self-portraiture?

3 The notion of 'autobiographical space' derives from the notion that in literary self-expression the narrator establishes some 'distance' between his narrating act and the self whose presence he conjures into his text. That distance, it might be held, could be viewed as the space of consciousness, in which we are invited to touch the self-generative level of the autobiographer. Do you see some validity in this set of thoughts? Do they seem to apply to the operation by which Xenophon is creating an autobiography?