

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# ROMAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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## Overview of Autobiography in Classical Roman 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.

Roman culture follows its mothering Greek culture, from which the Romans drew their artistic themes, their derivative mythography, their sense for the fine detail of literary craftsmanship and statecraft. As it happens, there is a breakthrough of individual literary self-awareness, in Roman culture, at the same cultural point—at a major historical transition—at which it occurred centuries before in Greek culture. I refer to the historical intervention of the Roman personal lyric, and other poetic styles, with their (albeit highly stylized) revelations of the self inside, a kind of intervention we found earlier in Greece, as that culture segued, in the sixth century B.C., from epic mode (a 'shame culture') to democratic mode (a 'guilt culture'), from epic to lyric poetry. Roman culture's transition from the late Republic into the early Empire ushers in a period rich in salient artistic personalities ready (in their ways) to 'write about themselves.' The synecdoche of these two periods--6th century B.C. Greece; 1st century B.C./A.D. Rome-- puts such lyricists as Archilochos, Sappho, Catullus, Horace, at the center of our analysis. The lyric moment becomes the most expressive outpouring of both Greek and Roman culture, and we need to reflect on the political/economic similarities between the lyric age in Greece (6th century B.C.) and the lyric outpouring of Rome in the the first centuries before and after Christ.

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)

## **Cicero** (106-43 B.C.) Letters

Historical context determining many traits of human self-awareness, we will agree in advance that the three centuries separating Xenophon from Cicero saw changes in culture which would sharply inflect writers' autobiographical self-images. Such, of course, is true of the cultural space separating Cicero from Xenophon, a space in which the formative dominance of Greek culture, in the Eastern Mediterranean, was replaced by that of Rome, the new power center. The Eternal City replaced the increasingly fractious city states of Hellas, and the Empire of Alexander (356-323). So portentous was this cultural change, for the issues foremost in this course, that a culture in which the abstract and general was prioritized was being replaced by one in which the individual was being given that priority; in short, a cultural change was brewing which, though hardly to be fleshed out in a brief syllabus like this, was to undergird a change in the mode of the writing self as it moves into self-accounts, autobiography. We will have occasion to remark on this large scale change, as we consider the Roman literary persona in the first years of the Empire—and of course as we move, in our final section on Saint Augustine, into Christian registers of self-expression.

Viewed in political terms, Cicero was living through a chaotic historical period—1st century B.C., 300 years after Xenophon---in which the already hoary Roman Republic, with its traditional Latin virtues and severities, was falling prey to power forces—Caesar, Mark Antony, Brutus were the major players—and Julius Caesar was fatefully to promote himself to dictator status. Cicero, who was of aristocratic family and publically involved—equally brilliant as politician, lawyer, orator, and writer—found himself immersed in the struggles of his time, which ultimately led to his murder, but on the way elicited from him so prominent a public presence that many think him to have been the most formative Roman personage of his time; acquainted with all the power players, a trial lawyer handling cases central to the strategies of government and its foes, a man serving, both as quaestor and then as consul, at the highest administrative level of the Republic.

Cicero's Letters, which he did not write for publication, concern us this week, and will provide a window into a whole personality--politician, lawyer, father, orator, philosopher all in one--with a bewildering life fullness which makes us feel, coming from the Greek autobiography we have been reading, as if we are coming into a new universe. (Have we, among the personally rather reticent Greeks we read, encountered anything like the personal revelations Cicero offers us?) What are the topics of these letters? Political issues, such burning topics as the rise of Caesar as dictator, and the shaping of an opposition to him; the issues raised by the import of Greek philosophy and education into the training of the Roman gentleman; the wonders of filial love, as Cicero feels it toward his beloved daughter Tullia, whose death in 45 B.C. broke his spirit; Cicero's growing conflict with his wife, Terentia, with whom he seems never to have been in love, and whom he divorced, after thirty years of marriage, when he was sixty three—to marry a young girl for her money. What Greek of the ancient past do we know under these different phases? No need to enlarge usage, in order to view this material as autobiographical.

Readings: Cicero's Letters

Suggested Translation: Evelyn Shuckburgh, *The Letters of Cicero* (London, 1908-09)

Questions:

1 We referred earlier to the question of genres, and now with renewed force the generic question arises: is it relevant, and if so how, that an autobiography is being generated in letters—as distinct from being generated in lyric poetry, say, or in the writing of history?

What kind of autobiography gets created through letters? Do you know autobiographies in letters, in our time? How do they compare with Cicero's work in letters?

2 How do you explain the difference in self-presentation which announces itself so dramatically in the historical space dividing Cicero from Xenophon? Is self-expression in autobiography so tightly linked to the enviroing political-economic milieu, that a period of three centuries, even in a single broad geographical area, could undergird such change?

3 What kind of autobiographical construction of the self is letter-writing? Are letters—I mean old fashioned pen and ink or stylus-and-wax- tablet letters—creative imaginative documents? Can they be a genuine literary form? Or is the pressure of the audience, the intended receiver, too intense in letters to allow for the movements of higher imagination? Have you favorite letter writers, from closer to our own time, who have on you the effect of literary art?

### **Catullus** (84-54 B.C.) Lyrics

Catullus was born in Verona of a prosperous family, and, like Cicero and most of the accomplished Romans we are considering here, spent his life interacting with and moulding his equally aristocratic age mates. (Like Cicero, and the entire elite clique we refer to here—Tibullus, Propertius, Juvenal—Catullus was educated on and in Greek literature, and drew many of his values, including his aesthetic, from these Greek forebears.) The entry of Catullus, onto the scene of highly sophisticated poetry, was natural, given his genius and the support of a clique of neoteri, bright young fellow poets from the north of Italy. From within this setting Catullus rapidly distinguished himself, and managed within a short life—thirty or so years seems to suffice for prodigies like John Keats, Leopardi, or Shelley—to set fire to the possibilities inherent in his language.

The lyric work, onto which Catullus poured his skill, passion, and vitriol, is quick to establish him as autobiography in language, free and direct in his sentiments, and with little desire to conceal.

The body of Catullus' work falls into a number of thematic categories—invectives, Alexandrian epyllia (so called), poems to dear friends, passionate love poems, and poems of condolence, of which the one addressed to his brother (#101), is especially touching. Within these themes, and in a dressy variety of meters which conform to various lyric 'moods,' Catullus establishes a poetic personality of extraordinary openness, complexity, and fire. What kind of autobiography is established by the lyric has already been discussed in connection with the Greek lyric—'three characterful individuals speaking in their own voices'—and no precise answer. It is apparent that the classical lyric expresses an individual self—through the optic of a transformative metric and a rich inheritance of techniques—and is not to be confused, for instance, with the freer lyrics of Western European Romanticism—Hugo, Vigny, Wordsworth—where the free (but careful) flow of feelings is given its head. It is significant, in that regard, that one of Catullus' masterpieces (#51) is a translation of Sappho's passionate lyric addressing the lucky person who is seated beside her lover, a proximity she (the poet) would treasure but would find intolerably intense. 'That fellow seems the same as a god, /seems, if I may, to excel the gods,/ as he sits beside you and at one time/watches and hears you...' The powerful positioning device, by which the narrator accumulates a rare intensity around the beauty of the beloved, is a brilliantly literal squeeze of Sappho. You will want, again here, to sift through the meanings of 'autobiography,' for clearly Catullus is 'telling us about himself' but he is doing so in a subtly performative way, not in any kind of life-detail narration. The same positioning in artifice shines through such different virtuositities of self as poems # 64, the Marriage of Peleus and Thetis, and #97, a

powerful example of 'invective.' In the Marriage epyllion, Catullus observes an intricate box within box structure, with plentiful mythological scope and an ultimate conclusion, that our age is fallen and is abandoned by the gods—a conclusion often echoed in ancient texts, and already familiar to us here from our reading of Hesiod. (How elliptically Catullus brings us around, here, to himself as viewpoint!) In #97 we find the same charged skill brought to bear on an unfortunate victim of Catullus' contempt. How could Catullus have more powerfully expressed what he himself felt and was? How could he have done it with more adroitness of scorn, than by describing a foe whose mouth 'has half a yard of gums that grate like wagon crates;/ it widens as, in summer, split in two, the cunt of a pissing mule will do.'

Reading: Catullus, Lyrics

Suggested Translation: A.S. Kline, Catullus, The Poems,  
<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Catullus.htm>

Classics in Translation, (Vol. II), edited by MacKendrick and Howe (Madison, 1959) , is an excellent recourse for orienting yourself in Latin poetry.

Questions:

1 We marked a wide cultural gap between Xenophon's self-presentation and that of Cicero, two and a half centuries later. Do you have that 'gap' sense at all when you step from the world of Sappho, Archilochos, and Solon into that of Catullus? Does Catullus deal with a wider range of themes, and in a broader palette of moods, than his Greek predecessors? Or would you attribute whatever differences there are in this case to the relatively more fragmentary state of the Greek lyric poets' texts?

2 Catullus' passionate love poems are addressed to 'Lesbia,' about whose identity there is some doubt—though she was clearly a high flying society woman, and the spouse of a powerful political figure. Many of Catullus' poems refer to this woman, for whom he felt great passion. What kind of passion did he feel? Is it 'romantic passion'? Is it purely physical? Does Catullus seem to you similar to Archilochos, in the physical passion he expresses?

3 You have read several registers of Catullus' poetry: regret poetry, elaborate mythographic poems, long and super subtle, and invective. Do you have a sense of Catullus, in his poetry, as a whole individual sensibility? Do you see some similarities between Catullus and Cicero, as analysts of human passions? What kind of autobiography is Catullus creating, as he builds his poetic testimony? Have you acquired a sense of what kind of person he is?

## Horace (65-8 B.C.) Poems

By two of his earliest translators into English, Lonsdale and Lee (1874), Horace has been called the first autobiographer, and while we clearly dispute that view, in this course, our quarrel with the view may be partly semantic, and in any case does not prevent our seeing some truth in the point. Horace is the first Western writer to sit back, albeit in highly curried verse forms, borrowed from Greek masters, and to tell us about his life (a little), his viewpoints (a lot), the world in which he is living (a good deal), and his views on art, his aesthetic (a lot.) The sum of these disclosures is a fairly rounded personality impression—known in more aspects than Catullus, though subtler to characterize than Catullus—and as engagingly human as Cicero, with whom he competes in drawing our attention to a new sensibility, the Roman, in which the 'modern individual' we Westerners know and are is visible.

The poems left to us by Horace—odes, epodes, iambs—range from startlingly dirty invectives or erotic poems to reflections on art, beauty, and the good life, and carry out their single mission in meters transported from Greek—Archilochos and Sappho are major sources—which Horace had learned to master during his study years in Athens. What kind of man does Horace think he is, in these poems of many sorts? He 'thinks he is' a simple man, son of a freedman who selflessly pursued his son's education, ultimately shaping his ear and sensibility; he thinks of himself, as he ages, as a man enjoying his privacy and the peace of the countryside—Epodes # 2, Odes #3. 1 in which he opens with the famous *odi profanum vulgus et arceo*, I hate the vulgar crowd, and avoid it; Odes 2.18 on the vanity of riches, 2.14 on the shortness of life, I. 11 on the unpredictability of life and the case for a joyful/Stoic *carpe diem* philosophy—

Even now, whilst we are talking,  
Grudging time pursues his flight:  
Use today, and trust as little  
As thou mayst tomorrow's light...;

he is a man whose sexual passions are much tamer than those of Catullus, and who considers himself, at forty, past the 'age of interest' IV,1; who creates an *Ars Poetica*, an account of what makes for value in art, which is of pertinence to our day—and was his last published work, in 13 B.C., as well as a splendid poem, III.30, in which he declares that he will not wholly die, because his art, the fruit of his leisure and care, will survive.

What we have, by and large, is the testimony of a life-loving but careful—no Catullus he—gentleman, at home on the major power levels of society (his patron, Maecenas, was Rome's wealthiest supporter of the arts), happy in his country home and the surrounding scenes of nature which he loves, devoted to his art, exquisitely sensitive to language, and on the whole at peace with the human condition. There is no contesting that we have here, in sharply turned and learned verse forms, the unsystematic account of a whole life. And all this living was gone through over a period of 57 years of civil strife and soon Civil War, strongman turf battles on the governing level—Caesar, Pompey, Crassus; Brutus, Antony—world shaping events like Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon in 49 B.C. or the battle of Philippi, in 42 B.C., which set the stage for the Imperium of Augustus, the institution of a new form of government and eventually of society, a heralding of unparalleled consequence for modern western humanity. It was Horace's genius, and indeed a byproduct of his personality and values, that he was enabled to escape fairly tranquil and unscathed, though far from uninstructed, by these world formative events.

Suggested Translations: A.S.Kline,  
<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Horacehome.htm>  
Kraemer, Casper, Jr., *The Complete Works of Horace* (New York, 1936)

Questions:

1 Horace lives and writes during the very heart of Rome's political/military/social revolution, and yet in many places he writes of the beauties of art, the wonders of the integral life—the poem *integer vitae exemplum* exemplifies this theme--and of the removed pleasures of the countryside, praising his own suburban mansion, in Rome, for being *rus in urbe*, the countryside in the city. Do you read Horace as attempting to counterbalance, in his poetry, the unsettled world he is living in? Does he form his poetic autobiography as a defense against the world?

2 Does Horace's *Ars Poetica* seem to you an aesthetic theory drawn from his own work? Does his *Ars Poetica* exemplify his aesthetic, written as it is in poetry? These two questions may seem to stray from the autobiographical issue, but they do not. Does Horace write with self-consciousness, does he seem to know himself, perhaps to a degree not found in Catullus or the Greek lyric poets?

3. It was often claimed, in classical antiquity, that although local wars eventually sapped Greek power, and made the Greek city state a natural victim for the ascendant power of Rome, in the end the Romans were conquered by those whom they defeated. The reference here is to the overwhelming power of Greek culture, as it passes over into the Roman Republic and Empire. We have seen that Horace writes with virtuosity in a variety of Greek meters. Does it seem to you that the persona Horace is creating, as he builds his autobiography in language, is heavily indebted to Greek culture? Does your reading in Greek autobiography suggest any parallel to the work and life of Horace?

4. What are you learning, from this course, about orality/writing/printing issues in the formation of ancient Classical Literature? How did the Greeks and Romans create canons of their literary values? Who controlled the means of production when it came to the written word? Who, and when, determined the texts to be canonized as of defining value for the two civilizations? Will we understand classical autobiography more fully, as we understand the answer to questions like these?

2. Horace, Catullus, and Cicero all write from a tumultuous social-political period. (In the ancient classical world there is one other example of such a potent transition, from older to newer values, and that is the transition from the epic to the 'lyric' age of Greece, in the seventh and sixth centuries.) Does that period reflect similarly in the works of the three men? Which man is the most deeply imprinted by his age?

3. Both Horace and Catullus indulge in 'invective poems.' These are not Romantic or erotic poems, but 'scurrilous physical attacks,' in which, in language, the other person is delivered over to scorn. (References to body odors and sexual proclivities abound.) Do these language efforts raise a red flag, alerting you to the strong presence of ANOTHER CULTURE? Or does the poetry of our time include the scurrilous?

## **Ovid** (43 B.C.-17 A.D.) Poems : Tristia; Letters from Pontus

The figure of Augustus Caesar, who became Emperor of Rome in 27 B.C., and ruled until his death in 14 A.D., was a powerful tone setter for the cultural milieu in which Ovid grew up. Ovid was born in Sulmo, ninety miles from Rome, and with the support of his father, who, like Horace's dad, pushed himself to provide a fine education for his son, he became deeply immersed in the study of poetry and Greek. (Ovid was said, anecdotally, to have spoken in dactyls, the classic meter of Latin and Greek poetry, from infancy on.) Though Ovid's father pushed for his son's political career, Ovid himself was born for poetry, and though he undertook minor administrative jobs, and underwent legal training, his chief interest was in the language of the legal profession, not in the procedures. His decision for poetry was made the easier by his early popular success—the *Amores* were published when he was twenty, and were the talk of the town—and by his acquaintance with significant literary figures like Virgil, Propertius, and Tibullus. Rooted in Roman life, married—he was married three times, the last one the true mainstay of his life—he went on to major literary successes—especially *The Metamorphoses*, a catalogue of mythical figures who had passed into natural forms, and the *Ars Amatoria*—and to a position, along with Virgil and Propertius, as Rome's leading literary figure. (A position of eminence which was to play out through subsequent literary history, in which Ovid became formative for poetry in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.) In the midst of this 'successful life' a blow descended on Ovid; in 8 A.D. he fell victim to the wrath of the dictator—and sometimes dictatorial—Emperor Augustus, who sentenced Ovid to 'relegation,' who 'relegated' Ovid to exile in the (to the Roman) fairly barbarous outpost of Tomis on the Black Sea. (It is the present day resort town of Constanza, on the Black Sea.) There Ovid was to pass his remaining years, far from the culture he depended on, and surrounded by a people so foreign to Ovid that they dressed in skins, lived by bow hunting, and barely spoke Latin. And all that for an offense to the Emperor which we cannot fully understand, though Ovid attributes it to an 'error' and to a 'song,' a *carmen*. The explanatory theories around this 'relegation' cannot delay us here, for our point has to be this: during the twenty five years of Ovid's exile he created two long verse essays, the *Tristia* and *The Letters from Pontus*, into which he pours his genius and disappointment, and in one of which, *Tristia* IV. x, he includes a 132 line autobiography. That autobiography incorporates, in classical hexameters, virtually all the limited information we have about Ovid's life. This is the first text in classical literature that packages concisely, into a single area, what we might almost call a poetic resume. You will, therefore, want to give special attention to the way Ovid presents himself, though you may conclude, ultimately, that he is hardly revealing more from the inside than do Catullus and Horace, in more diffuse mode.

Reading: Ovid, *Tristia* and *Letters from Pontus*

Suggested Translation: A.S. Kline, cited above for his translations of Catullus and Horace, has translated (online) all the major works of Ovid.

Questions:

1 What is the dominant tone of Ovid's autobiography? Is he humiliated or unbowed? Does his pride in his achievements, as a writer, console him for the punishment he is suffering? Does he divulge his personality as fully, in this explicit 'autobiography,' as he does in his poetry, say *The Ars Amatoria*, where his unbridled wit and fascination with the *eros* game give glimpses of a full self?

2 Many of our inquiries into classical autobiography have been into verse texts—Hesiod, the Greek lyricists, Catullus, Horace, and now Ovid, a poet's poet, a supreme master of the dactylic meter. While it is a limitation of our course, that we must read all texts in

translation, we can through translation think out an important issue: in what way is the autobiographical project inflected by being created in poetry? Does poetry, in itself, shape and define the kind of autobiography created?

3 In Ovid's poetry the split between the cultured life of the Big City and the 'barbaric' life of the out back is vividly lived. Ovid is truly an exile, and, unlike Horace, Catullus, or Cicero spends many years exposed to a deeply foreign culture. (He is the first autobiographer in our class to live in such foreignness; though Herodotus visits the deeply foreign he does not live in it, only passes through and observes.) How does Ovid deal with this aspect of exile? Does he discover anything new? Or does he remain the Roman City poet? Does Ovid's exiled condition contribute significantly to his autobiographical image?

### **Statius (40-94 A.D.) Silvae**

Statius was born into modest circumstances in Naples. His father was a grammaticus, a teacher of poetry and augury, and himself an active poet. (Statius' father, like those of Horace and Ovid, was a devoted supporter of his son's education, and did all he could to assure the boy a firm foundation in Greek and poetry.) Both father and son were to be regular participants in the poetry festivals—like today's poetry ms. competitions—which were regular and popular events in Rome during the period of the Flavian Emperors (69-96A.D.), and which pitted leading poetic voices in both full scale and impromptu combat, again as in a poetry slam today. Statius became by this route a hanger-on with people of wealth, who admired and valued his verse. A natural genius with the hexameter, like Ovid, Statius was renowned for virtuoso impromptu poems, which he could pull up on the spot for a potentially interested patron; and not surprisingly he was an excellent eulogizer of Emperors, and particularly of the mediocre Emperor Domitian (86-96 A.D.), whose military and poetic exploits vied with one another—Statius' formula—for divine approval.

In his lifetime Statius was widely known both for his *Silvae* (89-96 A.D.), a collection of diverse hexameter poems on scenes of nature, events in Rome, and on the consolations available for those who lose their loved ones—and for *The Thebaid* (80-92 A.D.), a major epic derivative from Greek myths, and concerning the theme of the Seven against Thebes, around which Aeschylus had created a great drama. Much of Statius' work is highly polished and displays what to us seems purely formal feeling, but at certain points, as in his love poem to his wife, in his long eulogy for his late father V.3., or for his favorite slave V.5., he touches us deeply, and shows us his true face with as much ingenuousness as the intricately orchestrated hexameter lines permit. We are in these places as affected by the power of autobiography, as we are in the presence of Sappho's declarations of passion, or of Archilochos' erotic poetic electricity, at the very thought of Neoboule.

Readings: Statius, *Silvae*

Suggested Translation: Betty Rose Nagle, *The Silvae of Statius* (Bloomington, 2004).

Questions:

1 Autobiography in intricate, metrically deft and allusive poetry, chuck full of mythological references and exquisitely deft turns of phrase! Is it possible to put forth your life in such a way, in such a medium? How would you answer this question for the case of Statius' work in the *Silvae*?

2 We have not paid much attention to the economics of literary support, in the ancient texts for this course? How does Statius put bread on the table, so that he can express his feelings

intricately onto the tablet? How does he address the Emperor of the day, especially Domitian? Did Horace, Catullus, and Ovid have patrons? Did working for a patron strongly influence a poet's creations?

3 From Cicero to Statius—by way of Horace, Catullus and Ovid—we have seen that Rome is the dominant center for writing and cultural activity. We have referred to the collegiality between our selected poets and coteries of writers with whom they exchange ideas and inspiration. Are such creative communities points at which the self grows conscious, and in which the conditions for autobiography are created?

### **Pliny, (61-114 A.D.) Letters**

Not to be confused with an uncle, author of a renowned *Natural History*, Pliny the Younger enters history's pages as a prolific letter writer, an epistolary autobiographer who lays himself on the table, who has left hundreds of letters recording his own extensive public experience, both as a distinguished barrister and as a Senator appointed by the Emperor Trajan to supervise the Province of Bithynia. Less human in his letters than Cicero (Week 7), Pliny writes formally and seasons his messages with news of the day, remarks on his responsibilities, his affections, his life among important ruling figures, his work in the supremely distinguished post of augur, State Diviner, and his three marriages. All these events provide rich texts, and offer a prolonged look at the Roman man of state in this period when the Empire is still shaky from now century old problems of transition from the Republic. Among the letters of both lasting and local interest are Pliny's domestic vignettes—the combined pleasures of hunting and writing (I,vi), the joys of country peace away from the city (I, ix), his praise of the ideal gentleman, in the person of the philosopher Euphrates (I, x), his discussion of suicide (I, xii), his pleasure in hosting a guest to a fine tuned dinner (I, xv), his ample and fascinating description of his villa seventeen miles outside Rome (II, xvii)—and his major descriptions of two widely different historical events, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (VI, xvi; VI, xx) and his encounters with Christians, in his role as Governor of Bithynia (X, 96). Some of these letters deal with events of world moment, others with 'daily life,' but in either case the author is audible, almost visible sometimes, behind his text, and no more eager than Cicero to cloak himself in the fine robes of disguising art.

Having said this, we have of course not sketched the outer profile of the person behind this language. With Pliny, as with Cicero, life in the public sphere is the oxygen of thought and action. Pliny, like Horace, Catullus, and Ovid, was privileged to receive a distinguished Roman education, indeed to study rhetoric under Quintilian. By the age of eighteen Pliny made his first appearance at the bar—he too was a brilliant orator and trial lawyer, like Cicero. In 100 A.D., after surviving the reign of terror under the Emperor Domitian, and after having occupied an important administrative position in Rome, as supervisor of River Banks and Sewers, Pliny was made consul by the Emperor Trajan. He died in 115 A.D, a full life behind him, and one which he had assiduously translated into an immortal design, a soul in language.

Readings: *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*  
Suggested Translation: Betty Radice, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (London, 1963)

Questions:

1 What is the special character of letters as vehicle of autobiography? Is it not significant that the letter is a transaction between writer and intended receiver—a transaction involving a situational background--in which a distinctive kind of intimacy is evoked? How does Pliny

use this vehicle, to bring out his own personal traits in the course of writing? Is he conscious of 'talking about himself,' or does he simply 'reveal' himself by what he 'says' in letters?

2 How does Pliny's autobiographical presentation compare to that of Cicero? Cicero, it seems, did not write his letters for publication, while Pliny did; how does this difference in motive play out on the page? More than a century separates the letter writings of the two men. Do you see the marks of their different historical moments in the autobiographies they make of themselves?

3 Does autobiography, as we see it in Pliny the Younger, serve as an effective historical record, as well as a personal record? When Pliny describes the eruption of Vesuvius is he writing both about himself and about the eruption? Where, in Pliny's account of the eruption, does his account of himself enter?

### **Marcus Aurelius, ( 121-180 A.D.) Meditations (170-180 A.D)**

Marcus Aurelius was born during the reign of Hadrian, and grew up on the highest echelons of imperial society. (It is worth considering that all of the Roman writers considered here were born into comfort, and most into wealth and privilege. Among the Greeks we read, Hesiod was a modest farmer, Archilochos a merchant soldier, Herodotus son of a prosperous but upper middle businessman.) At the age of seventeen Marcus was adopted by the newly enthroned Emperor Antoninus Pius--whose daughter became Marcus' first wife- and in 161 Marcus himself was crowned Emperor, a role he worked with until his death in 181. (From the ages of seventeen to forty, when he became Emperor, Marcus Aurelius was learning the ropes of administration and governance in the rapidly growing empire, which by this time included what to the Romans seemed 'all the known world.')

While the Emperor was immensely busy with his new post, fighting against various unfriendly barbarians, in the East of the Empire, he was, as he aged, increasingly scribbling (marvelous prose) into his day book.

The Meditations, the name we give to this scribbled text, are antiquity's richest revelation of personal philosophy—think Sir Thomas More or Henry David Thoreau—as distinct from the other genres of self-revelation visited in this course—the letters, poems, histories, poetic accounts. The frame of the Emperor's self-presentation is Stoic reflections on life; the unique profile of a gentleman philosopher, experienced in a fallen world, radiates from these pages. What comes from these ruminations is what the Romans viewed as the ultimate in philosophy, the central function of which was to substantiate moral ideas. You will want to think, as you read these 'meditations' in light of our course, about what kind of autobiography is created by this kind of thinking. Does it matter what the idea-content of the meditations is, or is that content what Marcus Aurelius himself is, and is showing us?

The discussion in Marcus Aurelius' text is carried out informally, leaves and returns to ideas, then undercuts its 'ideas' sufficiently to preclude any strain of didacticism. Yet the self-portrait of Marcus turns around compelling self-images as a Stoic, that is as an inheritor of a post- classical Greek school of thought founded by Zeno of Elea at the beginning of the third century B.C. The central themes of this school will leave no doubt of themselves—follow reason, which will be a key to following nature; suffer all events as they come, confident they are guided by a meaning; discipline your emotions; cross check all the petty claims of your ego (jealousy, greed, above all anger); treat all humans as equal, bringing no judgment except the presenting of the best behavior you yourself are; enjoy fellowship; rest confident in the awareness that all things pass away, and are left to the disposition of the order of the universe. What renders this compilation of thoughts live, and leads many to

consider this the finest ancient autobiographical text, is that Aurelius allows enriching tones, into his perspective, which allow him to self-portray as a person both noble and complex. Maxwell Staniforth, in the introduction suggested below, remarks that 'the varying moods of hope and depression, the sensitive shrinking from disagreeable associates and sights of blood, the repressed but evident longing for sympathy and affection—these are not the signs of a temper cast in the antique Stoic mould.' (p. 21). It is as though the precepts Aurelius makes of himself are playing out against the very sub-thematic moods the precepts are meant to combat. The person surging at that point of conflict is the noblest of the Roman Emperors.

Readings: Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

Suggested Translation: Maxwell Staniforth, *Marcus Aurelius Meditations* (New York, 1964).

Questions:

1 We have discussed whether, and in what sense, lyric poetry is the establishment of an autobiography, and we can pose the same question about the kind of informal moral philosophic writing we find in Marcus Aurelius. Is this kind of philosophizing writing your autobiography or showing yourself as the figure that can be taken as your autobiography in motion?

2 Does Marcus Aurelius portray himself as a humble figure, and if so does he thus mark a departure from the ancient themes prominent earlier in this course? (Is any of the earlier Greco-Roman autobiographers humble: Solon has his *gravitas*, Cicero has his *dignitas*, Pliny and Horace have their 'rustic modesties,' but is any of the Roman poets 'humble,' or interested in 'humility'?) Does not Marcus revel in the awareness of his own fragility and temporary hold on life, and does that reveling not constitute a pleasure in humility?

3 Does Marcus Aurelius' self-account include a view of himself as a lover of the beautiful, as well as of the good? Consider Book IV, section 20, of the *Meditations*. Is the beautiful just what things are by their nature? Is Marcus Aurelius presenting himself as a lover of beauty, as he respects each thing's realization of its own nature?

**Saint Augustine**, (354-430 A.D.) Confessions (397-398)

Saint Augustine was born in present day Thagaste, forty five miles south of the Mediterranean coast in present day Tunisia. He was, thus, an African, but from a North Africa which was a province and dependency of the Roman Empire; no longer the confident Empire of the time, say, of Marcus Aurelius, but an Empire already under threat from non-Roman 'hordes' on the Eastern border.

In his youth Augustine enjoyed a thorough classical education but was drawn to the pleasures of the flesh—a woman he loved, who bore him a child, and to whom he remained sexually faithful—and to the thought of a sect prominent and influential in North Africa, the Manicheans. Embedded in the world of those involvements, he started a school of Rhetoric in Carthage—the kind of study drawing all the Roman writers we have introduced earlier—but he found himself appalled by the hooligan behavior of his pupils, and thereupon decided to undertake a teaching career in the mother country, Italy, a career which soon (384 A.D.)—because his brilliance early on attracted the intellectuals of Rome—won him a Professorship in Milan, and with it the opportunity to meet the first religious sensibility that made sense to him and inspired him, the equally brilliant Saint Ambrose. Under the influence of this new Italian milieu he was won over to Catholicism in 386, and baptized in 387. (In 313 the Emperor Constantine had issued the Edict of Milan, which conferred legal and privileged status on Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire.) In 388 Augustine returned from Italy to Africa, and in 395 he was appointed Bishop of Hippo, where he remained for the rest of his life, writing and preaching voluminously, and proving himself a master of both prose and theological genius in works like *The Confessions* (397-398) and *The City of God* (early fifth century). Augustine is the first Christian to appear on our syllabus, and we will pay attention to this spiritual change and the new conception of autobiography. Many new regions of self-investigation are opened up by the Christian perspective.

What are *The Confessions*? They are the text in which Augustine recounts his youth, his gradual breaking from sensuality—marriage, the dualism of the Manichaeans—his Italian peregrinations leading to a Professorship in Milan, the encounter with Ambrose, conversion, and, at the very end of the text (397 A.D. in real time) his baptism and the death of his beloved mother, Monica. Is this recounting an autobiography in any of the multiple senses we have been giving the term earlier in the course?

Maria Boulding, the recommended translator of *The Confessions*, writes that we are not 'reading autobiography in the modern sense. Few modern writers of autobiography...would relentlessly take us through page after exhausting page about the nature of memory, the mystery of time...He referred to his work as "the thirteen books of my confessions.'" The two operative senses of confession here—as the translator continues—are a retailing of sins, and a praising of God. From the start of the text, these two senses are fused. The sins offered to the reader are made namable, by Augustine, through the grace of God, whom he praises for having made those sins visible to this sinner—thus of course saving Augustine from unresolved Hell.

Readings: Saint Augustine, *Confessions*

Suggested Translation: Maria Boulding, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (New York, 1998)

## Questions:

1 Does Augustine belong in the lineage of autobiographies that we have been tracing in earlier classical literature, or does his confessional presentation move into new territory, which reflects his Christian faith? Do we feel he is establishing, toward us as reader, a self-presentational style which differs from that of the Greco Roman tradition?

2 In such poets as Archilochus or Catullus or Horace we see a readiness to lay personal cards on the table, in the form of lyrical discourse. Is that kind of laying out of cards at all what Augustine decides to do, in *The Confessions*? Is Augustine talking to you and me, the readers, or to the inner voice he names God?

3 Marcus Aurelius is concerned, in the *Meditations*, with 'making his behavior better,' with growing closer to perfection in his personal life. That preoccupation hardly seems present in any of the earlier classical autobiographical writing we have read, but it is clearly present, in fact dominant, in the work of *The Confessions*. How does Augustine's autobiographical quest for perfection differ from that of Marcus Aurelius?

4 We suggested earlier that literary genre plays a role in shaping autobiographical texts. How many literary genres have we worked with—epic, lyric, history, epistle, prose meditation, confession—and which seemed (seem) to you especially propitious for the construction of autobiography?

5 Do the autobiographers we have read often take us inside their erotic or romantic lives? Which ones do? What is the effect, on an autobiography, of the incorporation of the beloved or significant other? Does that incorporation enrich the autobiographical text?

6 Viewed as a whole, are the autobiographies reviewed in this course profoundly distant from what we would read, today, from someone of our own moment? Which of the ancient biographies seem to you most distant from us, from another age? Which closest? Is temporal proximity to us the key to intelligibility to us?

7 Apart from Augustine—for the instance is too evident—do the autobiographers we have reviewed feel easy with showing us their inmost feelings? Do we hear much of sadness, loss, anxiety? Please cite examples of such 'inmost feelings' in our texts.

8 Each of our autobiographers is embedded in history—we all are. Which of these writers seem to you most conscious of the historical world they are in? How do they see themselves in that world? Which writers seem most nearly to be writing in a historical vacuum?

Recommended Readings (The Loeb Classical Library, published by Harvard University Press, has for over a century been assembling a complete series of bilingual--Greek and English; Latin and English-- volumes of all the significant literary work remaining to us from ancient Greek and Latin literature. Those volumes are a convenient source for the readings of our course; they can be found in most larger libraries, and are reliable. Be it said, though, that the translations provided in those volumes are sometimes good, but often only 'scholarly'. You can read all our texts in the Loeb version, as a default move, but I will indicate preferred translations for each week-- preferred meaning 'lively,' 'contemporary' but not necessarily more 'scholarly' than the Loeb version. Note, of course, that most of the material for this course can be accessed on line, sometimes in the "preferred translation," sometimes not. A Google search will inevitably generate many alternate translation choices, for the readings of this course. Suit your taste, pocketbook, and good sense in these matters, and remember that newness is not necessarily a virtue in translations from the Classics.)

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