

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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# GERMAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Friedrich Nietzsche 1844-1900, *Ecce Homo* 1888

Otto von Bismarck 1815-1898, *Reflections and Reminiscences* 1898

### Twentieth Century

Ludwig Wittgenstein 1889-1951, *Philosophical Investigations* 1945

Christa Wolf 1927-2011, *The Quest for Christa T.* 1968

Max Frisch 1911-1991, *Montauk* 1975

Guenter Grass 1927- , *Peeling the Onion* 2007

### Recommended Reading

(The texts for each week are included in the entry for that week, but the following is a brief indication of collateral reading that can be helpful and interesting for you).

Butler, E.M., *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (New York, 1935)

*The Cambridge History of German Literature* (Cambridge, 1997).

Evans, Owen, *Mapping the Contours of Oppression: subjectivity, truth, and fiction in recent German autobiographical treatments of totalitarianism* (Amsterdam, 2006).

Fulbrook, Mary, *A Concise History of Germany* (Cambridge, 2004).

Furnkas, Josef, *Der ursprung des psychologischen Romans* (Stuttgart, 1977).

Gillies, Alexander, *Herder* (Oxford, 1945).

Hagberg, Gary, *Describing Ourselves: Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness* (Oxford, 2008).

Hamburger, Michael, *The Truth of Poetry* (New York, 1969).

Morrow, Ian, *Bismarck* (London, 1953).

Nietzsche, Friedrich *Writings From the Early Notebooks* (Cambridge, 2009).

Olney, James *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, 1981).

Petersen, Carol, *Max Frisch* (New York, 1972).

*The Cambridge Companion to Guenter Grass* (Cambridge, 2009).

Sayre, Robert, *American Lives* (Madison, 1994).

Wende, Peter, *A History of Germany* (New York, 2005).

Will, Frederic, *Intelligible Beauty in Aesthetic Thought from Winckelmann to Victor Cousin* (Tuebingen, 1959).

## **Overview of German autobiography**

**Prior to 1700**, German culture is virtually closed to autobiography in the 'modern' sense. There is an exception to this point—the wonderful autobiographical novel *Simplicissimus* (1668) by Grimmelshausen—but on the whole the writer as an explorer of personal roots and motivations barely existed. There was no figure like Montaigne, not even a Sir Thomas More or Sir Francis Bacon, those slightly more stylized English cousins of Montaigne. There was, in a word, no Renaissance, that period starting in the fifteenth century in which countries like France, England, and the Netherlands began to discover the power of ancient Greek and Roman literature, and of the world delight packed into that literature—and visual art.

In the **eighteenth century**, however, German Humanism explodes, a belated Renaissance of ancient classical fervor as well as of the excitement of the Enlightenment. (The coinciding of these two cultural movements gives German Humanism a rich flavor not to be found elsewhere on the continent after the Renaissance.) Many writers of autobiography emerge in this period: among them *Herder* (1744-1803), *Moritz* (1756-1793), and *Goethe* (1749-1832). In the autobiographical writings of these eighteenth century German men there glow both the heritage of the ancient Greeks, and the determination, as Goethe puts it, *im ganzen gut und wahr und resolut zu leben, on the whole to live truly well and resolutely*. The powerful achievements of German metaphysics—the work of Hegel, Kant, and Schelling—were soon to build conceptual superstructures on the inwardness of autobiographers like Goethe and Herder.

**Nineteenth century** German literature—like nineteenth century culture throughout Europe—lacks homogeneity; it tracks immense transitions from the previous agriculture based century, through the industrialization of Western Europe, through the expansion of capital commerce, to the new colonial Empire building and consolidation of Nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Our selection of nineteenth century autobiographies will accordingly be diverse: the opera composer *Richard Wagner* (1813-1883), the philosopher *Friedrich Nietzsche* (1844-1900), the Iron Chancellor *Otto von Bismarck* (1815-1898). Of Nietzsche and Wagner it may be said that the power of *das Volk* can be heard in them; for good or evil they raise the decibel power of the German voice. Of the above trio, though, little can be said except that they all reacted autobiographically to a roughly similar period of events.

With the **twentieth century** our sampling of autobiographical work inevitably gravitates toward the political. Think of the turbulent history of Germany itself—two major wars, a lengthy period of sealed off Communism, the breaking of a Wall that divided the nation, the post WW2 rise to the position of economic super power! A broad range of autobiographical writings spreads before us. In this course we will deal not only with 'conventional autobiographical narrations'—like *Max Frisch's* (1911-1991) *Montauk* (1975) or the confessional work of the novelist and political activist *Guenter Grass* (1927-)--but with experimental 'fictional autobiography,' as in *Christa Wolf's* (1929-2011) *Second Thoughts* (1999). We will also pause at *The Philosophical Investigations* (1945) of Ludwig Wittgenstein, which explores the very possibility of the exploration of the self by the self. [very good overview]

*Readings:* Mary Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany* (Cambridge, 2004.)

## H. J. C. von Grimmelshausen (1621-1676)

### Introduction

The greatness of German literature moves by peaks and depressions; the early epic—*Nibelungenlied*, *Parzival*—soars with power; then there is a deep valley until the peak of 18<sup>th</sup> century Humanism, the Goethezeit, is spied in the distance. One mountain alone fills the intervening landscape, Grimmelshausen's *Simplizzisimus* (1668), and no account of German autobiography would be complete without inclusion of this brilliant text, of which it must at once be said that some critics, citing the later largely peaceful middle class literary life of its author, cast doubt on the whole notion that this work is an autobiography. (This issue is thorny. Grimmelshausen was kidnapped by soldiers at age ten, like his character Simplizzisimus, did see a lot of military action during the Thirty Years War, and upon the war's end retired to an administrative post with a regional nobleman, experiencing court life in a way that Simplizzisimus sees, and parodies; but the ragged picaresque main character of the novel seems to be a fiction built by the businesslike author.) As the syllabus for this class will involve itself regularly with the definition of the autobiography, we should at this point raise the life writing/autobiography question. Is there a rigid definition of autobiography, or is the term a literary usage of value for helping us think about the nature of the fictional process? As we follow the present syllabus, to the doorsill of our own age, we will find ourselves generating many working definitions of autobiography, from the most textbook/orthodox usage, through the view that the autobiography is a kind of fiction, to the thoughts of a particular philosophical text which raises doubts about the portrayability of the self in any form.

*Simplizzisimus* is a picaresque novel, borrowing many of its techniques from Renaissance Spanish literature, even from *Don Quixote*. The author, born in the midst of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) which convulsed Europe for three decades—it was the longest continuous war in European history, and wiped out nearly half the population of the continent—picks a perfect vehicle for displaying the horrors of the war, as well as the process of male growing up under the most horrifying experiences. The plot itself is episodic, built up out of small vignettes of a young man's life as he is victimized, spoiled, horrified by what he sees, cynical, reckless: an unforgettable portrait of life under wartime circumstances, a cross between Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

*Readings:* H. J. C. von Grimmelshausen, *Simplizzisimus*; trans. Goodrick (Lincoln, 1912).

### Questions:

1. Do you read *Simplizzisimus* as though it was a fiction, or as a record of its time? What would you learn of the author's time from this book?
2. What is the world view of the author, at least in the first four books—that is before the allegorical developments of the last book? Does Grimmelshausen hate the war, as would seem inevitable, or (and at the same time) revel in it?
3. How does the author handle the rhetorical problem of speaking both through the voice of a naïve young man/boy and in the voice of a satirical observer of the world, like that voice which dominates the first two chapters?

## Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803)

### Introduction

If we were to seek for autobiography, or even life writing, in earlier German literature, we would have trouble. As we have seen, Grimmelshausen's *Simplissimus* (1668) is a picaresque account of a young man's adventures in the Thirty Years War, and can serve as a kind of instance of the first German autobiography. (We confront here the issue of defining 'autobiography,' a slippery term, or even the broader term, 'life writing,' which terms have murkily defined borders with fiction and 'literary writing' in general. This distinction will come up for consideration here, for in a loose sense all 'creative writing' derives from the life of its author, and can be considered 'life writing.') It is true that Grimmelshausen's own 'quiet and non military life' is sharply different from the adventurous character he portrays, but at the same time the world of that adventurer is very much the world Grimmelshausen is living from. Aside from that wonderful and indirect piece of life-writing, however, we would not easily find a candidate for any kind of autobiography, in German literature, before the Herder text before us.

With Herder we are already far from the origins of German literature, which can be traced to magnificent epic texts—*The Niebelungenlied*, *The Parzival*—from the fourteenth century. We are into one of the founding texts of the German Humanist Movement which exploded in the mid-eighteenth century, and provided Europe with original tributes to the power of Classical Antiquity, the spirit of humane letters, and the power of Enlightenment thinking, which was sweeping over Europe with new hopes for the future of a reasonable mankind. While Germany did not experience a fifteenth and sixteenth century Renaissance—with severe consequences for the future of German culture—it did enjoy an eighteenth century version of a Renaissance, and Herder's discovery of a new world is part of that movement. We will later be involved with the efforts of self-reflective Germans (Nietzsche, Wolf, Grass) to deal with the tortured national history, that resulted from the absence of a true Renaissance in German culture.

Herder is an intense admirer of ancient Greek culture—he reads, critiques, and cites it at every turn-- but he feels that such culture was a rare and unrepeatable trick of historical development. His own perceptions drew him increasingly toward world culture, the common traits of human nature which are based on the uniqueness of the individual. He is open to the largeness of the human experience, and to the anthropological insights which, in a highly aesthetic observer, lead to disclosing the nature of society. As a literary critic Herder goes beyond even his contemporary Lessing, in his sensitivity to the living presence of the stage. In his studies of ancient poetries he breaks down artificial barriers between the 'modern' and the 'ancient,' and sees world culture as one. As you read the text for this week, please try to ferret out the distinctively modern tone in Herder. Does the work before you seem to qualify as autobiography?

We could answer *yes* by digging into the poverty and obscurity of Herder's childhood—as we will do later with Karl Philip Moritz—and viewing his work as a way to recover from deprivation and praise human potential; but we would do better to view much of Herder's work, and certainly the *Journal* before us this week, as a kind of philosophical journalism reporting on and exhorting from the course of his experience. (Autobiography, as we have already begun repeating, is not going to be a monolithic term, sharply defining off one kind of writing from others—like fictions or memoirs or historical dramas. Autobiography is self-expression in which the writer's self is highlighted in one way or another, and made the object of reflection or intentions.) Herder forever remodels and rethinks his own self, as he brings forth from his bosom the outlines of new potentials for Humanitaet.

*Readings:* Herder, *Journal of my Voyage in the Year 1769*. (In *J.G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*, trans. F.M. Barnard, Cambridge, 1969, pp. 63-113).

### Questions:

1. What is Herder's view of language, and in what sense does he see language as the center of the human personality?

2. Herder is forever exhorting nations and people to realize their natural energies and geniuses, and not to rely on the dull structures of the past. Does he seem to be exhorting himself at the same time? What kind of self-image does Herder carry with him?
  3. Does Herder evaluate himself, as he vents his ideas? He thinks of the Germans as dull and complacent--so will Nietzsche think, ahead--and of the French as light headed and shallow, but what does he think of himself?
4. How do you explain the fact that there is no autobiography in German before the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, while other literatures in Europe were generating this kind of writing during the Renaissance? Does even *Simplizzisimus* seem to you a genuine autobiography? What kind of quantum leap, of self-presentation, seems to you have occurred between the work of Grimmelshausen and Herder's *Journal* or *Werther*?
5. Both Herder's *Journal* and Goethe's *Werther* deal with young male consciousnesses setting off on journeys, and stumbling into the rich reality of the social/cultural world. Both these texts involve life writing, the presentation of the human experience of venturing into the new. Do you see significant traits in common to these two forms of autobiography?
  6. Do you observe already, in your reading of autobiography, a variety of rhetorical options for the 'presenting of the self'? How do Grimmelshausen and Herder, for example, deal differently with the presentation of the self in their 'autobiographical writings'?

### **Johann Wolfgang Goethe I (1749-1832)**

#### *Introduction*

We are familiar now with some of the wide range of meanings of autobiography or *life writing*, the wider term which attempts to include memoirs, letters, and diaries, along with 'formal autobiographies.' Each of our examples, to date, has shown us a text only indirectly reflecting the person of its author, but doing so nonetheless; reflecting, that is, in a sense we would not use for even the most author-based fiction. In a true fiction, *Emma* or *The Return of the Native* or *War and Peace*, the author is embedded in the scenes and characters he/she invents. In *Poetry and Truth*, (Goethe, ahead) or *Simplizzisimus*, the author is much closer to the surface of his text than he is in the three cited novels. It is as though we can make out the profile of the author more or less distinctly, though still 'obscured,' in the works by Goethe or Grimmelshausen, while in the transformative-fictive novels above, we can only distantly intuit the presence of an author.

The small book *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, written by Goethe at age 24 (1773), not only exercised immense influence on European culture, but served Goethe as an autobiographical recourse. We know that as a young man Goethe was already fascinated by death, and that as he matured, from romance to romance as a young adult, he was—very much in the romantic mode of his time—concerned with the relation between love and death. (We will soon read the autobiography of Richard Wagner, the composer of great operas rooted in pre-Christian German culture. You will find Wagner's creations regularly touched by the linkage between love and death, the *Liebeshod* theme, for instance, of his opera *Lohengrin*.) It is thus that we may consider *Werther* the autobiography of Goethe himself, the writer working through the painful fall outs of a complex and intense romantic relationship. The literary history involved in this case is full of paradox. Goethe himself wrote *Werther* in part as a way to work through his own anxieties about losses in love, and in the course of that working through, as he tells us, he came out on the far side fervently life-affirming.

*Readings: The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. Michael Hulse. (New York, 1989).

#### *Questions:*

1. We have discussed the complexity of Goethe's self-image in *Werther*, an image which in part self-portrays, in part self-transcends. On the face of it, knowing nothing of Goethe's actual life, would you read

this text as autobiography? Will most of the work we are calling 'autobiography' carry on its face the watermark of actually 'being an autobiography'?

2. Think of *Werther* as life writing. Can we learn a lot about the world Goethe wrote this text in? Are autobiography and life writing properly considered two different kinds of writing? Or are they different words for the same thing?

3. Perhaps the writing of this text was therapeutic for Goethe! Let's broaden that speculation. Does it seem to you that autobiographical writing is naturally part of a therapeutic project? Or is that a highly simplified way to describe what goes on in the writing of autobiography?

## **Johann Wolfgang Goethe II (1749-1832)**

### *Introduction*

Goethe takes us to the center of German Classicism/Humanism/*Sturm und Drang*. (Check out this last phrase, *Sturm und Drang*, in a *History of German Literature*.) As you read Goethe, and about him, you will find all these terms put to use, for this author is so great, his achievements so multiple and thoughtful, that he is not easily caught in a brief concept. Perhaps the notion of *Aufklaerung*, Enlightenment, belongs to Goethe in all his facets, for he brings the light of reason and imagination to his creations and researches. He creates dramatic epics like *Faust*, heart-rending short novels like *Werther* or long philosophical novels like *Wilhelm Meister*; he writes art and literary criticism; he rivals Herder in stimulating travel writing—as in his *Journal of a Trip to Italy*; he masters every form of lyric poetry at its highest level; he provides lasting models of dramatic art, and indeed, as though the foregoing were not enough, he conducts fruitful and still today relevant research into botany, geology, meteorology, and vulcanology. One of the questions you will be asking yourself, as you read this man, is: what goes into constituting a universal genius? You may search your memory for other examples. Leonardo da Vinci? Aristotle? Is this kind of comprehensive knowing and creating possible in our time? While it is true that Goethe draws vigorously on his predecessors, what he makes of them is uniquely his.

*Poetry and Truth (Dichtung und Wahrheit)* (1808-1831) is a huge autobiography carried out by Goethe over a period of twenty three years (1808-1831). (The years of Goethe's life covered in this autobiography are 1749-1775, up to the time when he went to Weimar.) The richness of portrayal of Goethe's world—personal encounters, travel memoirs, reports from the local kingdoms which were the administrative nodes of a Germany not yet a nation—is indescribably full. You will want to ask yourself how this kind of memoir, historical record, personal inspection, and gossip column turned inside out into world historical observations—how this huge canvas fits with the other 'autobiographies' we are reading. The answer may have to be that this work is unique, for besides the fullness of detail, which makes it a portrait of twenty five years of social and personal history, this book is a consistently carried out thematic unity, in which Goethe's natural addiction to the poetic (*Dichtung* means *poetry* and also *fiction*) is brought into 'harmony' with the truth which the 'real world is.' In that sense the argument of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* resembles the argument of *Werther*—and for that matter of Goethe's epic *Faust*—which is that the passionate/romantic essence of human nature will destroy itself against the rough coasts of daily reality, unless maturing care is taken.

*Readings:* Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *From my Life: Poetry and Truth*; trans. Robert Heitner. (New York, 1987).

### *Questions;*

1. In *Werther*, as we said, Goethe seems to be working through 'personal issues,' those which he avoided but which were ultimately fatal to Werther himself. Do you see Goethe carrying out the same kind of personal search in *Poetry and Truth*? If not, to what do you attribute this kind of personal testimony to his life?

2. What part does romantic love play in the life Goethe portrays as his? How does he view his own susceptibilities and behaviors under the spell of romantic love? Can we see the Romantic and the Realist in conflict in Goethe's self-portrait?
3. How does Goethe relate to the nobility, and especially to his own patrons, who play an important role in the narrative of *Poetry and Truth*? Do you see Goethe shaping his own described personality in a fashion to ingratiate those persons?

### **Karl Phillip Moritz (1756-1793)**

#### *Introduction*

Karl Phillip Moritz was born into poverty, and into a family ruled by discord and tension. (Interpretation of the theology of the French Quietists, and of the influential Mme. Guyon, was the issue of conflict in the parental family, which was dominated by the strictest religious discipline.) With relief Moritz found his way out of the cramped family home, to serve as an apprentice to a hatter, where he found work and life hard, but the horizons wider. Through a process of charitable education he was schooled, learned Latin well, and eventually made his way to Erfurt, where he aspired to and got launched on, a career in the theater. (The foregoing events make up the substance of Moritz's autobiography, *Anton Reiser*, which is our text for this week.) Moritz's early immersion in religious doctrine directed him toward the study of theology at Erfurt University, then toward travels to England. In 1786 he went to Italy, where he had the good luck to meet Goethe, a generation his elder. By this time Moritz was a sensitive art and literary critic—the author of a widely appreciated essay on sculptural representations of beauty, and the editor (1783-1793) of a *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, in which he helped to promote that study of human behavior which is so carefully applied in *Anton Reiser*.

*Anton Reiser* is a 'psychological novel,' as Moritz dubs it, concerning the world as lived and seen by an impoverished, dream-filled, religious, sardonic kin to Goethe's Werther. (Both Moritz and Goethe chipped off slices of their own lives, and lived them virtually on the page.) You will see that the flavor of Moritz' work is in the wry and often subtle life observations that Anton generates—far surpassing Werther in worldly wisdom. Faced with the dramatic challenge of taking First Communion, Anton 'did his utmost to bring on a state of joyful trembling, but it did not work, and he reproached himself bitterly that his heart was so hardened. At last he began to shiver with cold, and this reassured him somewhat.' (p. 105). The same Anton is open to unusually rich perceptions—chips off Moritz' mental block—like the following intuition, drawn from the character's wanderings through city crowds: 'He fancied that all the ideas of so many thousands of people, at present separated only by the barrier of each person's body, and communicated to one another by the motion of certain parts of this barrier, would flow together after people's death, and form a unity...' (p. 184). The same Anton, a copy of the author who was creating him, thought that when 'he wanted to see anything that was surrounded by a crowd of onlookers, everyone else was always bolder than him, and elbowed him aside—he thought that eventually a gap would appear, where he could join the line without having to push anyone aside in front of him....' The psychological finesse of *Anton Reiser* is Moritz' way of working through his own fresh and often disturbing psychological fields of play.

*Readings: Anton Reiser in Anton Reiser: a Psychological Novel* (trans. with an introduction by Ritchie Robertson. (London, 1997).

#### *Questions:*

1. Moritz entitles his book 'a psychological novel.' Does this trait distinguish the present life writing from that we find in Goethe's *Werther*? How does the 'psychological' element enter Moritz's account?
2. Does the motif of the journey play an important role in Moritz' account of Anton's development? Do you see any linkage between Herder's journey account and Moritz'?

- Both *Werther* and *Anton Reiser*, are semi-directly [what are “semi-directly autobiographies??] autobiographies. Which autobiographer seems to you to ‘reveal’ himself most in his text? How do the two writers reveal themselves?

### **Richard Wagner (1813-1883)**

#### *Introduction*

Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, the child of a clerk and the daughter of a baker. Early on, taking advantage of the meager instruments and instruction at the local school, he began—well before the age of ten—to show signs of musical precocity, sketching out librettos and scores. From that point on, in the course of study at the University of Leipzig, and then under the patronage of regional rulers—King Ludwig II of Bavaria was the foremost influence --Wagner devoted himself to composition, public speeches, his writing on music and politics, and his autobiography, *My Life*, which he began dictating in 1864, and which covers his life from childhood through the year 1864.

Richard Wagner was a versatile genius: a great composer, poet (of the librettos of his operas), scenographer, and publicist, and it is no wonder that his creative brilliance made of opera (the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the *Total Art Work*) the consummate statement of 19th century Romanticism. You will be able to trace, in any of his operas, the combination of skills which soars ambitiously. You will also have the occasion, if you review Wagner’s written librettos, to recapitulate (in his invariably fresh and socially alert manner) many early Germanic narrative themes: *Lohengrin* and *Parzifal* (Wolfram’s *Parzifal*, early thirteenth century); *Tannhauser*, *The Meistersingers*; *The Ring of the Niebelungen*; *Tristan und Isolde* (by Gottfried von Strassburg, twelfth century). Wagner’s perspective, throughout the reworking of this narrative material, is romantic-tragic in mode, but in world view celebratory of the origins of German literature. His written lyrics, and sublime (at best) music, which he was to help enshrine in a national festival at Bayreuth (1872), mark one of the high points of German cultural self-awareness. (A kind of national autobiography?)

It must be mentioned that Adolf Hitler promoted his own cult of Wagnerian music, which he considered the highest testimony to German national supremacy. But it has been frequently observed that Wagner was, instead of a nationalist, a creator employing the treasures of German culture to focus an unrelenting critique of German society. You could take it as a study guide prompt, to figure out the special nature and value opera occupies, in the palette of forms by which a society gives an account of itself.

Wagner’s *My Life* was dictated at the request of his most supportive patron, King Ludwig II of Bavaria, and in its final form is an amalgam of oral narration with later editing from the page. Throughout this huge text Wagner sustains what most readers find a consistently strong narrative sense; the same sense he conveys in the librettos he wrote for his major operas. You may well find this autobiography, which is truly life writing, a kind of narrative work—what one would ‘typically’ think the classic version of telling your life like it is. (I did this; I went there; I met W; I got measles: all spiced up with dates, trends of the time, and humor.) If you think that, you are probably on target, for no life writing we touch in this course, with the occasional exception of Bismarck’s work, reflects so clear and urbane a mandate to present a felicitous/factual account of a life. The pleasure of the reader is to go with the flow, but the trick, for the critical reader, is to see the care and strategy of what seems a simple presentation of ‘the way it was.’

*Readings:* Richard Wagner, *My Life*; trans. Andrew Gray. (New York, 1992).

#### *Questions:*

- Adolf Hitler was an admirer of Wagner’s early Germanic theme operas. To Hitler these powerful pieces seemed to spring from the Aryan soul, and to reflect all that was purely German. Do you see what, in Wagner’s autobiographical text, could have led Hitler to his conviction? Is Wagner’s autobiography flawed, for you, by racial attitudes you find objectionable or dangerous?

2. Does Wagner mix fiction into his life writing? Where can you identify that fiction? Is it, this fictional quality, a source of life in his writing? Does it include humor?
3. Wagner gives a generous glimpse of the social and cultural world in which he lived. How does he introduce that sense of his environment? Is it of interest to him only as adjunct to his own creative sense, or is he interested in his culture and society in their own right?

## **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900)

### *Introduction*

For the scholar, Friedrich Nietzsche seems embedded between philosophy and literature, neither of which terms would have satisfied him. For example think of the figures he establishes of himself as creator: 'a Zarathustra figure who transforms all values, who delves into the meaninglessness of existence, in order to emerge from it with a triumphant cry of joy on his lips; or a figure following a strangely tempting ideal to which we should not wish to persuade anybody because we do not really concede the right to it to anyone; the ideal of a spirit who plays naively...with all that was hitherto called holy, good, untouchable, divine...for whom those supreme things that the people naturally accept as their value standards, signify danger, decay, debasement...' (From *The Gay Science*). It may be imagined, from these projected self images, with which Nietzsche was profligate throughout his writing life, that right here, in these images, he was writing/creating his autobiography, and that the hard facts of his *vita* would diverge sharply from the potent torrent of his self-presentation.

The hard facts, that kind of autobiography we put on our resumes, give us this: Nietzsche was born in 1844, into a ministerial family, and soon (1858-64) found himself a student at the distinguished preparatory school of Schulpforta, where the mind of the classical philologist was honed on vast pens of Latin. After graduation he went to the University of Bonn, where his classical studies put him into contact with the distinguished scholar Ritschl, whom then Nietzsche followed to the University of Leipzig. In 1868 Nietzsche made the acquaintance of Richard Wagner, with whom a mutual fascination with Schopenhauer opened a lasting and profound friendship. Then at age twenty four, clearly a prodigy, young Friedrich was offered a position in Classics at Basel, where he was to continue teaching until 1879, when his health undermined his ability to continue University work. From that date on Nietzsche would face daunting physical illnesses, criticism from the academic establishment—remember he is both a philosopher and a literary person, and a volatile strong willed personality to boot—and yet at the same time he would launch into a series of powerful books, which brought him attention: his earlier *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) was followed by *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883/85), *The Gay Science* (1882-87), and *Ecce Homo* (1888); his reputation grew. In 1889 he suffered a total mental collapse, and for the last seven years of his life remained essentially a stroke weakened invalid, cared for by his mother.

Nietzsche, then, is surrounded by autobiographies: the luminous personal passionate texts he wrote throughout his life, origins as they proved for much of the power in Existentialist thought—Sartre especially, then Heidegger—and for the ongoing debates, in our own time, about the meaning of the 'presence of God' in human affairs; and the hard facts of life itself, the so called resume we all carry with us. If at any point Nietzsche brings these two kinds of autobiographies together it is in *Ecce Homo*, our reading for this week. For in this book he both recounts the central sequence of his writings and thoughts, and characterizes himself with an exquisite mixture of irony and self-praise, which leaves ample room to bash the pedants who drove him crazy, and the fundamentally bourgeois Germans whom he abhorred.

*Readings:* Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*; trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, 1967).

### *Questions:*

1. Is Nietzsche preoccupied with self-praise? What does he think makes him a great writer? Why does he think the Germans are incapable of understanding him?
2. Is *Ecce Homo* a philosophical autobiography? Or is it the autobiography of a philosopher? What kind of persona holds the text together?

3. What does Nietzsche hate about Christianity? Is he drawn to some aspects of that religion? What does he think of Jesus?
4. Is Nietzsche a living force for the thought of our day, when some would say the God is dead theme is itself dead, and *techne* seems to have replaced the old God of the Hebrews?

5. You were invited in week 5 to discuss Goethe's *Werther*, in connection with Herder's famous journey south. What do you think of the relation between Goethe's *Werther* and his *Poetry and Truth*, which was published from thirty to fifty years later than *Werther*? Both of those works are autobiographies—the latter explicitly, the former more indirectly, as we have seen—but how do they differ in their strategies for representing the person of Goethe himself?

6. Both of Goethe's autobiographies—see question 1, above—deal with youth—*Poetry and Truth* covers Goethe's life til age twenty six, when he left for Weimar—as does Moritz' autobiography, *Anton Reiser*. Are there special writing problems connected with writing of one's youth? How do Goethe and Moritz differ in meeting the challenge of writing about their youths?

7. In his *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1888) Nietzsche bitterly attacks the music of this hero, with whom he had for long enjoyed a worshipping friendly relationship. Do you see a relationship, between the two men's autobiographies, which we have read in weeks 8 and 9? In comparing those two self-analytical texts, can you see the basis for a serious falling out between the two artist/writers?

### **Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898)**

#### *Introduction*

Autobiography, in the high formal sense, can include texts in which the author writes about him/her self as though about a third person, or, as in the present author's work, as though about an historical figure embedded in the weave of events:

*These deliverances of the Emperor's could not have been entirely without foundation, even though he should not expect that I should not take advantage of my social relations with Metternich to the extent of breaking the confidence reposed in me. (P. 97)*

It is true that Bismarck uses the first person pronoun to define himself, but look at the gap between true personal identity and public persona, the persona Bismarck ascribes to himself in the passage above.

The man writing the above might well have thought of himself, even felt himself, as a part of history, for when we turn to the diplomatic/political dynamic of nineteenth century Europe, we will hardly find a more prominent or forceful player than Bismarck. He was raised into a Europe which was just coming to terms with its nineteenth century break from the stable values and institutions of the preceding century. His own upbringing, as the child of a Prussian noble family, led him to an early identification with older values: he, Bismarck, was a young monarchist, a believer in the divine destiny of the Prussian monarchy, devoted to the land—agriculture, for him and his cohort, being the mother of all virtues, incomparably richer than the (then starting up) products of the industrial age. He was an anti-democratic parliamentarian, who accepted the limited value of a national deliberative body but not of one that overrode the King in the passing of legislation. This was the core Bismarck, the figure he characterizes, we might say 'stiffly,' in the *Reflections and Reminiscences* we are reading.

Bismarck's life, as you will see in this week's reading, was one that exposed him to the world events of his time—the Restoration after Napoleon's Revolution, the European uprisings of 1848, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Yet Bismarck's text is also seeded with episode and anecdote that brings the large political picture into a miniature human light—and that make the reading of these *Reflections* a surprising delight. Typical of Bismarck at his most thoughtful are phrasings like: 'I have never regarded birth as a substitute for want of ability; whenever I have come forward on behalf of landed property it has not been in the

interest of proprietors of my own class, but because I see in the decline of agriculture one of the greatest dangers to our permanence as a state' (p.28); while typical of Bismarck at his most charming (and frequent, too) are the passages in which he debunks the grand, observing that in France the wearing of medals, honorary chest decorations, was absolutely compelling to crowds, so that when even a small fry local official, chest covered with medals, appeared before a crowd, the mob dispersed in respect. We come closer, here, to the remarkable Bismarck, who not long before being dismissed from his Chancellorship by Frederick William, generated and passed extraordinarily modern legislation, through the then unified German parliament—legislation providing for kinds of social welfare/security which addressed the needs of the whole people, and far exceeded any previous achievements of European governance.

*Readings:* Bismarck, Otto von, *Reflections and Reminiscences* (New York, 1968)

*Questions:*

1. The autobiographer faces a strategic writing problem. He/she ages, matures, in the guise of narrator of the autobiography. Should this change be reflected in the life writer's own style and perspective? How does Bismarck handle this? Is the narrator stable or mobile, as he presents his text?
2. Does Bismarck, as life writer, think and write in terms of 'us and them,' 'us Prussians and our enemies the French,' or does he have a broad vision of European unities which are out there to be sought for?
3. What does war mean to Bismarck, as he tries to sketch his view of his life and world? Does he conceive of himself as a militarist? Does he see under the surface of European hostilities to the human stratum underlying them?

**Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889-1951)

*Introduction*

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was born in Vienna to a wealthy business family, reputedly the second wealthiest family in the Hapsburg Empire (second only to the banking family of the Rothschilds.) Though Ludwig's career was subsequently to lead to a Professorship at Cambridge, and to close acquaintance with many of the leading thinkers of the twentieth century in England and Germany, he published little in his lifetime, and took considerable time for solitary living and thinking. (In World War II he could not endure being absent from the war struggle itself, and [did volunteer work]

for a long time as a hospital orderly; while in WWI he was active on the front lines, and was decorated for bravery.) In 1921 he published a version of his Cambridge thesis under the title *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which he attempted to show the correlation between logical propositions and the structure of the world. In later life he reread this work and found it seriously lacking, especially as he had, since the 1921 publication, been intensively at work on the notes and papers for a new work, the *Philosophical Investigations*, which would first be published in 1953, after his death. It is that work which we will read this week, and which will doubtless occasion the query what this work is doing in a syllabus on German autobiography.

The syllabus writer before you has taken the liberty of including, in a course on German autobiography, a text (*The Philosophical Investigations*) which is not an autobiography—for Wittgenstein wrote no such thing—but (among many other issues)—a text about the possibility of autobiography. This set of reflections bears on the nature and possibility of the whole life-writing or autobiography project the present class takes for granted. Wittgenstein plants, in the midst of the materials of this class, critical doubts without considering which we are hardly in a position to justify our whole undertaking. From the time of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein was concerned with the problems raised by our efforts to describe in language, and though he came out, in that text, very subtly on the side of the describability of the world, he has, in *The Philosophical Investigations*, taken the same concern in a different direction. He has

subjected language and its descriptions to a radical critique, introduced the notion of language games, and thereby raised fundamental doubts about the kinds of descriptive vehicle available to us, for describing or talking about our selves. In plain English, he has very subtly raised the question of what kind of account we could possibly give of ourselves.

*Readings:*

*Philosophical Investigations*; (trans. Anscombe.) (New York, 1958).

*Questions:*

1. In the opening of the *Investigations* (sections 1-7) Wittgenstein outlines his conception of language as a game, a way of moving counters without actually making contact with the real world entities those counters represent. What specific implications do you see, in this theory, for the practice of autobiography? Do you accept Wittgenstein's perspective, or do you see a way to restore, to language, an objective/substantive role in human being?
2. What is Wittgenstein's view of the 'self' or the 'soul?' From section 413, off and on until the end of the text, Wittgenstein grapples with this self-issue. How does his view challenge the assumption, about selfhood, on which the present syllabus is based?
3. Is it important to you, as a student of autobiography, to understand whether the autobiographical text sheds light on its object, or is that a matter of indifference? Are you comfortable to think of the autobiographical text simply as a construction in language, without reference?

**Christa Wolf** (1927-2011)

*Introduction*

The author of this text and the woman sought for in this text are both Christa. Is the author in search of herself, or is the T., added to Christa in the novel's title, a code for the difference of the author from the character she seeks?

A mystery cloaks this powerful book, and the mystery covers at least the suspicion that we are dealing, here, with a subtle form of autobiography. There seems little doubt that the eminent East German novelist, Christa Wolf, is in the present book looking for herself, and in the course of that looking constructing a vehicle for free discourse about herself and her society, a then closed East German Communist society in which criticism was dangerous; a state which she knew from the inside, having lived in it as an informer, and for decades as an informed on, citizen. Such, at least, is a plausible view of this autobiography, published in 1967 as the DDR was enforcing its strength and wary of its critics. Such is a plausible reason for this author's lifetime preoccupation—she was born into Nazi Germany, lived her adult life as a member of the Communist Party—with discovering who she is and what she believes in, in a world full of hotly and dangerously disputing view points.

Autobiography has been born from many motivations, throughout this syllabus. But isn't search for the self a consistent drive, as we rethink the motives for the texts read in this course? Isn't that what we find in the life writings of Herder, Goethe, Moritz, Bismarck? Answering yes will simplify our attempt at a unified shape for this course, but won't it be an empty simplification, to remain with the notion of the 'search for the self?' We have already discussed the fine line that distinguishes the self-presentation of the novelist from that of the autobiographer, and now we make our classification harder, by admitting a wide diversity of texts into the category of the autobiography. Well, let's see if *in fact* our autobiographers are seeking their selves. Herder is looking for an escape from the imprisoning teaching job he is locked into in Riga, shut off from the larger world—of nature, history, art—which is being parochially closed to him. Herder is a young man looking for the world, that is himself. Goethe, in *Werther*, may down deep have been working to purge from himself a suicidal inclination, from which the book's huge success effectively cleared him—leaving to other young men the burden of following in Werther's fatal footsteps. Bismarck wrote his *Reminiscences* as an aging and retired statesman, of worldwide renown but considerable inward dissatisfaction, and we have to guess at his 'motive.' He wanted to come to terms

with his life, to be even with himself—and to share jocose reminiscences of what an engaging presence he was. Shall we say that the foregoing are all ‘seeking themselves’? With some truth we *can* say that, if we take the ‘seeking oneself’ loosely, and contrast the autobiographer’s effort at discovery with the other kind of discovery—native to the fiction writer or poet—for whom discovery is ‘discovery in the imagination,’ rather than discovery of the ‘real world.’

*Readings:* Christa Wolf, *The Quest for Christa T.*; trans. Christopher Middleton. (New York, 1968).

*Questions:*

1. Is Christa Wolf Christa T? Is the author in search of herself? Why the letter T, then?
2. Is this text a political one, at the same time that it tries to penetrate the mind and life of a single individual? If so, what is the viewpoint of the narrator toward the polity she lives in?
3. To what is due the gradual decline of Christa T? Does her illness have its roots in her own failures or in those of the society around her? What is the problem with that society?

**Max Frisch (1911-1991)**

*Introduction*

Max Frisch was born and educated in Switzerland, working first as an architect—he drew the design for the central swimming pool in Zuerich--then working as a journalist with the *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, with which he would stay in close connection all his life. However when it came to post-War consciousness in German—concern with human rights, identity issues, political dignity—he proved to be an exceptional spokesperson for the *whole* German speaking world. His plays, novels, and journalistic works dug deep into the human condition, and he, like Wolf and Grass (ahead), was deeply concerned with the construction of a new German society after the Nazis.

Given the thematic concerns of his work, it is no surprise that in all his major work—novels like *I am not Stiller* or *Homo Faber*; plays like *The Chinese Wall* or *Andorra*—Frisch is writing a quasi autobiography, a dramatization of his own views. In *Montauk*, however, Frisch writes a less fictionally cloaked self-writing, and generates a tight literary squeeze of the events of ‘his own life.’ (The self-portrait is subtly molded to his own contours: a shy and yet addicted womanizer, a sensualist of the eye and mood, an observing and ironic student of himself, an astute judge of cultural differences.) It is interesting to note the style of this work, which creates self-image through a blend of fictional adroitnesses—mixed up time sequences; sharp flashbacks; mood repetitions, as in the recurrent visions of the misty coast off Long Island—with the realisms of a sixty-three year old man exposing both his lasting romantic nature and the physical/perspectival differences he discovers between himself and the thirty-one year old Lynn.

*Reading:* *Montauk* (trans. Skelton) (New York, 1975)

*Questions:*

1. Christa Wolf and Max Frisch, as well as Guenter Grass (ahead) all write as voices of the *Nachkriegszeit*, the Post War period of Germany that set in at the middle of the twentieth century. While each of these authors related very differently to the war time, and addressed issues of personal conscience differently, each of them wrestles with human issues raised by the war and its aftermaths. What do you see in common to the works of these three authors, as writers of personal testimony?
2. You have read some orthodox narrative autobiography in this course—Bismarck, Wagner—in which the narrator speaks in his own voice, not disguising that voice under any more indirect narrative devices. How does Frisch present his own voice in *Montauk*? Do we feel we are hearing *him* in the text?

3. How does Frisch deal with the issue of 'fame' or 'literary reputation'? Does he define himself in terms of others' views of him, or is he indifferent to others? How does the way one writes his autobiography overlap with the way he deals with others' attitudes toward him?

## **Guenter Grass (1927-**

### *Introduction*

Guenter Grass was born in Danzig (Gdansk), in a culturally complex environment which was both German and Polish, and which lay at the heart of the fighting between Russians and Germans in the Second World War. His mother owned a grocery store in Danzig, and proved the main support of the family, which though not well off managed to send Guenter to a fine prep school, the *Conradinum*, where he received a rigorous education. His relation with his father was lacking in the intimacy the young man wanted, and at age fourteen Guenter enlisted in a submarine division of the German army. (He was caught up in war fever, and wanted to participate in his nation's upcoming conquests in the East.) Moving on from that basic military commitment, he soon joined the 10<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division of the Waffen SS, Hitler's elite Storm Troopers. It was this move which proved the most controversial of his life, and which serves as the key preoccupation of our reading for this week, a preoccupation the greater for the long commitment of Grass, after the war, to anti-war causes, and his prominence as a supporter of demilitarized Germany.

For a half year Grass served with the Panzer Division, until he was taken prisoner by the Americans, and held in a prison camp awaiting repatriation into a Germany which, because the old homelands of Danzig were now Russian occupied, had to repatriate him to West, Berlin. Never far from his notebooks and sketch pads, whether in childhood or war or post-war time, Grass entered heartily into the cultural life of liberated West Berlin. He wrote voluminously—making himself best known in the West for *The Tin Drum* (1959) and, later, *Cat and Mouse* and *Dog Years*. He was also active and influential as a sculptor, graphic artist, and poet. From 1983-86 Grass was President of the Berlin Academy of the Arts. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1999.

While much of Grass' work in fiction is now considered part of the magic realism school—fantasy, abrupt shifts in narrative, self-conscious play with the reader, exoticism at will; as in the work of Garcia Marquez or Julio Cortazar in South America—the work we are reading belongs with autobiography in the formal sense—though with the sharp personal tweak given it by Grass. You will note, for starters, that Grass the narrator moves in and out of his main character, himself, at one time speaking in that person's voice, at another speaking 'about' that narrator in the third person. The play between these perspectives keeps the self-account supple, giving Grass himself ample room to roam over the cultural landscape of pre and post war Germany, and to introduce us artfully to his own ideas about war, armaments, and art. Grass the fiction writer is all over this commentary on his own times, as you will note by the rhetorical device by which Grass raises the question whether what he is telling is true, or is just a game played by Fickle Dame Memory. The self he targets is lodged in a 'real world,' as embeddedly as Bismarck's self is lodged in his diplomatic/political world, but Grass's self performs, in his word environment, like a character in fiction.

### *Readings*

Guenter Grass, *Peeling the Onion* (trans. Michael Heim). (Orlando, 2007).

### *Questions:*

1. Grass' book acquired much notoriety for its revelation of his enrollment with the Waffen SS, Hitler's elite corps, especially in view of Grass' later renunciation of anything to do with the Nazi war machine. Does Grass convincingly clear himself of his 'earlier mistakes'? Is he remorseful?
2. What role does Grass's family play in his coming into himself? How does he present himself in relation to that family, and do you feel confident that he is trying to portray the family as they were? Or does the fictional urge inflect his portrayal of that family?

3. What kind of childhood did Grass have? Into what kinds of corners did he retreat, in order to be himself? How does he portray this intimacy of youth in himself?
4. Has your view of what autobiography is changed as a result of working through this syllabus? Does the term autobiography—a writing about oneself—prevail over the notion of 'life writing'? Can you see certain descriptive advantages to 'life writing'?
5. Do the autobiographies of Grass, Frisch, and Wolf seem to you to have a lot in common? Do they all reflect a post WW2 mood, or perhaps a late 20<sup>th</sup> century mood, which holds them together?
6. How has war been treated in the self-describing efforts of Grimmelshausen, Goethe (in *Poetry and Truth*), Bismarck, Grass? Does war provide a thematic in terms of which the autobiographer can self define?
7. Does the autobiographer often trace the stages of his/her life—Moritz, Wagner, Nietzsche, Grass—and if so how do these writers describe the different stages their life has gone through? Does the narrator change as the figure he/she is describing goes through different life stages?
8. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* raised the issue of the possibility of describing the self—the kind of activity implied in the notions of autobiography and life-writing. What is your view, now, about the possibility of describing the self, as it plays out in German autobiography?