



Critical Memoir: A Recovery From Codes

Sarah Heston

The field of autobiography studies in the United States emerged in literature departments in the 1970s largely as a response to such literary schools of thought as New Criticism and Deconstruction, which jettisoned the notion of authorial intention as a primary factor in the interpretation of a text's meaning, even proclaiming, as Roland Barthes did in 1968, 'The Death of the Author.' Thus, since its inception as a formalized field of study, autobiography studies has been preoccupied with whether an autobiographical text can communicate to its readers the reality of its author's experiences. One side of the debate—typified by theorists such as Paul de Man—has held that it is impossible for language ever to represent reality 'accurately,' even asserting that autobiography is theoretically impossible. The other side—elaborated by thinkers like James Olney—claims that the truth of unique individuals can be known through the autobiographies they write, even if language is not purely transparent and 'truth' is not the same thing as 'fact'

—Jakki Spicer, "The Author Is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual" (388).

Memoir studies, which includes the fields of autobiographical studies, creative nonfiction, and the vast number of popular reviews of memoir written by journalists and creative writers, has long had a contentious relationship with the field of critical theory. While many critical theorists have produced autobiographical writing of their own and have written extensively on canonical autobiographical texts, memoir studies, especially autobiographical studies, has consistently rejected theory, especially deconstruction. A famous memoir by a famous scholar, such as *The Future Lasts Forever* by Louis Althusser, in which the theorist explains how he murdered his wife, has never been discussed in the field that specializes on memoir. While "it is in a way simply the bad luck of autobiographical studies, or the good luck of critical theory...that their development has been simultaneous" (Jay 44), one of the major projects of critical theory in the last thirty years or so has been to question and complicate concepts of truth and self, the very concepts memoir studies has endorsed without conflict.

Autobiographical literature, said by memoir scholars to be focused on articulating a true, individual self, should be a ripe target for critical theorists, which should in turn make these theorists ripe targets for memoir specialists. According to some of these specialists, “it seems clear that the dogmas of postmodernism (...poststructuralism and deconstruction), generally viewed and treated as ‘discoveries’ (that is, as if they had proven, factual validity), threaten autobiography to the point at which its practice tends to become impossible” (Brosman 96) because critical theory tends to “ignore the very texts that stand in need of interpretation” (Arch viii). To combat this attack, memoir specialists claim they need to “recover particular ways of reading a particular genre...to recover discursive practices” (Arch 11), or they risk losing memoir to “the cunning deconstructionists who charge forward, heads lowered, like well-trained bulls, as soon as someone waves the red flag of sincerity” (Philippe Lejeune qtd. in Regard, *Mapping the Self* 20). Moreover, James Olney argues that critical theorists misunderstand memoir as a genre because “however much they talk about genre or linguistics or deep-lying structures, what they are still troubling about is the self...even though in a kind of bravura way some of them may be denying rather than affirming its reality or possibility” (*Autobiography* 23).

Whatever else it might include, memoir scholars assert, memoir is “a discourse of identity,” that resists the theorist’s “narrowly conceived literary approach to autobiography” (Eakin, “Breaking Rules” 124), and critical theory, “with all its sophistication needs to be reminded that there is nothing perfunctory about the referential claims of autobiography” (Eakin, “The Referential Aesthetic” 142). The proponents of using critical theory as well as memoir are duped “by those under the influence of various schools of modern linguistics, especially of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze” (Brosman 97). To consider some kind of critical theory while examining memoir, it seems, one must be in an altered state, and the logic follows then to call some works of critical theory “memoir,” one must be handing out the Kool-Aid. But memoirs by some critical theorists are exactly the kind of narratives that memoir scholars have been trying for forty years to define. The opportunity is ripe for memoir scholars to note the ways that the self of a

theorist memoir is referential or even absent while its truths are mystical instead of equitable; when these issues are explored, such memoir scholars might find memoir produces ambiguity more than anything else because it celebrates forms of resistance rather than conforms to a standard.

Consider, then, *Jacques Derrida*, by Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, a text that situates itself in the traditions of critical theory, memoir, autobiographical studies, a prime example of the ways that memoir's relationship to the self is ambiguous. This text is precisely the concept that begs further exploration and collaboration in memoir studies. *JD* is an experiment in critical theory, certainly, but it also establishes itself from its first pages as a product of and a testament to a lineage of Western memoir and scholarship on memoir. *JD* is emblematic of autodiegetic autobiographical testimonials that reach far beyond the scope of an individual author articulating the movements of his autonomous self and also suggests that scholarship on memoir needs to allow for more ambiguity, for the "contract" that begins autobiographical studies prescribes a reader-writer exchange that is normative and ideal but not representative of the way memoir actually works. Intentions change, and if memoir begins to be understood as a form of art that challenges the prescriptions placed on it, what constitutes "memoir" must necessarily change.

The irony of looking at memoirs by theorists is that their inclusion might be more representative of the history and preoccupations of Western memoir than autodiegetic narratives about a spiritual or psychological conversion—the very narratives memoir specialists come back to over and over again. Before Augustine, the author considered by most if not all memoir scholars as the progenitor of the genre, there are a plethora of memoirs by martyr saints that double as biographies. Even Augustine himself claims the martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas—attributed with possibly writing the earliest Christian narrative by a woman (Castelli 86)—as worthy of imitation (Augustine, "On The Feast Of SS Perpetua and Felicitas" 39). Augustine's own text denies its status as progenitor and provides evidence for that fact. Furthermore, while Rousseau supposedly secularizes the genre, the eighteenth-century innovation of the

slave narrative complicates that history by presenting ambiguous, spiritual texts that are mystical and counter-cultural, texts that Rousseau claims influence his ambivalence about the self (Lowe 105) but that memoir scholars claim are not memoirs.¹ Rousseau, like Augustine, notes an important autobiographical influence that does precisely the exact opposite of what his text does, according to memoir studies.

Clearly, poststructuralist philosophical preoccupations involve canonical memoir on the one hand and ambiguity on the other hand. Derrida's work references Augustine and Rousseau with as much frequency as a memoir scholar's articles. Yet the way Derrida approaches memoir is as much from the point of view of a creative writer as a philosopher.

JD is an auto/biographical text in two parts. In the autobiographical section, "Circumfession," Derrida addresses himself as a confessional memoirist, attempting to deliberately place himself in the tradition of both Augustine's and Rousseau's *Confessions*. In "Circumfession," Derrida quotes Augustine and remarks on biographical details of his own life, which he uses to understand his own status as a Jew, a son, and as a writer in a literary lineage. Readers less familiar with the variety of memoir forms might note quizzically that his text wanders through his life in a circumspect way, not focusing on a specific incident or a chronological narrative of his youth to present age and culminating in what Derrida calls his own "radical absence" (*JD* 191). Yet, the impending death of his mother, as it relates to his lineage as a Jew and a prominent literary figure and his own mortality, rules the text:

They are going to think that my mother's metaphasic chaos is becoming my sentence, as though through an ultimate confusion with 'the last loved face' in *L'Amour fou*, at the moment when I have not even had the good luck to have the contemplation of Ostia, only of teaching it, of seeing it in San Geminiano, when Augustine can speak with *his* mother, in the imminence of her death...*'only write here what is impossible, that ought to be the impossible-*

¹ See Olney's "I Was Born," which argues that the slave narrative "tends to exhibit a highly conventional, rigidly fixed form that bears much the same relationship to autobiography in a full sense as painting by numbers bears to painting as a creative act" (48).

rule (10-11-77), of everything G. can be expecting of me, a supposedly idiomatic, unbroachable, unreadable, uncircumcised piece of writing, held not to the assistance of its father, as Socrates would say, but to my assistance at the death of a mother...it is in the sense of the witness who, through countersigning attestation, confirms the logic of the counterexample, by daring to kill the quotation marks, without quoting me, calling me back to the moment when, like twelve years ago, I did not yet know what circumcision means (193-96).

The sentence continues, becoming the likes of one perhaps not often read in major authors' works or even pleasurable to read, but it nonetheless works as a sentence. To identify a representative sentence to stand as "sentence example" is fruitless—this is nothing new for readers of Derrida, obviously. What is particularly noteworthy here is that language play becomes *genre play*. Just as there is no perfect "sentence example," there is no perfect "memoir example." All the parts of memoir are here—the much-discussed mother figure of memoir, the acknowledgement of previous, famous memoirs, the autodiegetic narrative, the author's discussion of his ethnic and religious statuses. But all these generically appropriate parts are jumbled in a way that amounts to rumination more than an easy-to-follow, step-by-step telling of one event or time period in which one whole self changes into a different whole self.

The other narratives in *JD* are biographical writing about Derrida—Geoffrey Bennington's "Derridabase" and "Acts/The Laws of Genre," both of which play with "Circumfession" to create a "simulacrum of a duel" (319). "Derridabase" has the stated goal of "computing" (1) Derrida's ideas into a system (a database on Derrida) that can be accessed by all readers, which Bennington calls the first round of one card game that explains Derrida's thinking (319), while the latter piece, "Acts," provides only biographical details of Derrida's life:

Be it biography, bibliography, or iconography, I shall play, no doubt out of provocation with respect to my partner, J.D., or any other reader, a game which consists in following

‘the law of genre’ (one of the titles of *Parages*) or received norms, the very norms that J.D. has never stopped calling into question, in a theoretical mode but also in his work as a writer. These constraints appear particularly artificial in the establishment of the *Curriculum vitae*, an expression I prefer to that of biography: it gestures toward rhythm and speed, race or cursiveness (319).

“Derridabase” and “Acts” create a personal and theoretical biography/database of Derrida that seeks out the *savoir absolu* (absolute knowledge) “craved by systematic philosophical thinking” (Shakespeare 13), while “Circumfession” has the goal of revealing that such a database on Derrida is pointless beyond the play of testimonial, for a whole account of a writer/thinker will never be complete, just as a biography or memoir cannot ever be viewed as complete accounts of the self. Situating the biographies “Derridabase” and “Acts” in the same book with the memoir “Circumfession,” which disrupts their goals, makes a broader comment about a scholar’s inability to systematize literature, writing, and language, including the inability to define specific parameters for what qualifies as what kind of life writing. This conceptual organization of auto/biographical testimonial is the focus from the first page of the text.

In addition to an immediate allusion to the *Confessions* and the confessional memoir tradition, which presents the same preoccupations with Augustine and Rousseau that memoir scholars have, the first pages of *JD* cue readers to interpret this work dually as one, memoir, and two, scholarship on memoir. The table of contents has a peculiar heading that tells us that “‘this book presupposes a contract’ / 1” (viii) between Derrida and Bennington, wherein each agrees to complete this work with the particular parameters they each chose. The context for this contract is critical for our interpretation of it. Derrida and Bennington do not simply refer to a *contract*, which could allude to ancient Greece, the Enlightenment, or other philosophical renderings of this word in many time periods. Although scholars of other disciplines might read this allusion as resonating elsewhere, for memoir scholars, this “presupposed contract” is an allusion to the “father” of autobiographical studies, Philippe Lejeune. Of course, as is typical for Derrida, other

authors could be in mind when he uses this term. This “contract” can refer to the social (or political) contract made famous by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, in which the author discusses the important divisions between sovereign society and the government. But this merely returns to Lejeune, who uses the additional word “presupposes” when speaking about autobiographical writing and who names Rousseau’s “contract” when he discusses the important signature—“I, the Undersigned”—of the memoirist (*On Autobiography* 8). This helps Lejeune set up his own autobiographical contract in which a writer is “guaranteed to be faithful, accurate, to be taken literally” by the reader, just as Rousseau’s government is guaranteed to do the same (28). Otherwise, as Rousseau suggests, the people should overthrow the government. Similarly, Lejeune claims, readers, publishers, and authors should overthrow the memoirist who does not uphold this contract, or else the enterprise of memoir fails (28). It is worth noting that Lejeune is the very scholar who remarks on “the cunning deconstructionists who charge forward, heads lowered, like well-trained bulls, as soon as someone waves the red flag of sincerity” (qtd. in Regard, *Mapping the Self* 20), and who battles Derrida in print and conversation over the stakes of autobiographical writing for decades.² If there is any doubt that this is a reference to Lejeune, readers should recall that memoir specialists take up Lejeune’s cause and decry deconstruction and Derrida over all forms of theory and theorists. There is the General, and then there is the army.

Beginning with the father of autobiographical studies, Lejeune, this text, then, presumes an audience familiar with work on memoir. Lejeune’s contract regarding “retrospective prose narration written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4) ironically and famously prompts de Man to proclaim that this “father’s” work “does not seem to be founded on argument or evidence” (174)—that Lejeune himself demonstrates no responsibility to the contract of scholarly argument. Secondly, the reference to Lejeune’s contract

² Many texts and talks could be cited here. A reader merely need type “Lejeune Derrida” into a search engine to find some bizarre and tantalizing material. Robert Smith’s *Derrida and Autobiography* is a great collection of sources for these men’s own “duel.”

provides for readers the actual contract within which Bennington and Derrida are working. In this opening, Bennington says that his part in *JD* is to “limit himself to an argued exposition which would try to be as clear as possible,” like “computers” (1). Lejeune’s literalness becomes Bennington’s computing. Bennington is the scholar. Derrida is the memoirist whose stake in this contract is conversely to “show how any such system must remain essentially open” (1). Thus, Derrida’s response to Bennington’s “systemization” is to “write something escaping the proposed systemization, surprising it” (1). From the text’s first pages, the authors suggest that systems are fallible and that memoir does not systematize easily. Furthermore, the goal of the memoir portion of the text is to acknowledge and “surprise” the system of scholarship that understands it as a memoir. Thus, *JD* simultaneously acknowledges the scope and history of memoir that its scholarly “father” promotes, while purposefully creating an autobiographical act that is meaningful as memoir precisely because it rejects this scope and history. Instead, the book suggests that memoir begins in reference and departure, that is, an absence of a “literal” author who can be discerned in the text. If there is not an authorial presence to be equated with individual selfhood, then our beliefs about this morally “faithful” author who is “guaranteed to be...taken literally” is, indeed, not “founded on argument.” Derrida’s “Circumfession” seeks to recall the *Confessions* of memoir’s most discussed writers, yet it frames this recollection as a contract that is entered into in order to detach, or circumcise, from *Confessions* and all that the word implies for memoir’s history and scholarship. Bennington stands in as the memoir critic whose frame for memoir is happily revised after reading Derrida’s circumcission from the contract that looms over the memoirist. Certainly, contemporary memoirists will be aware of the sense that they are in a duel with critics who disparage the enterprise of memoir in a way that would never be done to poetry or fiction.

Perhaps the very first circumcission from the memoir happens in absence: the book begins with a contract rather than with any auto/biographical information on Derrida other than a name, *Jacques Derrida*. The book suggests that contemporary readers’ experience of memoir is intricately woven with

commentary on it, which is unlike fiction or poetry, as scholarship on memoir truly is by the people and for the people. And people need to *undo* what they think memoir should begin with—some basic information on the author’s life or an experience he intends to tell us about—before they come to conclusions about the genre. Such a suggestion is antithetical to contemporary practice in which conclusions about memoir often come before a reading of the text. In the ambiguous field of memoir studies, in which scholars and non-experts alike make grand statements, critics are not so different. Their conclusions are always encompassing—talking about one text allows a commentator to draw conclusions about the genre overall.³ Eventually, readers will get autobiographical information about Derrida, such as his experiences of being a reader (a common theme in Western memoir) and his experience of loving his mother (reminiscent of Augustine and Rousseau), as well as his fear of losing her as she dies. But for now, this project that acknowledges but does not participate with the most readily accepted concepts about memoir begs readers to ask how memoir departs from readerly expectations. The short answer is that memoir is an art form that explores absence and provides a location for readers to do the same.

Normativity Across Disciplines

For Derrida and Bennington, then, engagement with memoir studies—the philosophy of memoir—is important because one aspect of a memoir is its status as a genre that departs from established philosophies about it. In order to defy, one must acknowledge what one is defying, as Derrida does with Bennington’s intent to “systematize.” For Derrida, then, memoir must “surprise” rather than fit into an established canon. Of his interest in creating a comprehensive yet clear glimpse into Derrida, such as one

³ Once again, the number of examples I could provide here is enormous. I suggest a reader simply type “memoir” into a Google search field. The first page of results features Neil Genzlinger’s *New York Times*, “The Problems With Memoirs.” If one searches “memoir bad,” a whole slew of bashing articles appear, so much so that a great Rumpus commentary, Stephen Elliot’s “The Problem With The Problem With Memoir,” provides some much needed relief from all the condemnation.

that might be made by memoir scholars intent on framing memoir as a definable genre with a certain history and set of tropes, Bennington says that only after the “event” was he able to understand his attempt to construct this system as a desire “to provoke and welcome this surprise” (1). Thus, for Bennington also, memoir must acknowledge how it is perceived status in order to react to the status quo and become a experiment, an “event,” that astounds even the author(s). No doubt this double engagement is why *JD* has been called “a fascinating example of what might be called post-structuralist autobiography” in reviewers’ accounts of the book (Volpe 166).

Bennington’s resulting interest in “provok[ing] and welcom[ing] this surprise” is very important when one considers an ideology that promotes authorial intention as a means toward narrating a journey of selfhood. Just like Pascal’s belief that memoir “is a search for a true self” and Olney’s emphasis on the constant ‘I,’ Lejeune’s contract implies that an author begins with an intention that is—or should be—carried out in the text. The constant of the whole, true self that is a product of an author’s intention has reached grand new levels in memoir studies. Eakin is one of the most popular proponents of using the science of the body to prove the importance of the self, which he claims is “grounded in the neurobiological rhythms of consciousness” (“What Are We Reading?” 130). He then uses this claim to support his argument about the importance of the self in memoir. Eakin says that autobiography’s recording of the self across time “serves a homeostatic goal [and] the adaptive purpose of self-narrative, *whether neurobiological or literary*, would be the maintenance of stability in the human individual through the creation of a sense of identity” (“Living Autobiography” 4, emphasis added). Additionally, he argues that “developmental psychologists convince me...that we are trained as children to attach special importance to one kind of selfhood, that of the extended self, so much so that we do in fact regard it as identity’s signature” (“What Are We Reading?” 122). This is an attempt to systematize the human being and genre both as somehow *scientific*, and at the same time, *present*—the system is founded falsely in the declaration that the system is present, exists. *JD* teaches that memoir does not contain conclusive authorial intentions;

instead, memoir's intention is to experiment and revises during the process of writing itself. For example, Bennington's intentions are revealed to him as something quite other than his actual conscious, stated intention: to systematize Derrida's thoughts. Thus, *JD* prompts readers to see that "a narrowly conceived literary approach to autobiography"—what Eakin claims theorists are responsible for when they discuss memoir—is actually true only for specialized memoir scholars. Certainly, the experiment of *JD* itself is flawed, for human beings do not have a normative, constant physiology or consciousness. What the text *is* is not a product of intention, but rather, as both authors suggest, evidence of a surprising event. While the intention behind a memoir may not be to defy memoir scholars' positions on the genre, it is inevitable that this will happen, simply because intention itself is not normative, just as human physiology is not.

It is no wonder that Derrida and Bennington react against such normativity in a discussion of memoir, for it mimics some traps of phenomenology, the subfield of critical theory that Derrida has also reacted against. Drawing the connections, rather than solely the divisions, between memoir studies and a field of critical theory is important, for it shows us that even memoir specialists who decry the use of theory champion an ideology that is established in theory. Also, understanding how these memoir specialists utilize phenomenology draws us closer to understanding the conflict between their memoir studies and Derrida in the first place. Julie Rak points out humanistic readings of autobiographical texts by scholars such as Olney and Eakin think of memoir as having "a phenomenological approach to the recovery of the self that could be appreciated in its best examples, and then found in other examples of the genre" (486). Although they never quite own up to it, memoir scholars envision the self as a metaphysical truth set in stone that scholars seek to "recover" in academic discourse. Moreover, although they decry the use of critical theory, they actually employ phenomenology to make their claims. According to Derrida, the phenomenological emphasis on the immediacy of experience winds up being a mere "transcendental illusion," as phenomenology is, without being identified as such by its thinkers, a metaphysics (*Speech and Phenomena* 75, 104), or a privileging of an unproved presence in disguise that

valorizes intention over reflection or relation. In explaining his failure to construct Derrida through computer code, Bennington reveals that the most valuable connection between text and author in memoir is that a failed intention for a text can end up exposing the authors as simultaneously, infinitely more and less than the text itself rather than as “embedded in the physiological processes necessary for survival” (Eakin, “What Are We Reading” 126).

Origin and Testimony

JD also fits into an ambiguous, non-normative subfield of memoir that is not acknowledged by memoir studies, but one that I claim is an important step in understanding the defiant history of memoir: hagiography. In a variety of ways, hagiography shows us that an individual’s narrative and, indeed, an individual’s life is never autonomous; instead, it exists in relationship to other narratives and other lives. For example, Margery Kempe’s hagiographical memoir, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, considered the first memoir of (Middle) English, has at least three authors: God via instruction to Kempe, Kempe’s oral dictation to a scribe, and the scribe’s written, third-person account. Just as for *JD*, in order to complete a narrative about one person, multiple parties are required to complete Kempe’s text. Therefore, to explore the identity of one, a text of more than one is necessary. Just as Bennington’s third-person perspective is the primary step in “the event” that leads to Derrida’s inclusion of his first-person narrative, Kempe’s text is written in the third person from her first-person accounts of God’s first-person accounts to her. In order to have the text, the mystical event of God speaking must happen, then the event of Kempe’s translation of his words to her scribe must occur. Kempe’s narrative describes her in the third person as “the creature,” making her a character in the unfolding action, just like God and the scribe. Yet the perspective is inconsistent: sometimes Kempe speaks in the first person, sometimes other authors speak for her, and sometimes Kempe (and thus her memoir) is a vehicle for God’s instructions. While the book is about and attributed to Kempe, *The Book* exists through a dazzling array of perspectives; her narrative

self is never individual, for it is in constant relation, confession, and conversation (or one might say, competition) with other voices, just as Derrida's is. What *The Book* and *JD* suggest about memoir is also a suggestion about writers of memoir: an individual narrative and an individual life are only present in relationship to others, even when those others are physically absent: God, co-authors from afar, and even dead loved ones.

Lejeune might say that deconstructionists are opposed to sincerity, but in *JD*, memoir's sincerity is often ambiguous and difficult, and it comes without the security of a moral contract. The most heartbreaking parts of this memoir are Derrida's reflections on his mother. He begins writing the book when she is ill, and by the end, he knows her death is imminent. Derrida, Augustine, and Rousseau all search for systems through which to understand the power mother figures have in their lives, but what each man is left with is love, loss, and worship. A reader in any age could not know Augustine's conversion narrative without Monica's regard for belief over intention. Augustine says to God, "thus You changed her mourning into joy, a joy far richer than she had thought to wish, a joy much dearer and purer than she had thought to find in grandchildren of my flesh" (*Confessions* 147). Nor could a reader know Rousseau's narrative of social torment without his mystical "Mamma," Madame de Warens, who teaches him that God cannot be codified by church law or custom: "I had frequently made fun of religion in my own way, but I had never been totally without it...Mamma was more helpful to me in this respect than all the theologians in the world could have been" (*Confessions* 218). And the contemporary reader cannot know *JD* as a systemization that fails for good reason without knowing Derrida's mother, who succumbs to a vegetative state while he is writing "Circumfession:" "this is why I am addressing myself here to God, the only one I take as a witness, without yet knowing what these sublime words mean, and this grammar, and *to*, and *witness*, and *God*, and *take*" (56).

Derrida's seminal work *Of Grammatology* makes a case for a philosophical perspective that does not revolve around a metaphysical presence or essence. In order to prove that intellectual hierarchies can be

toppled in an avalanche, Derrida interrogates the widely agreed-upon linguistic concept that spoken language pre-dates the written sign and the implicit Western cultural beliefs that follow from that, namely that spoken language is more meaningful because it is originary. If one accepts his argument, then one must conclude that there can be no hierarchy in which first equals better, no essential truth in the specialized field of linguistics or in studies of literature, and no whole or true God. What remains is Derrida's concept that meaning is made in relationships. Thus, while one thing might always physically or conceptually be separate from another thing, all things are ultimately reliant on each other for meaning to be attributed. The center of the universe is not God (the origin of the universe) or a conception of God, because there is no center. According to the methodology outlined in *Of Grammatology*, God is viewed simultaneously as merely one concept in the connective tissue of the world and as other in the world. Thus, it is not accurate to say that deconstruction is a secular philosophy, for it does not reject the sacred; rather, the sacred is considered alongside the world rather than above it. As Christopher Yates suggests, "if there is a 'turn' at all, it is not a turn of Derrida toward religion, but a turn Derrida performs on philosophy and religion, on any discourse vying for authority in the realm of truth. Indeed, in a rather remarkable way, both are placed on their knees" (330). Derrida's deconstruction repositions a metaphysical presence away from the possibility of a center, but that does not mean that deconstruction removes God from the equation. Instead, Derrida topples long-held perspectives in philosophy about a hierarchy of importance. Readers are left with an assertion that there are layers to ideas, culture, religion, and language, rather than a certain set position from which to view the world.

Historically, memoir studies has worked in much the same way as the philosophical and linguistic traditions Derrida decried decades ago. The privileged origin of memoir is considered to be Augustine's *Confessions*, and this origin becomes an intellectual center of memoir studies because scholars elide it with memoir's moral center. Rousseau's *Confessions* is a close second, although, according to memoir studies, *Confessions* demonstrates a secularization of the genre, it also departs from the genre's moral center due to

its self-focused (read: secular) point of view. And most contemporary memoir comes from this latter tradition, which is why it deserves a good trashing from specialists and staff writers alike.⁴ The more memoirs are in the public's eye, the more Augustine's moral status as a long lost champion of goodness grows in the specialized field of memoir studies. However, to understand Augustine and Rousseau through Derrida's concept of referential meaning from *Of Grammatology* is to see connection rather than departure—the secular and spiritual are experiences that provide context for each other and cannot exist without the other. Augustine and Rousseau are not separate entities working in separate traditions, nor is one simply a lesser version of the other. For example, while Rousseau uses his *On the Origin of Languages* to posit that writing is simply a supplement to speech and written language becomes dangerous when it stands in for speech, his own memoir, written and addressed to his fellow men, arrives at a mystical appreciation of his spiritual “mamma,” who helps him strengthen his bridge with God, only through his written philosophical pondering: “Mamma was more helpful to me in this respect than all the theologians in the world could have been” (*Confessions* 218). Here Rousseau is not recounting a moment in which he once spoke with Madame de Warens—Mamma—about God. Instead, he is providing a written account of his arrival at spiritual understanding. Within the memoir and in Rousseau's genealogy, he defies his own overarching concept on language, and arrives, in his most sentimental, sincere moments with his Mamma, at God. This, of course, returns us to genealogy, which neither Derrida, nor Augustine and Rousseau, can escape. Since each of these writers “alone can attest to the truth, autobiography shares with philosophy the problem of self-accounting” (Kronick 1003). If God, and later broad cultural morality, implicitly becomes memoir specialists' way to divide aesthetics into good or bad artistic choices, when God and morality become referential within a text and genre, such specialists have to reorganize what they privilege in regards to origin and genealogy. They have to accept that God is one of many things for the genre, and

⁴ For rampant examples of this, simply recall reactions to Kathryn Harrison's memoir about consensual incest, *The Kiss*.

the moral or spiritual preferences of critics have nothing to do with the quality of a given memoir.

Scholars have to actually consider the prevailing and disruptive aesthetics of memoir.

There are many conversations about Derrida and autobiographical testimonial in critical theory, yet memoir studies remains mute on the subject. Since *Of Grammatology* dissects a Rousseauian conception of the truth of language—that written language is not as good as (or, is more dangerous than) speech because speech is originary—and Rousseau is considered a canonical, secular memoir writer, it makes sense that one of the most famous memoirists and one of the most famous theorists would collide in various subfields of English studies. Since memoir studies conflates origin and spiritual morality via Augustine, God is conflated with morality in the field's scholarship. It stands to reckon that at some point memoir studies will have to contend with Derrida instead of merely rejecting critical theory in general and deconstruction specifically. Additionally, since Derrida uses Augustine as a reference point so often in his work on God and truth, it would seem that his interests in religion and spiritualism are deeply imbedded with his interests in autobiographical testimonial, remarkably, the same points of interest for memoir scholars. But while memoir scholars focus on how Augustine created a memoir that made “the accomplishment an invisible, internal one, and the journey to salvation a spiritual one” and on how Rousseau championed the “secular transformation of the genre” (Mendelsohn 1), in fact, both Augustine and Rousseau have secular and spiritual, as well as private and public, threads in their work, according to Derrida's layered philosophy. For Derrida, “philosophic intentions are always and everywhere inseparable from intentions that are genealogical...if genealogy, then autobiography” (R. Smith 33).

Detachment and the Speaker

The detachment represented in the first pages of *JD* finds its required other in the artistic act of departure: the origins on which memoir scholars rely—the *Confessions* of Augustine and Rousseau, and Lejeune's foundational concept. This detachment presumes that memoir can be understood as an

acknowledgement of history—in order to cut from something, one must first determine where to make the cut. *JD* implies that the cutting itself is never possible—signification is unavoidable. Thus, instead of a clean cut, memoir is a literary removal in conjunction with Lejeune’s contract, or Bennington’s, for that matter. It is a botched circumcision. For Derrida, origin is inescapable, but also:

origin is elliptical; it must originally repeat itself, divide and share itself, in order to relate to something else; in order to be an origin. The origin is passion because it receives its determination from something else; in order to be an origin, to be the source of what is, of meaning, it must begin by dividing and supplementing itself (Kronick 1004).

Derrida says in *Learning to Live Finally*, “to ask me to renounce what has formed me, what I’ve loved so much, what has been my law, is to ask me to die” (30). Rousseau and Augustine are foundational authors for Derrida. However, the circumcision from the origins on which memoir studies relies on in an auto/biographical text such as *JD* suggests that, for Derrida and Bennington, a memoir must, as a rule, engage in such ambiguous departure, for so does the memoirist. This “dividing and supplementing” counts for what is written in a memoir, but also what is not named in a memoir and why. For example, Derrida is a noted secular theorist. As he tells us in the “Circumfession” portion of *JD*, “the constancy of God in my life is called by other names, so that I quite rightly pass for an atheist” (155). However, noting that Derrida is named Elie “after the prophet Elijah, who would come to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah,” one might read “Circumfession” as a memoir of an individual man that stands to open a pathway to acknowledging “a past beyond memory and a future that no one can anticipate” (Shakespeare 15). That is, it is not simply what is provided to the reader that can be called “memoir,” but also the pregnant darkness in which “even God, it seems, is denied absolute access” (Shakespeare 14). The memoir does not provide an account of the author’s or the genre’s history in total. While Augustine, then Rousseau, represent origin for memoir studies, each of their texts does so because it “receives its determination from something else”: memoir specialists. If origin is necessarily ambiguous, memoir’s

engagement with the status quo should also be the first step of a departure to the not-yet instituted. No matter how long the established history and tenets of memoir have been accepted, they do not provide absolute access to memoir.

Specifically, Derrida's "Circumfession" shows that his life details are not simply his own. A group contributes to the event of his life and to his identity, but this does not formally present itself as simply the use of multiple authors, nor does this contribution preclude autodiegetic memoir. However, it does augment what an autodiegetic narrative might signal to readers. Derrida's "Circumfession" is autodiegetic, but it includes excerpts from others' narratives, including his own journal from the late 1970s. The inclusion of narratives attributed to others also supports an interpretation of this text as being about both Derrida and the history of memoir. By including his old journals along with the excerpts from others' texts, Derrida presents his self as inconstant, unpredictable, and unidentifiable, for it is split; one part of him may quote from and analyze another part of himself, and the journals from the 1970s are not his, but "his," who is not the person he is now. Derrida presents his subjectivity as a product of these other voices' agency, claiming, "I am not confessing myself, rather I'm confessing the others for the imponderable and therefore so heavy secrets I inherit unbeknownst to myself" (187). Memoir here is an autodiegetic disguise. Derrida is *Jacques Derrida* and Kempe is *Margery Kempe*.

This disguise might be an important part of how "Circumfession" is situated as an ode to a lost loved one that moves beyond personal, private mourning and brings the reader into a group mourning made of memoirs before it, dead loved ones, and a god knowable only through faith, never evidence. Just as Kempe is the voice through which readers can hear God's voice and her scribe is the voice through which readers can hear Kempe, a complicated kind of testimonial disguise is happening in "Circumfession." To present this text as his memoir, Derrida frames his own confessions within Augustine's, often copying long sections of Augustine's *Confessions*. In order to understand the terror of losing his own mother, Derrida uses excerpts and images focused on the death of Augustine's mother,

Monica. The self of memoir here is conceptualized as what Lauren Slater calls “narrative self” in order to differentiate between a definable, codifiable being and a fluid state of consciousness that critics try to codify as “the self” (*Lying* afterword). Derrida capitalizes on the concept of a narrative self by making his autodiegetic narrative fold into other narratives, drawing attention away from the author-text connection and toward the chaos of the community we each keep as writers. When one voice goes, like Derrida’s mother, the other voices rise up. This is mourning, faith, and a spectral harmony.

This harmony suggests to us how memoir specialists can mitigate their own mourning for the self—acknowledge and collaborate with other voices, concepts, and fields. Just as Derrida’s mourning is not his own, for each voice contributes to the memoir’s expression of loss, so to leave behind a concept of the autonomous self in autobiographical testimonial is not to lose autonomy as a discipline, but, rather, to understand the agency of a large academic community. From this formal move as old as Augustine (and indeed, older), the academic community can learn that all who contribute to a field have been trained to make presumptions when they identify an autodiegetic narrative, specifically that the author-text connection is solidified in the memoir. Upon undoing this presumption, scholars can explore the number of narratives compiled to make the one, and the weird formal ways authors defer to narratives that are not their own. It is possible see the narrator recalling his narratives from other time periods as a moment that finalizes the split within what is called “self” and what we think of as self-narrating. Every memoir is haunted by the ghosts of prior texts, and scholarship on memoir could learn a lesson from this. Writers and readers are imbedded historically, theoretically, and sympathetically more than an author can conceive of in a single argumentative mode. Arguments, like autobiographical testimonials, are never merely autodiegetic.

Examining how direct address functions in “Circumfession” can further revise our ideas about autodiegetic narratives in memoir as they are related to divisions of spirituality and secularism in the genre. For example, the style and content of “Circumfession” owes much to Augustine’s *Confessions* (indeed, the

former text often simply quotes the latter), which reminds us that this memoir is in constant play, affirming and detaching from the historical origins of spiritual Western memoir. Implicitly, Derrida addresses Augustine with the title “Circumfession,” reminding us of Augustine’s *Confessions*. A confession can be considered a private address when it is a *confession laudis*, or praise of God from an individual, like Augustine’s. Augustine’s memoir is divided into thirteen thematic Books that use the Latin *vos* (thou, plural) for a direct address to human beings and *tu* (you, singular) for a direct address to God. His direct address to God is not simply private, however, because it is placed before an audience; each Book functions as a thematic sermon that provides a lesson on some subject matter while referencing the Bible and personal anecdotes.

Also, as Derrida is prone to ruminations on origin, a reader can presume that his play with the word and formal structure of one *Confessions* through his title “Circumfession” acknowledges Rousseau’s *Confessions*, too, as the often considered secular origin of memoir. While confession can be understood as a praise of God, it can also be a more ambiguous public address when it is a *confessio peccati*, or confession of sins to God/someone/a group, like Rousseau’s memoir. Rousseau says that his entire work is addressed to his fellow human beings, yet this address reads like a soliloquy: “my purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true in nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself” (*Confessions* 17). Although he claims to be writing to his “own kind,” Rousseau appears to be writing to himself in order to revise how others perceive him in his own mind. A soliloquy is a form of address that allows an individual to ruminate through testimonial, but to whom exactly is ambiguous, especially in the context of the written word. This is Rousseau’s *confessio peccati*. Derrida acknowledges both Augustine and Rousseau through his own confession.

The autodiegetic narrator in “Circumfession” is one immersed in evolving the group identity rather than articulating an individual self. Even in Derrida’s most private moments of prayer, in which only the individual knows what is prayed for, only the group can aid the reception of the prayer, such as

Bennington does with Derrida. Derrida relies on direct address to each person in his narrative and to the readers when he speaks about each of these parties in the third person. When Derrida addresses Bennington as “G,” for example, it is in regards to what is commonly considered private matters, such as prayer, but, just as with Augustine, this private journey is placed before an audience: “for if you knew, G., my experiences of prayer, you would know everything, you who know everything, you would tell me whom to address them to” (*JD* 188). The quality of this text as an event, just as with Augustine’s and Rousseau’s, is one that relies on a group discussion to reveal the autodiegetic narrator. It is clear from the style of address that “Circumfession” uses that it belongs in a history of memoir that is spiritual, in which address, prayer, and sermon are inseparable. This memoir situates itself as both *confession laudis* and *confessio peccati*. They are not separable, just as the author is not separable from his history, and a memoir is not separable from its historical roots in the genre. Readers know Derrida through his writing about his own and Augustine’s mother, through Bennington’s portrayal of him as a peer, and through a younger Derrida that we see copied in decades-old journals. But readers know *JD* through its relationship to the themes and styles from memoir’s history, such as hagiography. In considering the style of “Circumfession,” it becomes clear that memoir’s biggest hits—Augustine and Rousseau—are similarly implicated in this relational interpersonal identity, as well as the historical identity of future memoirs, like *JD*.

The End With Codes

Memoirists might have had intentions that began their testimonials, but they are each within an unfolding event the moment the work begins. As readers, we do not know what they are thinking during the writing, what they want to fashion rhetorically, or what historical signification they intend. We ascribe agency because this is the grammar we have. We say that Augustine positions his conversion as that of a sick man who heals, Rousseau secularizes Augustine’s memoir to champion the eighteenth-century “autobiography” of the autonomous individual consciousness, and Derrida treats memoir as an

opportunity to play with language. We say *proper noun* and then we say *verb*. We create a contract to keep us safe; we judge an author's moral self to prove we know what *is* safe. Yet each author shows us that understanding him through his own intentions for a text, and then for his life, is wrong. Augustine wades through the thing "which doctors call the crisis" (*Confessions* 95); Rousseau admits that no matter his inclinations, his "feelings can only be described in terms of their effects" (*Confessions* 105); and Derrida, whose intelligence matters so much to the world that Bennington tries to codify it for an audience, is left bereft, asking, "why do I address her [his mother] like him, my God...you the knower" (*JD* 58). There is a lineage in these texts that can be codified for ease of research and understanding, but what each of these texts show is that memoir itself is an event in which "knowing" is beside the point of experiencing. What is memoir? *JD* teaches us that it is both an attempt to codify and our chance to recover from the codes.

Works Cited

Althusser, Louis. *The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir*. New York: New Press, 1993. Print.

Arch, Stephen Carl. *After Franklin: The Emergence of Autobiography in Post-Revolutionary America, 1780-1830*. Lebanon: New Hampshire UP, 2001. Print.

Augustine, Aurelius. "Augustine Preaches On The Feast Of SS Perpetua and Felicitas." *Medieval Saints: A Reader*. Ed. Mary-Ann Stouck. Trans. W.H. Shewring. Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999. 39-42. Print.

- . *Confessions*. Trans. F.J. Sheed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993. Print.
- . *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Trans. John K. Ryan. New York: Image Books, 1998. Print.
- Brosman, Catharine Savage. "Autobiography and the Complications of Postmodernism and Feminism." *The Sewanee Review* 113.1 (2005): 96-107. Print.
- Bruss, Elizabeth W. *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976. Print.
- . Review of *The Failing Distance: The Autobiographical Impulse in John Ruskin* by Jay Fellows; *Private Chronicles: Study of English Diaries* by Robert A. Fothergill; *A Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss* by Jeffrey Mehlman. *MLN* 91.4 (1976): 764-70. Print.
- Castelli, Elizabeth. *Martyrdom and Memory*. New York: Columbia UP, 2007. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*. Trans. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993. Print.
- . "Faith and Knowledge." *Acts of Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 42-101. Print.
- . *Learning to Live Finally*. Trans. Pascal-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Hoboken: Melville, 2007. Print.
- . *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998. Print.
- . *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques and Geoffrey Bennington. *Jacques Derrida*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1993. Print.
- Eakin, Paul John. *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*. Wisconsin: Wisconsin UP, 1991. Print.
- . "Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration." *Biography* 24.1 (2001): 113-127. Print.
- . "Living Autobiographically." *Biography* 28.1 (2005): 1-14. Print.
- . "The Referential Aesthetic of Autobiography." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 23.2 (1990): 129-144. Print.
- . "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?" *Narrative* 12.2 (2004): 121-32. Print.

-
- Elliot, Stephen. "The Problem With The Problem With Memoir." *The Rumpus*, 3 Jan. 2013. Web. 15 March 2014.
- Genzlinger, Neil. "The Problem With Memoirs." *The New York Times* 28 Jan. 2011. Web. 10 March 2014.
- Gilmore, Leigh. "A Lover's Discourse: Identity/Body Politics in Self-Representation." *Autobiographics*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994. 148-62. Print.
- . "American Neoconfessional: Memoir, Self-help, and Redemption on Oprah's Couch." *Biography* 33.4 (Fall 2010): 657-79. Print.
- . "Jurisdictions: 'I, Rigoberta Menchú', 'the Kiss', and Scandalous Self-Representation in the Age of Memoir and Trauma." *Signs* 28.2 (2003): 695-718. Print.
- . *The Limits of Autobiography*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001. Print.
- . "Representing Gender in Medieval Mysticism." *Autobiographics*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994. 131-47. Print.
- Jay, Paul. "What's the use?: Critical Theory and the Study of Autobiography." *Biography* 10.1 (1987): 39-54. Print.
- Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Trans. Barry Windeatt. London: Penguin, 1986. Print.
- Kronick, Joseph. "Philosophy as Autobiography: The Confessions of Jacques Derrida." *Modern Language Notes: Comparative Literature Issue* 115.5 (2000): 997-1018. Print.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "Autobiography in the Third Person." *New Literary History* 9.1 (1977): 27-50. Print.
- . *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989. Print.
- Loesberg, Jonathan. "Autobiography as Genre, Act of Consciousness, Text." *Prose Studies* 4.2 (1981): 169-85. Print.
- Lowe, Lisa. "Autobiography Out of Empire." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 13.1 (2009): 98-111. Print.

-
- Mendelsohn, Daniel. "But Enough About Me: What Does the Popularity of Memoirs Tell Us About Ourselves?" *The New Yorker*, 25 Jan. 2012: n. pag. Web. 15 July 2012.
- Olney, James, ed. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. Print.
- "The Passion of SS. Perpetua and Felicitas." Trans. H.R. Musurillo. *Medieval Saints: A Reader*. Ed. Mary-Ann Stouck. Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999. 21-32. Print.
- Regard, Frédéric. *Mapping the Self: Space, Identity, Discourse in British Auto/Biography*. St Etienne: U of St Etienne P, 2003. Print.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Confessions*. Trans. J.M. Cohen. London: Penguin, 1953. Print.
- . *On the Origin of Languages*. Chicago: Chicago UP 1986. Print.
- Slater, Lauren. *Lying*. New York: Penguin, 2001. Print.
- Smith, Robert. *Derrida and Autobiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie. "Constructing Truth in Lying Mouths: Truth-telling in Women's Autobiography." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 23.2 (1990): 145-63. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography*. Minnesota: Minnesota UP, 2001. Print.
- . "Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices." *Women, Autobiography, Theory*. Wisconsin: Wisconsin UP: 1998. 3-56. Print.
- Spicer, Jakki. "The Author is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual." *Criticism* 47.3 (2005): 387-403. Print.
- Volpe, Laurie. Review of *Jacques Derrida* by Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida. *French Review* 69.1 (1995): 166-67. Print.
- Yagoda, Ben. "A Brief History of Memoir-Bashing." *Slate*, 30 March 2007. Web. 14 July 2012.
- . *Memoir: A History*. New York: Riverhead, 2009. Print.