In reading an excerpt from Rousseau’s *Confessions* we are encountering a foundational text in the history of life writing. In her discussion of the *Confessions*, literary critic Linda Anderson illuminates the important role Rousseau played in defining life writing in secular culture. Unlike St Augustine, who wrote his *Confessions* in A.D. 397 and addressed them to God, Rousseau wrote his *Confessions* for the public audience to whom he felt he needed to justify and explain himself. This was a significant shift, and the use of life writing by public figures as a means of ‘setting the story straight’ or offering their perspectives on intellectual and political debates continues to this day (see, for example, Clinton). (Information about Rousseau as a public and intellectual figure can be found at: http://www.iep.utm.edu/rousseau/).

In the opening pages of her discussion, Anderson makes some important points about the *Confessions*, the most important of which is how Rousseau has influenced the question of truth in autobiographical writing:

> Truth for Rousseau becomes conflated with truthfulness, the non-verifiable intention of honesty on the part of the author. Truth, therefore, can never be established once and for all, but can only be presented in terms of the constant reiteration of avowals and disclaimers by Rousseau himself (44).

Here, of course, we see the historical forebear of Steven Colbert’s “truthiness” (see Miller, 538) and the inception of the problem that has defined autobiography as a genre since Rousseau. As a Romantic, Rousseau valued the individual, emotional perspective on the world, and the self, above the objective position put forward by Enlightenment thinking (look up the entry on Romanticism in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* if you need a refresher on either movement): “There is, for Rousseau, no higher form of knowledge than feeling” (44), and whether or not feeling, and the knowledge that stems from it, is knowledge worth sharing is central to the controversies and disappointments stemming from the rise of “confessional culture” (see Miller, 541).

Anderson’s discussion also highlights other genre traits introduced by Rousseau, which have equally defined life writing in literary and popular culture. She notes his “prolonged and insistent” focus on communicating the “truth” about himself (46), and his belief in the fullness of his knowledge of himself, which he believes he can simply transfer into writing. Rousseau is not writing to get to know himself better, he is writing to communicate all he knows to be true about himself to his audience (44–46), and this approach dominated life writing for a number of centuries (see Smith and Watson). There is also Rousseau’s unshakeable belief in his own uniqueness, his difference from others (47), which as Miller and Anderson observe, is perhaps Rousseau’s most influential legacy to the generations of life writers following him, such
as the disgraced James Frey.

This model of life writing, founded on self-knowledge, the communication of truth, and uniqueness, remains dominant; however, Anderson – referencing Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida – points out that a counter view of life writing has emerged in light of the influence of post-structuralism. (Post-structuralism is associated with theorists including Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler). Such a view examines how the self is constructed through the act of life writing, despite the author’s insistence that his writing is merely communicating what he knows about himself.

This approach is exemplified in Paul de Man’s suggestion that it is actually the opportunity to expose shame that motivates Rousseau when he tells the story of the stolen ribbon, rather than a desire to confess his role in Marion’s dismissal from her position. In this approach, the act (and the pleasure) of confession – a kind of exhibitionism – is the true motivation for the writing, and the communication and depiction of Rousseau’s “real” self is merely the ruse for such an elicit pleasure.

Discussion question

Consider the question of self-knowledge. Develop a position on whether life writing communicates a self that exists outside the text, or constructs a version of the self through the writing process itself.

Are you swayed by de Man’s argument that Rousseau is not actually confessing, but constructing an opportunity to draw pleasure from revealing shame? Is the ‘real’ focus of all life writing actually the “drama of the self”? (see Anderson, 49–51)

Writing exercise (optional)

Think of an event or moment from your childhood which has the potential to be shaped into an ‘exemplary’ narrative, a story which epitomises something about you, or which represents a key moment in your development (where you learned something, lost a belief forever, or had your ideas challenged or changed). Using Rousseau as a model, write up this event into an anecdote of development of a few hundred words in length.

Write about the ribbon incident from Marion’s perspective.

Works cited:

