

Truth in Autobiography: A Comparative Study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*
and Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

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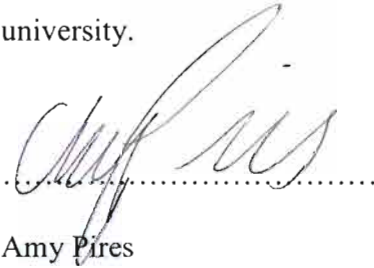
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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own work and that all acknowledgments have been properly made. It has not been previously submitted for any degree in any other university.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Amy Pires', is written over a horizontal dotted line.

Amy Pires

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Abstract

This dissertation studies understandings, definitions and uses of truth in autobiography, looking specifically at Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* and Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. In order for a text to be considered an autobiography some concept of truthfulness is necessary; however, truth is not always objective and verifiable. Concepts of absolute truth, factual truth, personal truth and essential truth impede a simple understanding of the notion of truth. Furthermore, different circumstances and contexts may affect our understanding and application of concepts of truth. In his autobiography Rousseau claims he will tell the truth as best he can while Eggers states that part of his work is exaggerated or fabricated. Nevertheless, both are classified as autobiographical accounts, thus implicitly claiming that they are representing truths. As some concept of truth is necessary in order for a text to be considered autobiographical, readers' expectations of autobiography will include an expectation of how concepts of truth will be deployed. While readers may accept inadvertent inaccuracies due to faulty memory, deliberate misinformation will not be accepted. Readers expect that the information and events chronicled in the autobiography will be those that best depict the person of the autobiographer. In my dissertation I will look at how Rousseau and Eggers deploy the truth of themselves and their experiences and how this deployment of truth seeks to direct the readers' response to the texts.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter one: Levels of truth in autobiography.....	11
Chapter 2: Understandings of truth in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's <i>Confessions</i>	28
Chapter 3: <i>A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius</i> – Dave Eggers' understandings of and applications of truth.....	45
Chapter 4: Reader-orientated theory – author's manipulation of their readers.....	62
Conclusion	81
Bibliography.....	87

Introduction

The notion of truth is essential to the study of autobiography. As autobiography is classified as a non-fiction genre and as truth is crucial to the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, any text which claims to be autobiographical must subscribe to some concept of truthfulness. However despite, or perhaps because of, the fundamental expectation that truth will be adhered to in some form, the notion, status and complexity of the concept of truth in autobiographical studies has not been as fully explored or developed as one might expect. In neither the *Encyclopedia of Women's Autobiography* (2005) edited by Victoria Boynton and Jo Malin nor the two volume *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (2004) edited by Margaretta Jolly is there an entry for "truth". The *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, however, does include entries on "Authenticity" and "Authority". G. Thomas Couser states that "the authority of biography would depend mainly on the relation of the text and the life of its subject" (2001:73). He differentiates between authority and authenticity, stating that

authority is primarily a question of the relation between the text and the extra textual world – veracity – while authenticity is essentially a matter of the relation between the text and its putative source – provenance.
(Couser, 2001: 72)

These entries cover two aspects of truth; authority deals primarily with the factual truth of the text, while authenticity looks at the sincerity of the author. However, these entries cover only two aspects of the concept of truth in its entirety is more complex, encompassing as it does concepts of absolute truth, factual truth, personal truth and essential truth. The many aspects of truth impede a simple understanding of the notion of truth. Furthermore, different circumstances and contexts may affect our understanding

and application of concepts of truth. In some instances factual veracity is of paramount importance; in other cases this may be subordinate to the sincerity of the account.

Although autobiographical texts must necessarily adhere in some way to a form of truthfulness, the heterogeneity, the diverse expectations and various limitations of the genre must be considered when exploring the notion of truth in autobiography.

Autobiography is a portrayal of life and as such can only present partial view of a metaphoric representation of a life. It is therefore necessary to examine how the author understands the notion of truth, how notions of truth are influenced or shaped by the limits and demands of the structure of the text and of autobiography as a genre. In addition to this the potential reader's expectations of the application of truth in autobiography will influence whether or not the text is deemed to be truthful.

In order to explore these notions of truth I will compare two autobiographies in terms of their authors' understanding and use of truth. The first text I shall be looking at is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (first published in 1781). This is a foundational, canonical text and Rousseau is widely acknowledged as the founder of modern autobiography. Rousseau's explicit understanding of truth is fairly simplistic: "I may omit or transpose facts, or make mistakes in dates; but I cannot go wrong about what I have felt, or about what my feelings have led me to do; and these are the chief subjects of my story" (Rousseau, 1953: 262). Thus Rousseau indicates that while he may make mistakes in transcribing facts he shall be faithful to his emotions and personal truth. The second text I shall look at is Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2007). Eggers' understanding of truth in his autobiography is less simplistic than

Rousseau's; he states: "For all the author's bluster elsewhere, this is not, actually, a work of pure non-fiction. Many parts have been fictionalized in varying degrees, for various purposes" (Eggers, 2007: ix). I have decided to compare these two texts, written two hundred years apart, as both claim to be autobiographical and therefore to reveal some form of truth about the author; the author's however, employ different means of conveying this truth and therefore illustrate the different deployments of truth which may be found in autobiography. It is this difference which forms the basis of the textual comparison. The claim of both texts to be autobiographical means that the reader's response to, and expectation of, both autobiography and of truth are informed by and, in some cases, deviate from the authors' explicit claims of truthfulness

In chapter one I shall look at the different types of truth. Absolute truth is assumed to have a transcendent, transcultural, transhistorical meaning. Although autobiographers may use their autobiographies to point to an absolute truth, the purpose of autobiography in general is to show the more personal truth of the author's experiences. The two types of truth which are most easily identified in autobiography are microscopic truth and deliberative truth, as defined by Alex Boraine and Janet Levy,. Microscopic truth looks at factual veracity while deliberative truth is the subjective truth of experience. But there is a third kind of truth which readers of autobiography may often seek, and that is essential truth; this is the deeper truth which exists beyond the reality of things or events as a person experiences them. This is not the same as absolute truth, for essential truth is a truth which is specific to an individual or community or event or era. Unlike absolute truth, it does not transcend such particularities. The point, though, is that truth is a

complex concept; the autobiographer, nevertheless, makes an implicit claim for the truthfulness of his¹ work, no matter how difficult that truth-value is to ascertain. Thus the reader will not accept a deliberately deceitful account and will, moreover, consciously or unconsciously, look for other truths such as deliberative truth and essential truth.

The autobiographical author sets out to record his experiences as faithfully as possible; in order to do so he must translate lived experience into verbal (and sometimes but not in the case of Rousseau or Eggers, also pictorial or photographic) text. There are many issues to consider here in relation to truthfulness. Firstly, the experiences which the autobiographer relates have been mediated through learnt and culturally specific social values, so whose truth is it? Secondly, the translation of event into text has consequences for the author's ability to faithfully and accurately report his experience. Putting what he remembers and feels into words requires the autobiographer to use language, a non-neutral medium. Linguistic practices dictate that the text will never be more than a linguistic approximation of lived events; Elbaz states that "one always speaks from a linguistic-metaphoric reality" (1988:198).. Just as these practices impact on the ability of the autobiographer to depict his life faithfully and accurately, so too do the structural limitations imposed upon experience when the autobiographer sets out to translate it into a coherent text.

¹ As the autobiographers analysed in this text are male I shall use the generic male pronoun to refer to the autobiographer. In the interest of fairness I shall use the generic female pronoun to refer to the reader.

As a published text autobiography must subscribe to certain constraints; the author must decide on the content and construction of his text; recollected experience must be shaped into a structured text of manageable length. These are not, however, the only constraints faced by the autobiographer; he must also bear in mind the expectations of both the publisher and the potential reader. In doing this he must conform to expectations of privacy and normative behaviour. Thus the text is influenced further by the social context in which it is written. This makes it necessary for the reader to read the autobiography in the context in which it was written.

Another obstacle standing between the autobiographer and an accurate, sincere account of his life is the fact he recounts his experiences from memory, which is notoriously inexact. It may be argued that in remembering an event the author is able to see the experience in its entirety and place it in context. However, in doing so the autobiographer may be giving the reader an account of how his present self views past events rather than allowing the reader to see the events as he experienced them at the time. Furthermore, memory is itself structured by cultural imperatives and norms: what we remember, and how we remember, are shaped by the socio-cultural milieus in which we live. The structures and limitations placed upon an autobiographical text mean that the autobiography will be a poor factual representation of a life. However, autobiography is more than a collection of verifiable facts; rather it is the representation of a man's being and his experiences of life as only he can know and tell them. This means that the microscopic, or factual, truth of the text is subordinate to the deliberative, or personal, truth. As the aim of autobiography is to allow the reader to see the true self of the author,

it may be argued that the autobiographer cannot, in this case, lie, as any lie will characterize the autobiography and therefore point to an essential truth of the author. (Smith and Watson, 2001: 12).

In chapter two I look at Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. Rousseau's decision to shape his autobiography in the form of a confession is significant as the motive of a confession is to tell an essential – and shameful – truth about the self. Rousseau claims that his *Confessions* were written in order to reveal the truth of his life; he claims he will tell what I am here referring to as the microscopic truth of his life, as accurately as he is able, as well as the deliberative (or subjective) truth of his experiences. He is quite clear, however, that he deems deliberative truth to be of more importance than the mere facts of existence. He thus claims that he shall not deliberately deceive the reader and that any mistakes he makes in relaying factual information are unintentional and, ultimately, unimportant as they will not impair the reader's understanding of his true self.

Although Rousseau uses a confessional framework, he departs from traditional models in his choice of confessor; he neither confesses to, nor asks absolution from, God, but rather he confesses to man. Rousseau assigns to man the role of judging him, but more than that, he expects to be pardoned by his confessor. This has an impact on the notion of truth in Rousseau's autobiography for Rousseau's confessor is not omnipotent and must rely on the information Rousseau chooses to reveal. Rousseau is aware of his reader and ends his text with a bitter account of a disappointing reaction he receives from an initial reading of portions of his *Confessions*. The purpose of his text therefore appears to be to

elicit love and understanding. This may impact on the honesty of his work as he is no longer attempting to reveal an assailable truth about himself to a confessor who cannot be manipulated but rather he is looking for absolution and love. The complex motives which govern Rousseau's work therefore undermine simple notions of truth.

Further complicating Rousseau's claim to truth is the fact that Rousseau does not simply use the text to confess his crimes; he also uses it to explain and excuse himself.

Rousseau, through his explanations and justifications, seeks to manipulate the reader's response. Rousseau's complex motives and attempts to manipulate his reader's response compromise his claim to relate the experiences of his life faithfully and, as far as possible, accurately. However, Rousseau does make an implicit claim for a range of truths, the importance of which he hierarchises. Just as factual truth is subordinate to deliberative truth, Rousseau implies that all truths are subordinate to what he considers the greatest truth – that Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a good man. This, of course, characterises Rousseau and allows the reader to see an essential truth of Rousseau – which is that he wished to be loved and understood, and saw himself as worthy of such affections.

Published 219 years later and in contemporary America, Dave Eggers' autobiography *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, like Rousseau's *Confessions*, aims to tell the story of Eggers' life. Unlike Rousseau, whose explicit claims to tell the truth indicate a fairly simple notion of truth, Eggers' postmodern text explores the complexities of the nature of truth in autobiography. He opens his text with a lengthy introduction

comprising “Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of This Book”, a Preface, an Acknowledgments and an elaborate Table of Contents, all of which are aimed at drawing the reader’s attention to the difficulties imposed by the textual structure and autobiographical expectations upon an accurate and honest representation of experience. Eggers uses his introduction to explain to the reader the ways in which he works both within, and reacts against, autobiographical conventions. Eggers subscribes to autobiographical conventions as he narrates the events of his life, explaining, justifying and interpreting his actions in order to allow the reader an insight into his experience of life. However, in order to allow the reader to understand his experiences of certain events Eggers at times knowingly presents a factually inaccurate account of these experiences. In this way Eggers purposely misrepresents microscopic truth in order to tell the deliberative truth of his experiences. Thus Eggers uses falsifications to tell a personal truth. By drawing the reader’s attention to the considered inaccuracies in his text, Eggers shows he is not trying to deceive the reader and therefore, in spite of deliberate prevarications, is not being dishonest. Eggers, by drawing attention to these falsehoods, attempts to show the hypocrisy of claiming to tell the truth through a medium which can never convey the unmediated truth.

The notion of truth in autobiography is affected not only by the author’s understanding of truth but also by the reader’s expectations of the text. In chapter four I shall look at reader-orientated theory which argues that the meaning of the text is never self-formulated; the reader must produce meaning through her interaction with the textual material. The reader’s expectations of the text will influence her understanding of the

text; these expectations are partially governed by the genre to which the text belongs, and, of course, by the reader's understanding of generic convention. One of the fundamental expectations the reader has of an autobiographical text is that it will conform to some measure of truthfulness.

A fundamental part of the writing process is the creation of an implied author and an implied reader. The implied author is the persona of the real author that is created by and in the reading process, while the implied reader is the image created by the author of his reader (Booth cited in Davis and Womack, 2002:56). The reader's perception of the author is therefore determined by the implied author which is a reconstructed image of the material person. Thus the creation of the implied author and the implied reader allow the real author, the autobiographer in this case, to direct or guide, to an extent, the reader's response. This manipulation may, in turn, impact on the sincerity and the accuracy of the author's implicit claim to depict his identity utterly truthfully.

The discrepancies between the narrator, the protagonist and the implied author indicate that Rousseau attempts to influence the reader's response and to depict himself not as he is but as he wishes to be seen. Rousseau also uses his implied reader to direct his real reader's response. He ostensibly expects his reader to judge him, but the standards by which he requires his reader to judge him are not the reader's standards, nor are they objective ones – he demands to be judged according to his own standards.

Eggers, like Rousseau, creates an image of the reader whom he believes will read his text. However, unlike Rousseau, Eggers does not explicitly appeal to his reader for approval. Rather he, at times, uses the implied reader to establish an unfavourable comparison to show his own superiority. His attitude to his reader is, however, ambivalent. He alternates between raging at the reader and implicitly asking his reader for reassurance.

The reader is directed in her response to the text, not only by the implied author and the implied reader, but also by the context in which the autobiography is written. The author writes within specific cultural, historical and linguistic contexts; the reader therefore must attempt to read the text in terms of these contexts. Rousseau is influenced by the literary conventions of portraiture which was a well-established literary practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Mariner, 1992). The conventions of portraiture are at odds with Rousseau's claim to create an honest and accurate portrait of himself, thus the extent to which he complies with the expectations of the context in which he writes may affect the honesty of his work. Eggers is also influenced by the context in which he writes. Working within a postmodern framework he questions the ability of autobiography to ever be able to accurately or honestly represent a life.

When exploring the notion of truth in autobiography it is necessary to look at the context in which the reader reads the work as well as the context in which the author writes. The difference between the context of the author and the reader, particularly the difference between the modern context in which the reader reads and the eighteenth-century context in which Rousseau writes, may influence the reader's perceptions of the text. The

distance afforded the reader from Rousseau's text means that she may infer meanings that are at odds with the author's intention. On the other hand, the difference in contexts may allow the reader to understand more clearly the wider circumstances of the events Rousseau records.

The meanings of the text are determined by the reader's understanding, which, in turn is informed by the reader's expectations. As one of the most fundamental expectations of autobiography is that the text will, on some level, subscribe to truthfulness, it is necessary to look at those circumstances which affect the reader's interpretation and expectations.

Chapter one: Levels of truth in autobiography.

Definitions, understandings and uses of truth have, over time, proved problematic. The acknowledgment of different types of truth impedes a simple understanding of the notion of truth. However, despite the difficulties in defining, understanding and using truth, the autobiographer must subscribe to some measure of truthfulness. Thus it is necessary when studying autobiography to look at the deployment of truth in the text.

The notion of truth is often assumed to have an absolute, transcultural, transhistorical meaning, which may be defined as “a transcendent fundamental or spiritual reality” (Merriam-Webster online dictionary) . Absolute truth, it follows, is believed to be constant and to exist regardless of human understanding or belief. As it exists independently of human understanding absolute truth is objective; however, it is also unverifiable as humans can only understand reality through mediated means, therefore a truth which refers to a supreme, unmediated reality can never be verified. Thus absolute truth may be disputed as it can never be proved. An example of absolute truth would be that human life has value; although this cannot be proved and some may not believe it, in most cultures the intrinsic value of human life is undisputed.

As an autobiography is the record by an individual of his life experience, absolute truth would be impossible to determine. Some authors, however, do claim that their autobiographies point to absolute truths; St. Augustine, for example, uses his autobiography to point to the absolute truth of God’s goodness and grace. However, he

does not claim to reveal the absolute truth of his own life, but rather to use his subjective story to point to the absolute truth of Christian faith. A more complex reading of the concept of truth is therefore required, one which takes into consideration the truth of experience. Truth may be defined as “conformity with fact” or “accuracy” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989). This definition equates truth with factual accuracy and freedom from error. According to this definition, a “truthful” autobiography would present the facts of the author’s life accurately. However, this definition does not take into account any truth which cannot be factually verifiable. In their book *Dealing with the Past* Alex Boraine and Janet Levy identified two kinds of truth:

First, ‘microscope truth’ that is ‘factual, verifiable and can be documented’. Second, deliberate truth, that is, ‘dialogue truth’ or ‘social truth, the truth of experience that is established through interaction, discussion and debate’. (Cited in Leman-Langlois and Shearing, 2004: 6)

Thus we can immediately see that although microscopic truth has a fixed, verifiable meaning, deliberative truth, as the truth of experience, cannot exist independently of human understanding. Furthermore, as each human experience is unique, and as human relationships change, deliberative truth cannot have a fixed meaning.

The notion of deliberative truth is explored by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which identifies three sub-divisions of deliberative truth. The first of these is “personal and narrative truth”, which “may or may not be corroborated or factually exact but it is representative of victims’ perceptions of their personal context” (Leman-Langlois and Shearing, 2004: 6). This definition is, of course, particular to the context of the TRC; if “personal and narrative truth” were to be placed in a general context it would refer to the

perception of an individual's personal situation, which may or may not be corroborated or proved to be factually correct. It is clear that the truth may be considered to be 'truth' even if it is not factually accurate. The second form of deliberative truth is "social truth" which recognizes "as a matter of fact that in the past there [have] been different public views" (Leman-Langlois and Shearing, 2004: 6). Social truth acknowledges that even if people were to experience the same things, their perceptions of those events would differ. As the truth of a perception can only be measured by the sincerity of the belief in it, the acknowledgment of the validity of differing perceptions undermines the concept of a fixed, knowable truth. "Healing and restorative truth" refers to the way in which the TRC handled deliberative truth; by acknowledging the truth of the victims' experiences the commission sought to restore victims' dignity and promote reconciliation through forgiveness (Leman-Langlois and Shearing, 2004: 6). "Healing and restorative truth" thus acknowledges the validity of the deliberative truth of the victims' experiences, even if that truth is not accurate or differs from the accounts of others. Therefore to accept the existence of deliberative truth is to accept that some truths, at least, are not factually verifiable but are derived from experience and understanding. In these cases factual accuracy cannot be used to determine truthfulness.

In order to understand the truth of experience or understanding our definition of truth needs to be expanded to include some concept of honesty, faithfulness or sincerity which assumes that truth will be free from deceit or hypocrisy. In order to be judged "truthful" the author of deliberative truth cannot make statements he believes to be false; he must

relate events as he knows them to have happened. Truth, therefore, needs to be judged both in terms of freedom from factual errors, as well as freedom from deceit.

Microscopic and deliberative truth point to another type of truth – essential truth.

Essential truth is the truth which lies beyond facts or perceptions; essential truth is the deeper truth which facts and perceptions point to. Essential truth is the truth which lies beyond the appearance of events and how we experience them; this is the truth that is not immediately apparent but is the deeper meaning which can be seen on reflection. Unlike absolute truth, essential truth is specific to an individual, community, event or era. The ways in which a person understands and conveys microscopic and deliberative truth indicate an essential truth of that person and their character.

In order to be considered autobiographical the basis of the text must be truthful. Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (1989: 4). Lejeune goes on to define the relationship between the autobiographical author and the reader as a contract. Two things are implied in this contract: the first part is that the author, narrator and protagonist are one and the same; that is the vital statistics of the author, such as date and place of birth, education and so forth are identical to those of the narrator, who is also the protagonist of the text. The second part of the contract is that there exists an implied “pact” between the author and the publisher attesting to the truth of the signature (1995: 8). Thus when an author places his or her signature on a text which he claims is an autobiography he is attesting to tell

the story of himself, as he knows himself. A claim, therefore, “is made for the truth-value of the autobiographer’s reports – no matter how difficult that truth-value might be to ascertain” (Bruss in Elbaz, 1988: 5).

The autobiographical author is expected, by the implicit conditions of the autobiographical pact, to deliver a faithful and accurate account of his life. Paul John Eakin claims that, “while we may well have the right to tell our life stories, we do so under constraints; we are governed by rules, and we can expect to be held accountable to others for breaking them” (2001: 114). He goes on to identify the “misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth” (2001: 114-115) as a transgression of the rules that govern autobiography; therefore, a deliberately inaccurate autobiography will not be accepted. Eakin looks at two examples of autobiographies that misrepresent biographical and historical truth: Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* and Rigoberta Menchú’s *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Eakin notes that Wilkomirski’s autobiography tells of his experiences of Majdanek and Auschwitz; it was later discovered, however, that he was not in fact a survivor of the Nazi death camps but had spent the war years in a Swiss children’s home (Eakin, 2001: 117). Menchú’s autobiography has also been proven by David Stoll to misrepresent biographical facts, as she could not have experienced several of the events she claims to have witnessed or experienced firsthand (Eakin, 2001: 116). While both of these autobiographies are factually inaccurate, Wilkomirski’s narrative was completely discredited by these revelations while Menchú’s work was deemed to still be of some merit. Eakin argues that this is because

[Menchú’s] large-scale facts were accurate even if she was guilty of representing the testimony of others as her own. For another, her

motive for doing so, the creation of effective propaganda supporting an oppressed people, seems understandable, legitimate, and even admirable.

Wilkomirski's facts, on the other hand, didn't check out. He proved to be an impostor. (2001:117)

Therefore Wilkomirski completely transgresses both principles of truth: factual accuracy and sincerity. He presents complete fabrications as truth, and he does so knowingly.

Menchú's case, on the other hand, is more complex. Writing some time before the Menchú and Wilkomirski controversies, Roy Pascal argues that "there is no rule-of-thumb procedure to judge of these omissions or distortions. All of them damage the historical or psychological truth of autobiography; but they may not damage the true value of the autobiography" (1960: 67). Menchú claims her autobiography is "also the testimony of my people ... My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people" (1992: 1). Thus while Menchú's falsehoods damage the historical truth of her autobiography some essential truth is adhered to as she implicitly claims to be telling the story of a community. Although her information is not factually correct, the events she describes were, or could have been, experienced by other people in her community. Therefore she succeeds in representing the life of a

Guatemalan Indian. This justification holds true too for her transgression of sincerity;

Stoll proved Menchú could not have experience all the events she claims to have.

However, in relating events that were, or could have been, experienced by those close to her, she is able to relate an accurate picture of the life of a Guatemalan Indian.

The example of Menchú's testimony serves to highlight the complexity of truth in autobiography. Truth may be determined by the accuracy of facts, as well as the honesty and sincerity of the autobiographer in his representation; however, the reader also needs

to take into account the structure and nature of autobiography, which may hinder the factual and sincere representation of experiences. Menchú's goal was to present to the world a representative account of the life of a Guatemalan Indian. However, the nature of autobiography, notably the implicit claim that all the events described were experienced by the author firsthand, impedes her goal as Menchú's personal experiences were not those typically experienced by a Guatemalan Indian. By claiming as her own the experiences that other members of her community may have lived through, she is able to fulfill her goal. It is therefore necessary to look at the elements of autobiographical writing that impact on the autobiographer's ability to report his experiences as accurately and faithfully as possible.

The reader expects the autobiographer to set out, as faithfully as possible, his own experiences. In order to do this he must undertake to translate lived experiences into text. It is here that the autobiographer encounters a problem with reporting his experiences faithfully, for the account of the autobiographer's life that the reader has access to will always be mediated through culture and language. According to Robert Elbaz: "[any] meaningful statement in no way duplicates reality; it constructs it. For language is functional to the ideological position of the speaking subject, and 'reality' is the creation of this same subject" (1988: 8-9). According to this argument experience is mediated; an individual can only understand his life through learnt, and culturally specific, social values. Thus the autobiographer may be said to construct 'reality', which means that although the author may believe he reports the truth, he is unable to objectively verify his experiences.

The experiences related in an autobiography are mediated through linguistic practices as well as cultural values. The reader cannot relive the life of the author; the only way to “experience” it is through the autobiographer’s retelling, and as “one always speaks from a linguistic-metaphoric reality” (Elbaz, 1988: 14) the autobiography will always be a linguistic approximation of lived experiences. In the same way that the life the autobiographer writes is a linguistic representation of the real life he has lived, the written ‘I’ can only ever be a linguistic image of the real author; the material person of the autobiographer cannot be translated literally into text (Coullie, 1991: 3).

Autobiography is not only mediated through culture and language, it is also mediated through the structural limitations imposed upon the transformation of lived experiences into a coherent text. According to James Olney neither the *autos* nor the *bios* existed – complete, defined, known – before the autobiography was written (1998: 22). It has already been argued that the *autos*, the written ‘I’, is a narrative reflection of the material person of the author, and that the *bios*, the written life, is an approximation of the lived experiences. In life writing, then, both the *autos* and the *bios* exist only as components of the verbal construct. The written life is further hampered in its attempt to accurately convey the experiences of a real life by the necessity of structure. Generally, the readers of an autobiography expect the text to take the form of a coherent and logical narrative. Thus, in order to write his autobiography the author “reassembles scattered elements of his individual life and regroups them into a comprehensive sketch” (Gusdorf, 1980: 35). This is where the structure of autobiography comes into conflict with the aim of

autobiography to represent the author's life as objectively as possible, for a person's life and the manifold experiences which construct it do not always follow logical or coherent narrative frames. According to Pascal: "The linear narrative format of the autobiography imposes a distortion on the truth" (1960: 78). He uses the example of André Gide's autobiography to illustrate his point: "He found himself forced to write in separate sections of his religious, intellectual, and emotive development, though he was conscious that they all occurred together as one process" (Pascal, 1960: 78). Even if the author's autobiography does not follow a coherent narrative, the form of the text will inevitably act upon the content. The form of Roland Barthes' autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* is non-narrative; the author opens his autobiography with a series of photographs followed by titled fragments which he arranges alphabetically. Although this autobiography is not a narrative text, Barthes' account of his life is still constrained and mediated by the form he imposes upon it. Therefore in order to write an autobiography the author shapes his experiences to fit a textual framework – be this narrative or otherwise.

Autobiography, as a text, must be structured. The autobiographer must decide on a number of issues, such as:

[What] events are to be selected? Whose point of view is to be privileged? How will the textual construction of the events be achieved: through prose or poetry, narrative or impressionistic segments loosely connected, in language accessible to a small group or to many...? (Coullie, 1991: 17)

In order to answer these questions the autobiographer must fit recollected experience into some kind of design, and, as such, may compromise the faithful retelling of his

experiences. The reader of an autobiography understands that the author will not be able to relate every event in his life, even if he were able to recall everything, and therefore the reader is aware that what she reads is a selection of incidents and experiences from the author's life. But the mere fact that the author must select certain experiences to represent his entire life defeats the autobiographer's claim to faithful presentation of his life.

To give the truth about oneself has always been the aim of autobiography, but from Augustine himself, who 'toiled' at re-collecting the past, it has been realised that this means selection, discrimination. And selection, in its turn, implies some principle. (Pascal, 1960: 61)

The autobiographer will have his own reasons for writing his life story – be it to leave a record of his life for posterity, to correct a misconception or to write an apologia or confession – and this purpose will influence the occurrences the author chooses to represent his life. As the autobiographer is always subjective it may be argued that he will not necessarily choose those events of his life that best represent the whole to recount in his autobiography, but rather those experiences that best suit his purpose in telling his life story.

When selecting the events he will include in his autobiography the author must bear in mind the expectations of the publisher, as well as the potential readers. This will influence the author's selection of experiences: as Eakin points out, life stories are told under constraints (2001: 114), and there are consequences to breaking the socially determined rules of autobiography. Eakin identifies the misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth as transgressions of the rules of autobiography; however, he also goes

on to identify two other transgressions: “infringement of the right to privacy; and ... failure to display normative models of personhood” (2001:113-114). It is not always possible for the autobiographer to represent the biographical and historical truth of his life at the same time as respecting the privacy rights of others or representing normative models of personhood. While the reader expects the autobiographer to represent his life honestly, society expects the autobiographer, to a degree, to conform to expectations of privacy and normative behaviour. Thus the author may not be free to include or fully explore certain events of his life which infringe on privacy or which transgress what is commonly understood to be normative behaviour. In this case the autobiographer cannot explore all the experiences of his life.

An autobiographer writes from a privileged point of view for he is telling a story that only he can – the story of his own life. But as we have seen even the autobiographer’s identity and perception of himself is mediated. The autobiographer’s identity and his view of the world and, indeed, himself are constructed through learnt and culturally-influenced social values. When reading an autobiography the reader must take into account the social, historical and cultural context of the autobiography as these contexts will shape the autobiographer’s perceptions. This in turn will influence both the subject and the structure of the autobiography. Thus autobiography is mediated through the learnt cultural norms of the autobiographer – these will shape what he perceives to be the truths of his world, himself, his life and his autobiographical enterprise; autobiography is also mediated through the structural confines of the text.

As autobiography is the story of a person's life, identity is an integral part of the text. However, "[identity] is a function of the social, and since perception is a function of identity, there can be no experience which is free of cultural and historical constraint" (Coullie, 1991: 14). Therefore, although an individual may understand himself to be "'naturally' self-produced" (Smith and Watson, 2001: 43), he is never free of the social and historical contexts within which he lives and writes. Not only is an individual's perception of himself influenced by such contexts, but his perceptions of how he should present himself to the public will also be mediated by such concerns. Thus the autobiographer's ability to convey the "story of his personality" (Lejeune, 1995: 4) in a manner that is both accurate and sincere may be compromised on two fronts – his inability to separate his identity from a social context and his inability to separate the presentation of himself from a social context. It is not only the autobiographer who is influenced by this: the reader also brings a set of culturally-informed expectations to her approach to the autobiography. According to Elbaz, "surrounding any text are implicit contextual conditions" (1988: 4); the reader will judge the text and the information contained therein against the implicit, pre-conceived and culturally determined expectations of the text. Not only will the autobiography be affected by the socially-influenced perceptions of the writer himself, the text will also be influenced by the author's conforming, to greater or lesser extent, to the reader's expectations. As these expectations, as well as the writer's perceptions, are informed by social and historical contexts it is important to "fix autobiography in the moment of writing" (Olney, 1998: 19).

Another obstacle that stands between the autobiographer and a faithful, accurate retelling of his experiences is memory. Although the author may have access to such historical sources as old letters, diaries and so on, the primary archival source of the autobiographer is his memory (Smith and Watson, 2001: 6). And memory is notoriously inexact.

According to Primo Levi:

Human memory is a marvellous but fallacious instrument. The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even increase by incorporating extraneous features. (1989: 30)

Thus the very source from which the autobiographer constructs his text is flawed as it cannot allow the autobiographer to relay his experiences accurately. For while he will have forgotten certain details, others will have been changed or been added to in his own mind. Leigh Gilmore states: “the reader and the autobiographer gaze into the unfathomability of memory and concede that the telling of lies is inextricable from the writing of memories” (1994: 70-71). The autobiographer cannot recount his experiences exactly and this means he compromises the authority, or factual accuracy, of his text.

Ultimately the information provided by memories cannot be relied upon to be accurate as not only may memories be inexact but the autobiographer’s current situation will affect the way in which he views the past. The unreliability of memories is not the only reason Gilmore’s statement may be accepted; the autobiographer writes in the present, the person he writes about – himself in the past – no longer exists, he is a different person now. “Since I am not myself, I am not the same person I was yesterday or ten years ago; given my relational nature, I cannot be writing my autobiography but the story of a variety of old ‘personae’ seen from a distance” (Elbaz, 1988: 12). Given that the

autobiographer is seeing his experiences from a distance, and is no longer the same person who experienced them, his perceptions of these experiences will have changed and as such he may be unable to accurately convey to his readers how he experienced these events and what he felt at the time.

Also standing in the way of a full and objective account of the autobiographer's past is the fact that remembering is not a passive process. "[The] remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering" (Smith and Watson, 2001: 16). The autobiographer must look back on his life and by selecting certain events he attributes to them meaning and significance that they may not have had at the time the author lived through them (Smith and Watson, 2001: 16). . Thus remembering "involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present" (Smith and Watson, 2001: 16). St. Augustine explores this notion in his *Confessions*. Olney argues that Augustine "imagines [memory] as a great reservoir, which provides the matter to be recited or narrated and which receives it back again, no doubt altered and enriched by the process of reciting, when the recitation/narration is completed" (1998: 4). In the twenty-eighth chapter of his eleventh book Augustine describes the process of reciting a Psalm. The Psalm he has learnt exists to him as a memory; once he has remembered the Psalm and prepares to recite it, there exists an expectation of the Psalm in the future as a recital. Once he has recited the Psalm it exists once more as a memory, now as the Psalm he has learnt and as the Psalm he has recited (cited in Olney, 1998: 3). Thus it may be seen that narrating events from memory is not a passive process, nor are the memories recalled unaffected by the active process of remembering. If the autobiographer is unable to recall events

exactly as they happened, is no longer the same person who experienced them and must interpret these past events in the present, the autobiographer may not be giving his readers an accurate, or unproblematically truthful, account of his life.

Gusdorf, on the other hand, agrees that the autobiographer tells his story at a remove, but he argues this remove allows the autobiographer to be more honest.

In other words, autobiography is a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it. In the immediate moment, the agitation of things ordinarily surrounds me too much for me to be able to see it in its entirety. Memory gives me a certain remove and allows me to be able to take into consideration all the ins and outs of the matter, its context in time and space. (1980: 38)

Although memory does sometimes allow the author to see the event in its entirety and place it in context, it may be argued that by doing so the autobiographer does not allow the reader to see the events as he experienced them, but rather as his present self believes they were experienced in relation to the rest of his life. This remove means that he cannot allow the reader unmediated access to his past and, as with all mediation in autobiography, this presents a challenge, if not to the autobiographer's sincerity, then to the accuracy of the recounted experience.

It is clear that although the autobiographer may aim to tell his life's story as honestly as possible, the reader will never be able to access an unmediated version of the author's experiences.

It is all very well to accept that autobiographies deal with real life experiences, which are – in intention and, as far as possible, in fact – untampered with, but when it comes to scrutinising individual texts it

becomes decidedly difficult to determine just how much ‘tampering’ has occurred. (Coullie, 1991: 1)

The autobiographer is forced into a position of occupying two roles – that of the observer and that of the observed subject – and must thus simultaneously convey external and internal views of the life being written about. According to Gusdorf this creates a divide between the autobiographer’s objective aims and subjective intentions:

There is, then, a considerable gap between the avowed plan of autobiography, which is simply to retrace the history of a life, and its deepest intentions, which are directed towards a kind of apologetics or theodicy of the individual being. (1980: 39)

It may be argued that the author’s deepest, perhaps even unconscious, aim will be to convince the reader that the world and the autobiographer are as he himself sees them.

However, an alternate argument may be offered: that the subjective, internal position which the autobiographer must assume allows him to recount the story as only he can. Autobiography, then, is not merely a collection of verifiable facts, but rather it is the representation of a man’s being and his life’s experiences as only he can know or tell them. “We do not judge an autobiography solely upon the evidence of facts but also upon the intuitive knowledge of the distinctive character of life as experienced by ourselves individually” (Elbaz, 1988: 10). Elbaz goes on to argue that although facts reported in the autobiography may be refuted, the readers’ criterion for judging the autobiographer’s honesty is whether or not the author believes what he asserts (1988: 5). This being the case, microscopic truth is subordinate to deliberative truth in autobiography. The autobiographer aims to show the reader, to the best of his ability, his

experiences of life, and how he has interpreted these experiences. According to Smith and Watson,

[autobiographers] cannot lie because anything they say, however mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not. Any utterance in an autobiographical text even if inaccurate or distorted, characterizes its writer. (2001: 12)

Therefore, the autobiographer allows the reader to see his true self simply by telling his life story, for even if the autobiographer lies, his lies distinguish his personality. By the very means of mediation that obstruct his aim of allowing the reader to objectively observe his experiences, he allows the reader to discern the type of person he is by noting how he structures his text, how he chooses to convey his experiences, what he chooses to include and how he views himself. Thus it may be said that while an autobiographer may never present an objective, historically accurate account of his life, he must present the subjective truth of himself.

The concept of truth in autobiography is problematic. The constraints placed upon the text by memory, as well as social and textual mediation, mean that the text is possibly a poor representation of the author's experience of life. However, the highest aim of the autobiographer is to present to the reader an accurate picture of the man he is. In this case, although the autobiographer is expected to adhere to microscopic or factual truth as accurately as possible, it is deliberative or social truth that is the most important truth in autobiography. The author, by placing his signature on the text, pledges to convey to the reader, to the best of his ability, the truths about person who has experienced the events described. Even a factually flawed autobiography reveals truths about the autobiographer.

Chapter 2: Understandings of truth in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau claims to fulfill the highest aim of autobiography – to display to the world an accurate image of the man he was. It is this statement which opens his *Confessions*, followed by a description of his family and early childhood in his father's house and later at Bossey, where he boarded with his cousin at the local pastor's house. The teenage Rousseau worked first as an apprentice to a notary and then to an engraver. At fifteen Rousseau ran away from Geneva after being locked outside the city walls after curfew. After leaving Geneva Rousseau was introduced to Mme de Warens, whom he described as the greatest love of his life, and was sent to Turin to convert to Catholicism. Thereafter, the young Rousseau spent some years wandering through Italy and France, supporting himself as a servant, secretary and tutor. During this time he lived on and off with Mme de Warens.

From 1743 to 1744 Rousseau took a post as a secretary to the French Ambassador to Venice, but quit after eleven months and returned to Paris. While in Paris Rousseau entered into a relationship with Thérèse Levasseur, who bore him five children; he also befriended the French philosopher Denis Diderot and contributed numerous articles to Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. Rousseau's interest in music continued and King Louis XV offered Rousseau a life-long pension (which Rousseau turned down) after seeing his opera 'Le Devin du Village' (The Village Soothsayer).

In 1754 Rousseau reconverted to Calvinism and returned to Geneva, where he formed an unconsummated romantic attachment to Sophie d'Houdetot. Rousseau later broke with

the Encyclopedists and he and his books were banned from France and Geneva and warrants for his arrest were issued. Rousseau was forced to flee to Neuchatel and later to Great Britain.

The chronology of his narrative is confusing and Rousseau writes at length on minor events which are significant to himself. He frequently dwells at length on unsavory or embarrassing incidents; for instance, he recounts in detail his experience of being beaten by his female nanny when he was eleven and desiring to be beaten again. He also recounts his habit, as a young man, of exposing himself to women.

Rousseau's work was often the subject of outrage and condemnation. Voltaire, Rousseau's most bitter critic, "accused Rousseau of wanting to walk on all fours, and...went so far as to call him the most despicable madman he had ever known" (Galle, 1986: 555). Rousseau's *Confessions* have generated much controversy since their publication; Roland Galle argues that the *Confessions* can be understood as a reaction to the collapse of such social institutions as social status, religion and the family (1986: 561). Before Rousseau, the function of the autobiography was "the realization, the fulfillment, the shaping of a significant institutionalized, and normatively preformed way of life" (Galle, 1986: 564). Rousseau, on the other hand, rejects institutional bonds and seeks instead to write "the history of my soul" (1953: 262); he declares that he sets out for the world the truth of his own, individual life, as only he could know it. Rousseau indicates his autobiography will not present an account of an institutionally prescribed role but rather the truthful representation of an individual; he writes, "I never promised to

present the public with a great personage. I promised to depict myself as I am” (1953: 169), showing the reader that the aim of his autobiography is to present his personal experiences. Furthermore, Rousseau’s choice to structure his autobiography as a confession reiterates his implicit claim to tell the truth of his individual life.

Autobiographical writings can be divided into several subgenres, such as memoir, apologia and confession. J. M. Coetzee argues, “We can demarcate a mode of autobiographical writing that we can call the *confession*, as distinct from the *memoir* and the *apology*, on the basis of an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self” (1992: 252). As Rousseau writes his autobiography in the form of a confession, he makes an implicit claim to tell the essential, or deeper, truth of himself. Thus in order to judge the merits of his text it is necessary to examine Rousseau’s deployment of truth, in all its forms.

Rousseau himself declares he wrote his *Confessions* in order to reveal the truth of his life. Addressing both his future readers and God, he declares: “My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself ... I have bared my secret soul as Thou thyself hast seen it, Eternal Being!” (Rousseau, 1953: 17). The invocation of the “Eternal Being” is proof of his commitment in this regard for no believer would call on the omniscient, omnipotent Creator to witness to the veracity of his account if he was being consciously deceitful. He makes a claim for the microscopic and deliberative truth of his work; Rousseau writes:

Since I have undertaken to reveal myself absolutely to the public,
nothing about me must remain hidden or obscure. I must remain

incessantly beneath [my reader's gaze], so that he may follow me in all the extravagances of my heart and into every least corner of my life. Indeed he must never lose sight of me for a single instant, for if he finds the slightest gap in my story, the smallest hiatus, he may wonder what I was doing at that moment and accuse me of refusing to tell the whole truth. (1953: 65)

In this way Rousseau affirms his *Confessions* will be both accurate and sincere as he will tell the whole truth of his life. He does, however, qualify his assertion that his autobiography will be completely accurate; he states he may "have used some immaterial embellishment ... to fill a void due to a defect of memory. I may have put down for fact what was no more than probability" (Rousseau, 1953: 17). This qualification does excuse the factual inaccuracies of the details of his work, of which there are several.

According to J.M. Cohen:

The detail of his memories may often be inaccurate. It is exceedingly difficult, for instance, to ascribe his early journeys to their definite dates. Occasionally where a check is possible, as to the length of his stay in the hospice at Turin before his abjuration of Protestantism, he may well have proved to have exaggerated weeks into months. (1953:9)

In the case of his stay at the hospice in Turin, Rousseau claims he was baptized months after arriving and left immediately after the baptism; Cohen contradicts this, however, in a footnote, stating, "None of the temporal facts about Rousseau's sojourn at the hospice are reliable. He would seem to have made his abjuration earlier than he says, and to have stayed there for sometime afterwards" (1953:73). However, Rousseau does more than excuse any factual errors; by admitting that his memory is imperfect and by telling the reader how this might affect his account, he further serves to secure his claim to truthfulness. His frank admission implies that he will inform the reader of any mistakes he might make, thus any unqualified statements are both accurate and sincere. Rousseau goes on to assure the reader that although he acknowledges the impossibility of relating

the facts of his life completely and precisely, he will relate them as correctly as possible.

He also asserts he will relate his experiences of life faithfully.

While Rousseau acknowledges the microscopic, or factual, truth, and the problems he encounters when attempting to present this truth in his account, it is the deliberative truth of his account which appears to concern him most. He declares:

I have only one faithful guide on which I can count; the succession of feelings which have marked the development of my being ... I may omit or transpose facts, or make mistakes in dates; but I cannot go wrong about what I have felt, or about what my feelings have led me to do; and these are the chief subjects of my story. The true object of my confessions is to reveal my inner thoughts exactly in all situations of my life. It is the history of my soul which I have promised to recount. (Rousseau, 1953: 262)

Although Rousseau's proclamation to reveal himself "in every way true to nature" (1953: 17) indicates he will be as accurate as possible in presenting the events of his life, he is able to downplay errors regarding facts by his declaration that his highest priority will not be to record the details of the facts of his life. His intention is to impart the deliberative, or personal, truth of his experiences of life. He shows his belief in the importance of feelings over accuracy in his account of the help he receives in finding a place for his wife Thérèse's father, Le Vasseur, in the poorhouse. In the body of the text Rousseau states M. d'Holbach helped him find a place for Le Vasseur; however, he corrects this in a footnote:

Here is an example of the tricks my memory plays with me. Long after writing this I have learned, while talking to my wife about her dear old father, that it was not M. d'Holbach, but M. de Chenonceaux, then one of the governors of the Hôtel-Dieu, who found him the place. I had so completely forgotten the incident, and had such a vivid memory of M. d'Holbach that I would have sworn it was he. (Rousseau, 1953: 371)

The significance of this correction is that Rousseau chooses to leave the factually incorrect version in the body of the text, indicating that his memory and beliefs of that event are as, if not more, important than the factual accuracy of the account. Rousseau therefore hierarchizes factual and deliberative truth, stating factual truth will always be subordinate to deliberative truth.

Rousseau was not the first to write and publish a confession: more than a thousand years before Rousseau, St. Augustine wrote his own *Confessions* – a model which Rousseau both emulates and departs from. “By giving his project the very same name as its ancient counterpart, Rousseau at once paid homage to Augustine and signalled a new departure” (Manganiello, 2001: 228). Both Augustine and Rousseau resolve to reveal their innermost selves and to present themselves for judgment, but it is in their choice of confessor that they differ. Augustine confesses directly to God; his main purpose is to present himself to, and to praise, God.

But, dust and ashes though I am, let me appeal to your pity, since it is to you in your mercy that I speak, not to a man who would simply laugh at me. Perhaps you too may laugh at me, but you will relent and have pity on me. (Augustine, 2004: 2)

Although primarily a work of acknowledgment and praise, Augustine’s *Confessions* do serve a didactic purpose; he hopes man will learn from his experiences and while his account of his life is not an absolute truth, he does intend it to point to the absolute truth of God’s sovereignty.

Rousseau’s *Confessions* emulate Augustine’s in that, like Augustine, Rousseau resolves to reveal his innermost self, and to present that self for judgment. However, Rousseau

departs from Augustine's model, for while he does acknowledge God, Rousseau neither confesses to, nor asks absolution from God. Rousseau opens his text with an image of himself presenting his *Confessions* to God and to his fellow men:

Let the last trump sound when it will, I shall come forward with this work in my hand, to present myself before my Sovereign Judge, and proclaim aloud: "Here is what I have done, and if by chance I have used some immaterial embellishment it has only been to fill a void due to a defect of memory. I may have taken for fact what was no more than probability, but I have never put down as true what I know to be false. I have displayed myself as I was, as vile and despicable when my behaviour was such, as good, generous and noble when I was so. I have bared my secret soul as Thou thyself has seen it, Eternal Being!" (Rousseau, 1953: 17)

In this passage Rousseau echoes Augustine's proclamation to present an account of himself to God. It is here also that Rousseau deviates from Augustine's example in two important ways: while Augustine offers his subjective account as an indicator of the absolute truth of Christian faith, Rousseau, by baring his soul "as Thou thyself has seen it, Eternal Being" (Rousseau, 1953: 17), implies that his text will show the complete truth of his life in itself. As God's knowledge is complete and transcendent, Rousseau, by professing to reveal himself in conformity to God's knowledge of him, implies that he will reveal the complete and transcendent truth of himself. Rousseau thus implicitly claims that it is possible to know oneself as completely as God, who is omnipotent, does. This declaration denies any man the right to question the honesty of Rousseau's account.

Rousseau's *Confessions* again differ from Augustine's in that Rousseau does not turn to God for judgment and absolution, but rather to man. In Rousseau's imagery the omniscient God is merely a witness; it is against Rousseau's standard that men must compare themselves and ultimately declare Rousseau worthy. Rousseau reiterates the

role of men in his judgment by opening the second part of his *Confessions* with a command that the reader not judge him till he has justified himself fully. “After two years of patient silence, in spite of my resolutions I take up the pen once more. Suspend your judgment, reader, as to the reasons that force me to it. You cannot judge them till you have read me to the end” (Rousseau, 1953: 261). Thus it is clear that Rousseau assigns to man and not to God the role of judging him in all things; more than that, however, he demands that he be pardoned by man.

The distinction between the confessors of the two *Confessions* is important as Augustine acknowledges that his confessor is omnipotent: “O Lord, the depths of man’s conscience lie bare before your eyes. Could anything of mine remain hidden from you, even if I refuse to confess it?” (2004:84). Thus Augustine can hide nothing since God knows everything; furthermore, whether he confesses it or not, it follows that Augustine cannot manipulate his confessor. His confession is offered as a declaration of praise and love; however, he has no control over how his confession will be received.

Rousseau, on the other hand, confesses to man, who is not all-knowing, and who must rely on the information Rousseau chooses to reveal. According to Francis Mariner: “Writing the *Confessions* amounts to a veritable declaration of love on Rousseau’s part; reading the *Confessions* requires the return of that love” (1992: 26). Rousseau is intensely aware of his reader; he states: “I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader’s eye” (1953:169). Yet he demands his readers view him, not objectively, but with tolerance and affection. Thus Rousseau, like Augustine, offers his

autobiography as a declaration of love, and like Augustine, Rousseau expects his love to be requited. However, as he is confessing not to a loving God but to man, his *Confessions* are aimed only at those who will understand and love him. "The readers in whom Rousseau is interested are...those who would be willing passively to receive, as it were, the imprint of the proffered portrait upon their hearts" (Mariner, 1992: 26). Rousseau recounts the disappointing reaction he received from a reading of his *Confessions*, which did not elicit appreciation for his work:

Thus I concluded my revealing, and everyone was silent. Mme d'Egmout was the only person who seemed moved. She trembled visibly but quickly controlled herself, and remained quiet, as did the rest of the company. Such was the advantage I derived from my reading and my declaration. (Rousseau, 1953: 606)

Rousseau's bitterness at the reaction of his audience, who failed to appreciate his offering, is clear in the bitter irony with which he concludes the passage. The *Confessions*, therefore, are written with the specific purpose of eliciting love, and are aimed at those readers who will love him.

This desire for absolution and love may impact on Rousseau's honesty. Rousseau's explicit claim to truth in his autobiography is fairly simple: he declares he will reveal the inner truth of his thoughts and emotions, as only he and God can know it. He also makes a claim for the actual accuracy of his text; this however, is subordinate the deliberative truth of his life and is subject to mistakes. "My first part has been entirely written from memory, and I must have made many mistakes in it. Being compelled to write the second from memory also, I shall now probably make still more" (Rousseau, 1953: 261). Rousseau's explicit understanding of truth is fairly simplistic; he says he cannot be

mistaken in his understanding of his feelings and this is sufficient for him to write his *Confessions*: “it is enough if I enter again into my inner self, as I have done till now” (Rousseau, 1953: 262). However, his complex motives undermine a simple representation of his personal truth. Rousseau’s motivation to tell his story in order to elicit love and absolution mean that his *Confessions* are no longer simply an attempt to reveal an unquestionable truth of himself to a confessor who cannot be manipulated. Therefore his priority may not be to present a sincere and factually correct account of himself, but rather to persuade the reader that he is worthy of love and respect. Rousseau is thus not necessarily objective in selecting which events he will relate in order to reveal his innermost self to the reader.

Rousseau indicates that in revealing his innermost self he will present more than a simple confession, for his work will serve a didactic purpose. Rousseau resolves to reveal himself, not only to present an individual truth but to provide, through his own experiences, a general framework for human experience. He thus seeks to strike the reader as, at once, both an individual and a general representation of human experience. Rousseau ostensibly sets himself up as the model against which men must measure themselves in order to fully know themselves:

So let the numberless legion of my fellow men gather round me, and hear my confessions. Let them groan at my depravities, and blush for my misdeeds. But let each one of them reveal his heart at the foot of Thy throne with equal sincerity. (Rousseau, 1953:17)

However, Rousseau necessarily struggles to reconcile the tension of being both a universal model and a unique man. He states: “I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different” (1953: 17). It may be argued that Rousseau

does not reconcile this tension, nor, in fact, does he really attempt to. Mariner argues:

“Rousseau does not really write to know himself nor even to afford others the occasion to know themselves better; he writes to assert his self-worth and identity” (1992: 28).

The argument that Rousseau writes his *Confessions* not out of a desire to know himself, or allow others the opportunity to know themselves better, is substantiated by the events which prompted Rousseau to write his *Confessions*. The *Confessions* were not Rousseau’s first attempt at writing his autobiography; his return to this abandoned project was prompted by a pamphlet penned by Voltaire which launched a vicious attack on Rousseau.

We must admit blushing and with pain that this is a man, who, marked dreadfully by his own debaucheries and dressed like a circus clown, drags with him from village to village, over every mountain, the luckless woman [Thérèse] whose old mother died because of him, and whose children he left at the door of an orphanage, rejecting the kind offer of a charitable person to take care of them, abjuring all natural sentiments, just as he had stripped himself of those toward honour and religion ... Such is he who dares give advice to our citizens ...! Such a one speaks of the duties of society. (Cited in Coetzee, 1992:297)

With the publication of this pamphlet Rousseau understood that his image was destroyed and he would need to correct the impressions created by Voltaire’s words. Rousseau explains in his *Confessions*:

I, who believe, and always have believed, that I am on the whole the best of men ... I knew that I was represented in the world under features so unlike my own and at times so distracted, that notwithstanding my faults, none of which I intended to pass over, I could not help gaining by showing myself as I was. (1953: 479)

Thus, although Rousseau indicates that his aim is to present the unmediated and complete truth of his life, as a unique example and as model against which men may measure

themselves, the events which prompted him to write his *Confessions* indicate that his motives were mixed. Rousseau's claim that he should gain by showing himself as he is indicates that he writes, at least partly, to correct the unfortunate public image of himself.

This discrepancy between Rousseau's stated aims and the underlying motive that is possible for the reader to infer is demonstrated by the contrast between Rousseau's opening passage in which he says he will present the complete and sincere truth of his life, and the conclusion:

I have told the truth. If anyone knows anything contrary to what I have recorded, though he prove it a thousand times, his knowledge is a lie and an imposture; and if he refuses to investigate and inquire into it during my lifetime he is no lover of justice or of truth. For my part, I publicly and fearlessly declare that anyone, even if he has not read my writings, who will examine my nature, my character, my morals, my likings, my pleasures and my habits with his own eyes and can still believe me a dishonourable man, is a man who deserves to be stifled.
(Rousseau, 1953: 605-606)

This passage reveals contradictions in Rousseau's work. Although he states he will tell the truth as accurately as he is able, going as far as to imply he shall tell the complete truth of his life, in this passage Rousseau indicates that anything which contradicts his claim to be a good man, even if it is proved "a thousand times, his knowledge is a lie" (Rousseau, 1953: 605). This implication that Rousseau's *Confessions* are concerned less with truth which can be proved and more with revealing Rousseau as an honourable man, is reinforced by his proclamation that any man who does not acknowledge Rousseau as a good man should "be stifled". Thus Rousseau's aim to present a portrait "in every way true to nature" (Rousseau, 1953: 17) is subordinate to his aim of being recognized as an honourable man.

It is possible to detect attempts on the part of Rousseau to manipulate the response of his readers to his *Confessions*. Ostensibly his *Confessions* are nothing more than an attempt to expose the truth of himself and his life, confessing his crimes honestly, as well as displaying his good deeds. However, Rousseau does not use the text to confess his crimes but rather to excuse them. It is possible to determine two strains in Rousseau's stories: "an element of *confession* whose purpose it is to reveal a verifiable truth, and an element of *excuse* whose purpose it is to convince the reader that things are and were as Rousseau sees them" (de Man cited in Coetzee, 1992: 266). In telling the story of Marion and the ribbon, Rousseau does not simply recount how he accused an innocent girl of a crime he had committed, he carries on to justify himself and, implicitly, to demand the reader absolve him. Rousseau says:

I have been absolutely frank in the account I have just given, and no one will accuse me, I am certain, of palliating the heinousness of my offence. But I should not fulfill the aim of this book if I did not at the same time reveal my inner feelings and hesitated to put up such excuses for myself as I honestly could. Never was deliberate wickedness further from my intention than at that cruel moment ... My age also should be taken into account. I was scarcely more than a child. Indeed I was still one. In youth real crimes are even more reprehensible than in riper years; but what is no more than weakness is much less blameworthy, and really my crime amounted to no more than weakness. (Rousseau, 1953: 88-89)

Rousseau begins his account of the incident lamenting the heinousness of his crime, but concludes with a spirited defence of his actions, reducing the incident to nothing more than a child's weakness, something he clearly expects his readers to do as well. Paul de Man "believes that Marion herself is insignificant for Rousseau ... Rousseau creates 'a stage on which to parade his disgrace'; he fulfils another desire, his real desire in writing,

which is to compel public admiration for his inner self” (cited in Coetzee, 1992: 50).

Rousseau attempts to manipulate his readers’ reactions when reading his *Confessions* by first asking to be admired for baring his soul so candidly for not “palliating the heinousness of [his] offence” (Rousseau, 1953: 88); he then excuses his crime “by reference to his contradictory inner feelings” (Anderson, 2001:49). This is seen when he states: “When I saw [Marion] in the flesh my heart was torn” (1953: 88). Here he shows that he is a sensitive and caring person, and thus deserves to be liked. However, Rousseau does more than simply imply he should be excused; he explains that he has atoned for his crime “by all the misfortunes that have crowded the end of my life, by forty years of honest and upright behavior under difficult circumstances” (Rousseau, 1953: 89). Thus Rousseau shifts the emphasis from a confession of a crime to an explanation and self-justification; he does not fully comply with his own claim to present a frank account of his crimes and to “make [his] soul transparent to the reader’s eye” (Rousseau, 1953: 169). Rousseau’s apparent contradiction impacts on the reader’s belief in the sincerity of his account.

Rousseau goes on to state that if he is misunderstood the fault lies not with himself but rather with the reader. “[The reader’s] task is to assemble these elements and to assess the being who is made up of them. The summing-up must be his, and if he comes to the wrong conclusions, the fault will be his own making” (Rousseau, 1953: 169). Rousseau, therefore, indicates that there is a correct and an incorrect reading of his *Confessions*. Although he asserts he will do nothing more than present the elements of his life to the reader and allow the reader to reach his own conclusions, stating, “I shall continue just

the same faithfully to reveal what J.-J. Rousseau was, did, and thought, without explaining or justifying the strangeness of his feelings or ideas” (Rousseau, 1953: 595), he contradicts the agency he promises the reader by claiming the reader may reach the wrong conclusion. Although Rousseau may reveal to his reader the personal truth of what he believes of his experiences, he also declares he has “displayed myself as I was” (1953: 17) and has left it to the reader “to assemble these elements and to assess the being who is made up of them” (1953: 169). As Rousseau attempts to justify himself and to manipulate his readers’ response, he transgresses the truth-claims made by these statements.

Rousseau not only compromises his assertion to impart the complete and deliberative truth of his life to his readers, he also in several instances compromises the microscopic (that is, the factual) truth of his work. Rousseau, as an accomplished writer, was perfectly aware of the importance of the structure and style of his text. Although Rousseau pronounces he will reveal all that happened to him “in simple detail” (Rousseau, 1953: 169) without embellishment, it may be argued that “Whatever [Rousseau] would have us believe about his *Confessions* it is a work of art, an elaborate one” (Voisine, 1961: 55). Voisine points out that historical evidence, letters written at the same time as the incidents described, as well as first drafts of the *Confessions* show that Rousseau’s final version of the *Confessions* does distort certain incidents in order to accord them greater dramatic effect. First drafts of the scene in the Neuchâtel (Rousseau, 1953: 557), for example, are far less dramatic and ironically powerful. In this way it is possible to “catch the autobiographer in the act of altering or fabricating memories to suit

his own pleasure at telling a good story and capping it neatly” (Voisine, 1961: 60).

Rousseau’s experiences are thus mediated through the conventions of a published text, conforming to the expectations of the potential publisher and reader that the text should be interesting. In this way is possible to see that Rousseau deliberately alters events to better suit the form of his autobiography – giving lie to his claim never to deliberately alter the truth.

According to Pascal the imposition of structure and social constraints on a text mean that the text loses as a memoir, biography or as a social and psychological document.

However, these impositions do not necessarily damage the essential purpose or essential truthfulness of the text. As a confession, the purpose of Rousseau’s autobiography is to reveal an essential truth about the self. Rousseau promises to present an image of himself as he is; however, he hierarchizes truth in his autobiography: the truth of what he felt and remembers is more important than the factual accuracy of his account. Although Rousseau declares that he can never be mistaken in how he felt and that he shall present these feelings faithfully, there are indications in the text that he does not entirely fulfill this warrant. His choice not to confess to an omnipotent confessor, his desire for love and acceptance and his motive to correct the public image of himself, as well as his attempts to direct his reader’s response to his confessions, indicate that Rousseau does not realize his explicit claim to tell the complete and unmediated truth of his experiences. However, while these may compromise the reader’s belief in the sincerity of Rousseau’s assertion to tell the deliberative truth of his experiences, they do indicate that he wants his reader to understand, beyond anything else, that Rousseau is a good man. He states:

But my warm-heartedness, my acute sensibility, the ease with which I formed friendships, the hold they exercised over me, and the cruel wrench when they had to be broken; my innate goodwill towards my fellow men; my burning love for the great, the true, the beautiful, and the just; my horror at evil in every form, my inability to hate, to hurt, or even to wish to; that softening; that sharp and sweet emotion I feel at the sight of all that is virtuous, generous, and loveable: is it possible that all these can ever dwell in the same soul along with depravity which, quite unscrupulously, tramples the dearest of obligations underfoot? No, I feel, and boldly declare – it is impossible. (Rousseau, 1953: 332 - 333).

Thus he implies that there is a truth which is greater than the personal truth he can tell of his experiences – and that is the innate goodness of Rousseau.

This hierarchy of truth allows the reader to see a deeper, essential truth of Rousseau. His implicit claim that the greatest truth he can impart to the reader, that he is good man, which is more important than the personal truth of his experiences, which he declares he will tell unequivocally, allows the reader to infer an essential truth of Rousseau – that he wishes to be loved and understood. This characterizes Rousseau as a person, revealing an essential truth about the self and therefore fulfilling the aim of his autobiography. Thus his subscription to microscopic and deliberative truth, as well as his transgression of his own claims to them, points to an essential truth of the man.

Chapter 3: *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* – Dave Eggers'

understandings of and applications of truth

Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* ostensibly fulfills the same role as Rousseau's *Confessions*: to tell the truth of the author's life as only he can know it. While both texts claim to be autobiographical, and by implication, truthful, Eggers' understanding of concepts of truth in autobiography differ from Rousseau's understanding thereof.

Dave Eggers embarks on the same enterprise as Rousseau does – to tell the story of his life. Eggers opens his *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* with a graphic account of his mother's death of stomach cancer and, through flashback, his father's death of lung cancer a month before. Following his parents' death in Lake Forest, near Chicago, Eggers, then twenty-one, takes charge of his seven-year old brother Toph and follows his older sister to Berkeley. The tension Eggers feels between the freedom and irresponsibility his parents' death affords him on one hand, and the responsibility of raising his brother on the other, forms the focus of his work. Throughout the narrative which follows Eggers' move from Illinois to California and his launch of the counterculture magazine *Might*, his attempts to live the normal life of a young adult are overshadowed by his conflicting feelings of raising Toph. Eggers oscillates between certainty that his unconventional approach to caring for Toph is a brilliant method which will ensure his brother will grow up to be a well-adjusted adult and worry that it will

leave him maladjusted. In this way Eggers' autobiography is less of a validation of a life, as Rousseau's *Confessions* is, and more of an exploration of the tensions of relationships.

Eggers' text is neither a confession nor an apologia, but rather a postmodernist narrative. As with all autobiographies, the content and structure of the text is informed by both the general rules pertaining to the genre and the conventions particular to the subgenre of autobiography in which the author writes.

Eggers opens his book with six "Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of This Book" in which he advises the reader to skip large portions of the book, including the Preface, the Acknowledgments, the Table of Contents and pages 239-351. In fact, Eggers advises his readers "the first three or four chapters are all some of you might want to bother with" (Eggers, 2007: vii). Following these "Rules" is a Preface which details the areas of the text which have been fictionalized. Despite his earlier claim that "...characters and incidents and dialogue are real, are not products of the author's imagination" (Eggers, 2007: iv), he opens his Preface with the words: "For all the author's bluster elsewhere, this is not, actually, a work of pure nonfiction. Many parts have been fictionalized in various degrees and for various purposes" (Eggers, 2007: ix). Eggers goes on to point out which specific areas he has fictionalized, drawing attention to, and justifying, his contravention of autobiographical conventions. The first area he claims is not entirely factually accurate is the dialogue in the text. He says:

This has been almost entirely reconstructed. The dialogue, though all essentially true – except that which is obviously not true, as when people break out of their narrative time-space continuum to cloying talk about the book itself – has been written from memory, and reflects the

author's memory limitations and his imagination's nudgings. All the individual words and sentences have been run through a conveyor, manufactured like so: 1) they are remembered; 2) they are written; 3) they are rewritten to sound more accurate; 4) they are edited to fit within the narrative (though keeping with their essential truth); 5) they are rewritten again, to spare the author and the other characters the shame of sounding as inarticulate as they invariably do, or would if their sentences, almost invariably beginning with the word "Dude" – as in, for example, "Dude, she died" – were merely transcribed. It should be noted, however, that what's remarkable is that the book's most surreal dialogue, like that with the Latino teenagers and that with the beleaguered Jenna, is that which is most true to life. (Eggers, 2007: ix)

This passage acknowledges some of the problems facing all autobiographers. Dialogue, indeed all events, must be reconstructed and mediated, first through memory, then again through structural constraints of the text and finally through the autobiographer's desire to ensure the reader forms the correct opinion of the author and the people with whom he interacts. Eggers also details changes he makes to certain characters and their characteristics; he explains that he creates a character called John, based on a friend who did not want his name or a revealing account of his actions to be included in Eggers' autobiography (2007: x). Eggers admits to altering locations and time as well, to ensure his narrative flows smoothly (2007:x). He also includes in the Preface several pages of examples of omissions he has made. Thus Eggers is unashamed, indeed, he highlights the fact that he disregards the expectations that the autobiographer will tell his story as accurately and sincerely as possible. Eggers self-consciously contravenes both these expectations as he knowingly alters factual information.

After his preface Eggers includes a "Contents" page in which he includes key words to form a summary of the main events and themes of each chapter. Eggers then adds an Acknowledgements, which he uses less to acknowledge those people who helped him

write his book, as is usual, but rather to acknowledge the difficulties and incongruities of attempting to reproduce accurately the events and experiences of a person's life in textual form. The first acknowledgment Eggers makes is: "The author wishes first and foremost to acknowledge his friends at NASA and the United States Marine Corps, for their great support and unquantifiable help with the technical aspects of the story" (Eggers, 2007: xxii). As the story includes no technical aspects and the author obviously did not require the help of NASA or the United States Marine Corps in writing his autobiography this "thank you" indicates the ironic nature of his Acknowledgments and, by extension, the text as a whole. Eggers moves from satire to seriousness and back to satire. Following his acknowledgment of NASA and the Marine Corps Eggers thanks those people who have allowed him to include their names and actions in his autobiography, especially his older sister and younger brother. This is to be expected in the acknowledgments of an autobiography. Eggers then claims he will not single out his older brother, Bill, because Bill "is a Republican. The author would like to acknowledge that he does not look good in red. Or pink, or orange, or even yellow – he is not a spring" (Eggers, 2007: xxi). In this way Eggers both mocks and upholds literary conventions. Eggers continues to use his Acknowledgments to mock literary conventions; he acknowledges that "the success of a memoir – of any book, really – has a lot to do with how appealing its narrator is" (Eggers, 2007: xxvii); he follows this admission with a list of personal attributes which he believes will influence the reader to empathise with and appreciate him. He includes in this list the fact "[that] he is like you ... That, like you, he falls asleep shortly after he becomes drunk ... That he smiles when he sees young black men holding babies. One word: appealing" (Eggers, 2007: xxvii). This list draws attention to the commercial

context in which Eggers writes. It also highlights the fact that Eggers, like Rousseau, is very aware of his readers. He indicates that he is concerned that the reader should not think him inarticulate and that the reader will like the narrator. He goes further when he recognizes “the dilemma of self-interested autobiographers whose readers don’t share their enthusiasm for their lives” (Smith and Watson, 2001: 7). Eggers acknowledges that “the lives of people in their early twenties ... are very difficult to make interesting to those living them at the time” (Eggers, 2007: vii).

Eggers’ awareness of his readers and desire for his readers to appreciate his work may impact on his sincerity when presenting himself since, some critics argue, he shamelessly exposes himself in order to attract readers.

Eggers’ extravagant claims to remake the form of the memoir as a work of ‘genius’ in the service of the family memoir is a ... hyperbolic bid for readership... [Tracey Emin and Dave Eggers] are seen by some as shameless self-advertisers, excessively and flagrantly exposing themselves. (Smith and Watson, 2001: 11)

The nature of autobiography is such that no text claiming to be autobiographical can convey the complex truth of the author’s life; both the factual and the deliberative truth of the autobiographer’s account will be mediated. However, the author, by calling his work an autobiography, implicitly claims that despite the limitations of the medium in which he works, he shall attempt to convey to the reader a sense of himself and his identity. Eggers not only recognizes the fact that through the structural limitations of the text, and his own desire to be well thought of, neither the microscopic nor the deliberative truth of his life is fully conveyed, he continually draws his reader’s attention to this fact. As every autobiographer must tell a mediated account of his life, Eggers’ constant

acknowledgment of his inability to tell the full truth of his life may be seen as nothing more than a gimmick to attract readers. On the other hand, by admitting his transgressions of legalistic truth, Eggers may simply be subscribing to another truth – that he is unable to tell the truth, and is therefore more honest than any other autobiographer as he explicitly acknowledges this fact.

Eggers' introduction, comprising his "Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of this Book", Preface, Contents and Acknowledgments, serves as an ironic attempt to quantify the information and themes of his narrative. Not only is Eggers very conscious of the genre he works within, and against, he continually draws the readers' attention to the fact that his text is necessarily informed by the "rules" of autobiography. According to Smith and Watson:

In so elaborately sketching the rules of the memoir game Eggers simultaneously underscores and undermines them. Claiming to tell a true story in a genre about whose maneuvers he is acutely, endlessly self-conscious, he invites readers to confront the undecidability of autobiographical acts. (2001:9)

Writing about postmodern theory, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle point out that undecidability "dislodges the principle of a single final meaning in a literary text. All reading, finally, returns to a state of uncertainty" (2004: 179). Eggers therefore uses his introduction to explore the inability of autobiographical conventions to form a framework which leads to a single final meaning, and single, simple, generic classification, for his text. Thus Eggers works both within, and reacts against, autobiographical conventions.

One of the fundamental conventions Eggers questions is the conformity of the genre to non-fiction. Eggers questions the seemingly clear-cut distinction between fiction and non-fiction; while the events of a fictional account are assumed to be imaginary, non-fiction is “the narrative depiction of factual events” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989). Eggers, however, points out in his Preface that the narrative of factual events necessarily involves the falsification of certain areas of the text. While *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is based on real events, Eggers’ assertion that certain parts of the text have been fictionalized highlights the difficulties in distinguishing between fiction and non-fiction. By exploring the blurring of fiction and non-fiction in autobiography Eggers questions the notion of an unproblematically truthful autobiography.

Rousseau’s autobiography is shaped by his conformity to, and departure from, a highly structured confessional model, which is based on the example of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. Although Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is influenced by the postmodern context within which he works, the structure of his text is not obviously informed by any existing model.

According to Stuart Sim: “In a general sense, postmodernism is to be regarded as a rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the past couple of centuries” (2005: vii). If this general definition is applied specifically to the genre of autobiography, a postmodern autobiography would reject many of the Western cultural assumptions made about the genre. These assumptions are identified by Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography as a

contract that exists between the author and the reader. This contract implies that by placing his signature on his autobiography the author is attesting to tell the story of himself, as he knows himself, as well as making an implicit claim for the truth-value of his autobiography. An assumption is therefore made that the autobiographical author will deliver, to the best of his ability, a factually accurate story of his life, as he experienced it.

Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* ostensibly complies with Lejeune's directive that an autobiography is "written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (1995:4). Eggers is determined to tell his "own true, sorry and inspirational story" (2007: iv). He narrates the events of his life, explaining, justifying and interpreting his actions in order to allow the reader an insight into his experience of life. However, even as Eggers' work complies with Lejeune's definition, it undermines it. Eggers describes an incident in which he over-reacts to a friend's suggestion that he shouldn't ground his younger brother for being late. After describing the scene Eggers goes on to explain why he reacted the way he did, presenting his brother's reading of the situation:

She meant nothing by it, just an innocent comment. She's probably the last person in the world who would ever be insensitive, but see, you're always ready to fight. You've got that single-parent rage, that black-single-mother defensiveness, combined with your own naturally ready -to-be-indignant/ aggressive tendencies, inherited from our mom. (Eggers, 2007: 117)

He conforms to autobiographical conventions by explaining his inner feelings which prompted the incident, and by doing so allows the reader a view into his life and the person he is. However, he simultaneously rebels against conventions by attributing this passage to his nine-year-old brother. The sophistication and insight of this passage are

out of character for Toph. Elsewhere in the book Eggers and Toph's conversations do not deviate from what would be considered typical of a nine-year-old speaking to his older brother. Toph's youth and lack of understanding are indicated by his conversation with Eggers:

"Weird that you mention Sari. She's actually coming to town."

"Oh Jesus. You're not going to see her?"

"Yes I am, young Toph. Yes I am."

"I don't get it."

"Nor should you. Much too complex for your tender mind ... Toph, there are many things you have yet to learn." (Eggers, 2007: 319)

Thus it is highly unlikely that Toph would have had the ability or the insight into his brother's life to make the earlier observation regarding the narrator-protagonist's defensiveness. Lejeune's autobiographical pact states that the biographical facts of the narrator and the author must be identical and that the author attests to tell his story as only he can know it (1995: 8), thus it may be inferred that the autobiographical pact entails the requirement that the author's account is factually accurate. While Eggers upholds the autobiographical expectation to tell the story of his life and experiences, he undermines the normative expectation that he will do so in a factually accurate way.

This is not the only example of Eggers' subversion of microscopic truth in order to tell the deliberative truth of an experience. Eggers explains in his preface that the name and characteristics of the friend he introduces in the text as 'John' have been changed at the request of the person concerned. In chapter seven Eggers recounts an episode where he accompanies John to the hospital after John's attempted suicide; Eggers includes the following conversation:

"I mean, fuck it, asshole. I'm leaving."

"What?"

"Screw it, I'm not going to be a fucking anecdote in your stupid book."

...

"Listen, John – "

"Who's John?"

"You're John."

"I'm John?"

"Yeah. I changed your name."

"Oh. Right. Now, why John again?"

"That was my dad's name."

"Jesus! So I'm your dad, too. Fuck man, this is just too much. You are such a freak!"

...

"You're bored. You're lazy. I mean, every single thing is so boring – alcohol, pills, suicide. Man, no one will even believe this shit, it's so fucking boring."

"So leave it out then."

"It's not that boring ... because you've done it to yourself, made yourself the thespian, you have to fulfill that contract, play the dates, go on the road. Now you're the metaphor."

"Fine. Put me in the fucking book." (2007: 272-274)

This conversation could not have happened at the time and in the manner described. The suicide attempt occurred before Eggers wrote his autobiography and John would have no reason to discuss his inclusion in the text at this time and in this way. It can be clearly seen that the incident is factually inaccurate. However, by disregarding microscopic truth Eggers is able to convey more fully the deliberative truth of his interaction with and response to John. By including the exchange concerning his choice to re-name his friend as 'John' in the text, Eggers re-iterates to the reader that the character's name has been changed, as well as indicating his own uncertainty concerning the choice of name. Egger's explanation that John was his father's name. The pseudonymous John's exclamation, "You are such a freak" (Eggers, 2007: 273), indicates to the reader that Eggers has not fully resolved any issues he might have had with his father or his response to his father's death. Furthermore, Egger's explanation as to why he felt justified in

including John's story and John's reaction to this indicate to the reader that John was reluctant to be included in the book. Eggers' inclusion of his justification further indicates to the reader that Eggers himself felt a certain unease at the invasion of privacy including John's story in his autobiography entailed and allows the reader to see how he justified this inclusion to himself. By obviously distorting the facts, this conversation is clearly out of synch with the time-narrative continuum, Eggers shows that he is not trying to deceive the reader but to allow the reader to see a deeper deliberative truth of his interaction with and feelings towards John, thereby upholding the autobiographical aim of allowing the reader to understand the person of the author.

The device of having characters "break out of their narrative time-space continuum to cloyingly talk about the book itself" (Eggers 2007: ix) is an example of how Eggers uses falsifications to tell a deeper truth. Eggers recounts a scene in which Toph berates him for a hoax played by the editors of the magazine *Might*, which Eggers founded. The editors decided to run a fake obituary of child-star Adam Rich, ostensibly to rebel against a celebrity-obsessed culture in which people are moved by the death of someone they have never met. Toph claims this is not their real motive and that Eggers and his colleagues are simply jealous of the recognition garnered by these celebrities.

'That point being that you people are just as good as celebrities like him. You think [Adam Rich is] vapid, dim-witted, with his stupidity arising, first and foremost, from the fact that at nine he was hanging with Brooke Shields, that a hundred million people know his name, a hundred million more his face. And no one knows yours.'
'You're breaking out of character again.' (Eggers, 2007: 316)

It is quite clear that this conversation did not take place, at least not in the way it was transcribed. Few children would have the sophistication to speak thus, and, if it had occurred as represented, Eggers would have had no cause to tell Toph he was breaking out of character in reality. There is no doubt that Eggers transgresses microscopic truth; however, in so doing he is subscribing to deliberative truth. He makes it quite clear that this conversation did not happen as described, and thus he cannot be said to be trying to deceive the reader. Furthermore, although Toph did not berate Eggers, Eggers did indeed feel censored for what he had done, even if only by his conscience. By attributing the passage to Toph, Eggers implies that the reason he feels guilty is because of the example he is setting his younger brother. Therefore, although Eggers deliberately alters the facts, he may convey to the reader the truth of what he felt, and why he felt that way.

Eggers continually draws attention to the aspects of his text where it does not comply with the demands of autobiography to present a narrative which is as factually accurate and sincere as possible. His elaborate introduction points out the areas where he has knowingly altered facts; however, it is not only microscopic truth that Eggers transgresses, he also explores the boundaries of deliberative truth. As has been noted Eggers acknowledges that the narrator's appeal impacts on the success of an autobiography (2007: xxvii). This calls into question Eggers' sincerity; by adjusting the factual truth Eggers is deliberately presenting an inaccurate version of his experiences in order to tell the story he wants the reader to hear and form the opinion he wants the reader to form. He openly acknowledges that he wishes to tell his "heartbreaking" story,

1) to purge himself of his past by trumpeting his recent life's events to the world, and thus, by spreading his pain, his heartbreaking story ... he

would receive in return a thousand tidal waves of sympathy and support, and never be lonely again; 2) To become well known for his sorrows, or at least to let his suffering facilitate his becoming well known. (Eggers, 2007: xxxi)

The irreverent tone of this proclamation, at first, indicates that the passage is another challenge of autobiographical conventions, particularly the ostentatious goal of the autobiographer to recount his experiences of life, but which may slip, consciously or unconsciously, into self-justification and an implicit plea for the reader to understand and sympathise with the author. The hyperbolic quality of this passage indicates that Eggers does not expect the reader to take him seriously in this instance. However, despite the ironic tone, there appears to be a seriousness to his statement; thus the reader may infer that behind Eggers' attempt at frivolity is an earnest request for the reader to sympathize with him. This reading is reinforced by his explicit request for acknowledgment and acceptance: "Please look. Can you see us? ... Look at us goddammit ... Every day we are collecting on what's coming to us" (Eggers, 2007: 47). The sincerity of Eggers' account may be impacted on by his request for love, sympathy and understanding; the reader expects the autobiographer to attempt to tell his story with some form of objectivity so that her response to and understanding of the autobiographical subject is not manipulated or directed by the author. Eggers openly dictates the response he expects from his reader, which implies that the account he gives of his life is influenced by the way in which he hopes the reader will view him. This may impact on the sincerity and the deliberative truth of his account.

Eggers openly admits that he challenges autobiographical conventions and narrow notions of truth. The very title of his autobiography, *A Heartbreaking Work of*

Staggering Genius, is ironic and therefore defies the reader to treat any claim the text makes too seriously. Eggers states:

The author wishes to acknowledge your problems with the title ... Like, if this book is, indeed, heartbreaking, then why spoil the mood with the puffery? Or, if the title is some elaborate joke, then why make an attempt at sentiment? Which is to say nothing of the faux (real? No, you beg, please no) boastfulness of the whole title put together.
(Eggers, 2007:xxv-xxvi)

The claim to the “staggering genius” of his work is belied on the first page of the text by the self-deprecating “Rules and Suggestions for the Enjoyment of this Book”. This clearly indicates the author’s use of irony in his text and, consequently, the reader should exercise caution in accepting what Eggers says at face value.

It may be argued that Eggers’ exploration of the contestations of autobiography and his use of irony is a means of looking at the notion of truth in representing his life.

According to Stacey Otto:

Literary narratives have prescient, rich and important things to say about humanity, about the experience of being human, which simply cannot be said by another means, outside the boundaries of ‘fiction’ and the conventions of literary device. (2007: 85)

Autobiography has much to say, not only about the author’s life, but about human nature in general. Although autobiography claims to be non-fiction, and therefore factual, the highest aim of autobiography is not to present the facts of a person’s life, but rather an account of their experience of life. However, it is impossible to reproduce a life exactly as it is in text; autobiography, therefore, generally shares several features with works of fiction – plot, dialogue and character. The truth of human nature, which autobiography implicitly claims to reveal, is therefore presented within the “boundaries of ‘fiction’”. It

may be argued that Eggers uses the falsifications in his text to tell the truth; he claims the most surreal dialogue in the text is that which is most true to life, while the rewritten dialogue sounds most accurate (2007: ixx). Here Eggers shows that the mere facts of his life cannot accurately convey his experience; thus he adjusts the facts to convey an account which depicts the reality of his emotions rather than the facts of his existence.

Eggers deliberately contravenes readers' expectations of autobiographical truth and conventions. He is also "self-conscious about being self-referential" (Eggers, 2007: xxx). Eggers is aware of the self-referential aspect of his work and the inherent contestations that exist in self-referential writing. He therefore understands the difficulties of trying to recount an accurate and sincere account of his life through the mediated means of autobiography. He is not only aware of these contestations, and his own falsifications; he ensures that the reader is aware of them too. Thus Eggers attempts to show the hypocrisy of claiming to tell the truth through a medium which can never convey the unmediated truth. According to Smith and Watson, he attempts to "expose the audience's perceived demand for uncalculated sincerity as posturing, a false pose" (2001:10). Thus by pointing out the difficulties in giving a sincere and accurate account of his life Eggers assumes the only sincere position available to him.

Finally, while Eggers is blunt about his falsifications, he is equally blunt with the truth he tells. He includes in his Acknowledgments a note on "The unspoken magic of parental disappearance", in which he admits "that loss is accompanied by an undeniable but then of course guilt-inducing sense of mobility, of infinite possibility, having suddenly found

oneself in a world with neither floor nor ceiling” (Eggers, 2007: xxix). This is something that few, if any, would admit. Eggers certainly does not shy away from uncomfortable truths: he states that he does obscure some facts, he acknowledges the freedom his parents’ deaths have afforded him, also the fact that he uses their death to garner sympathy. He also admits to using Toph to gain status as a single-parent and as a means attracting women, as well as an excuse for ending relationships. Eggers therefore reveals intimate, discomfoting aspects of himself to the reader.

There is no doubt that Eggers transgresses microscopic, that is, factual, truth. He himself informs the reader of this fact. Less certain is his transgression of deliberative, or personal, truth. Eggers does transgress this truth – he admits to changing facts in order to appear more appealing to the reader. However, it may be argued that Eggers’ deliberate falsifications allow the reader a greater insight into Eggers’ character and experiences, which is the ultimate aim of deliberative truth. Eggers also works within a contested genre; by acknowledging the fact he is unable give the readers an upproblematically truthful account of his life, and by indicating the contested areas within his own text, he allows the reader a greater insight into his life. In this way, by transgressing truth, and acknowledging these transgressions, Eggers is adhering to deliberative truth as best he can within the constraints of autobiography.

Chapter 4: Reader-orientated theory – author's manipulation of their readers.

Both Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Dave Eggers make explicit and implicit claims concerning their understanding and application of the concept of truth in their texts. However, it is not only the author's understanding of this concept which will determine whether or not the text is accepted as 'truthful'. The reader brings to her reading of the text her own understandings of concepts of truth. Furthermore, both Rousseau and Eggers claim an interest in the interpretation of their texts and attempt to influence the reader's reactions to the text.. The reader's expectations and understanding of the author's deployment of truth in the text, as well as the author's attempts to direct the reader's reaction to the text will impact on the extent to which the autobiography is accepted as truthful.

Reader-orientated theory argues that the meaning of a text is not stable, final or set within and by the text itself; the reader must act upon the textual material in order to produce meaning. The meaning of any text, therefore, is dependent on the reader's expectations and responses to the text. The reader's assumptions of the text are partially governed by the conventions of the genre to which the text belongs. According to Jonathan Culler:

We can say that genres are not special varieties of language but sets of expectations which allow sentences of a language to become signs of different kinds in a second-order literary system ... the same sentence can have a different meaning depending on the genre in which it appears. (1975:129)

Reader interpretations of texts will thus be influenced by generic conventions and associated reader expectations. One of the fundamental conventions of autobiography is

that the text must be non-fiction and therefore the events related must subscribe to some measure of truthfulness. As both Rousseau and Eggers make some claim to non-fictional status and, as both are interested in readers' reaction to their texts, it is necessary to look at how these authors attempt to direct the reader's responses through their adherence to, and deviation from, the reader's assumptions of the genre.

According to Wayne Booth a fundamental part of the writing process is the formation of the implied author and the implied reader (cited in Davis and Womack, 2002: 56). The implied author is the persona of the author that is created by and in the reading process, while the implied reader is the image created by the author of his reader (Booth cited in Davis and Womack, 2002: 56). The creation of an implied author is significant as the reader's perception of the author is a reconstructed image of the material person. This being the case, the real author is able, to an extent, to manipulate the reader's perception of himself. In the same way the creation of the implied reader grants the author some liberty to manipulate the reader's response. According to Wolfgang Iser, the implied reader is "the reader whom the text creates for itself and amounts to 'a network of response-inviting structures', which predispose us to read in certain ways" (cited in Selden, 1985: 112). Thus through the creation of an implied author and an implied reader the creator of the text is able to manipulate the reader's response to the author. However, "[what] defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity" (Lejeune, 1995: 19); in this case the reader's expectation of the autobiographical text is that it will convey an accurate sense of the author's identity. The author's ability to direct, to a certain extent, the image the reader creates of the author, and the reader's

response to the text, may impact on the sincerity and accuracy of the author's implicit claim to depict his identity.

As we have seen, Rousseau, as an autobiographer, is very aware of his reader and of the image his reader forms of him. The narrator-protagonist of the *Confessions* is clearly outlined in the text. Rousseau explains to the reader that he, as the real author (and thus as the textually-constructed implied author) shall present to the reader a picture of himself, as he is. "I never promised to present the public with a great personage. I promised to depict myself as I am" (Rousseau, 1953: 169). And the person Rousseau assures the reader he is, is good. He states that, "I may have been mistaken, but I could never be callous" (1953: 333). He also claims his sincere and perfect love is one of the causes of his difficulties in life.

I have loved with too much sincerity – too perfectly I might even say – to attain easy success. No passions were ever at once so pure and so strong as mine. Never was love more tender, genuine and disinterested. (Rousseau, 1953: 80)

The protagonist, therefore, is a good man, a man who loves sincerely and perfectly. It is here, however, that a discrepancy between the protagonist and the implied author may be seen. The protagonist of the text is a good man and, Rousseau claims, would not have harmed his children: "Never for a moment in his life could Jean-Jacques have been a man without feelings or compassion, an unnatural father" (Rousseau, 1953: 333). Rousseau's actions, however, show this claim to be false; by sending his children to the foundling hospital he was condemning them to death, or to a life not much better than a living death: "of the children committed to *Enfants-Trouvés* in Rousseau's time, 70 percent died in their first year, only about 5 percent lived to mature years, and most of that 5 percent

concluded as tramps and beggars” (Olney, 1998:131). Thus it can be seen that the implied author of Rousseau’s *Confessions* serves not to uphold the contract of identity that characterizes autobiography but rather to direct the reader’s response. This impacts on the honesty of Rousseau’s work, for although he claims that he will “depict myself as I am” (Rousseau, 1953: 169), his manipulations of the reader’s response to the protagonist show that the implied author does not depict himself as he is, but rather as he wishes to be seen.

It is not only through the protagonist and the implied author that Rousseau seeks to direct his reader’s response but through the implied reader as well. The responses Rousseau wants from his reader are clearly outlined. He indicates that he requires his reader to judge him and his actions, which implies some form of objectivity on the part of the reader. “Suspend your judgment, reader, as to the reasons that force me to it. You cannot judge them till you have read me to the end” (Rousseau, 1953: 261). Although Rousseau expects judgment, by asking the reader to suspend that judgment until Rousseau can justify himself he implies that the reader should judge him favourably, in accordance with his justifications. Rousseau’s expectations of his reader’s reaction to the text are further shown in his proclamation:

Here is one more of these confessions which I am certain in advance will meet with the incredulity of those readers who always persist in judging me by their own standards, although they cannot have helped seeing, throughout the course of my life, countless inner emotions of mine utterly unlike their own. (Rousseau, 1953:595)

Rousseau clearly demands that he be judged not according to his reader’s presumably inferior standards but according to Rousseau’s own. Therefore the implied reader for

whom Rousseau writes is the reader who will see Rousseau as he wishes to be seen and judge him by his own standards; Rousseau thus denies the reader agency. Rousseau continues to deny the reader agency when he asks, “Who has the right to demand more of me, in the situation I am in?” (Rousseau, 1953: 373). Here Rousseau shows that the implied reader for whom he writes is a reader who will perforce see him as a good man, asking no more than that which Rousseau gives. Thus Rousseau attempts to manipulate his reader’s response to his *Confessions* by showing what he expects of his reader. The implied reader of Rousseau’s text is the reader who will accept Rousseau – as implied author, narrator and autobiographical subject. By judging Rousseau favourably – the complex textual construct – the reader accepts the author as a principled and honourable man.

Eggers, like Rousseau, creates an image of the reader whom he believes will read his text. Eggers uses his implied reader to gain self-confidence for the narrator; unlike Rousseau, however, who attains validation from his implied reader’s love and acceptance, Eggers does not appeal explicitly to his reader for approval. Instead of asking the reader for acknowledgment, Eggers, like Rousseau, uses the implied reader as an unfavourable comparison to show his own superiority. Eggers does not merely explain to the reader that the situation his parents’ death has left him in, that of orphan and surrogate father to his younger brother Toph, affords him freedom and a sense of entitlement. He launches into a tirade against the reader, explaining that he and his brother are exceptional and why this is so:

We cannot be stopped from looking with pity upon the all the world’s sorry inhabitants, they are unblessed by our charms, unchallenged by

our trails, unscarred and thus weak, gelatinous. It's unfair. The matchups, Us v. Them (or you), are unfair. We are dangerous. We are daring and immortal. (Eggers, 2007: 50)

Eggers does more than simply compare himself favourably to the implied reader. In an angry address Eggers places his reader in a position of helplessness through a defiant proclamation that he cannot be stopped from doing whatever he wants to, especially with regard to raising Toph.

He is my twenty-four-hour classroom, my captive audience, forced to ingest everything I deem worthwhile. He is a lucky, lucky boy! And no one can stop me. He is mine and you cannot stop me, cannot stop us. Try and stop us you pussy. (Eggers, 2007: 49)

In this instance Eggers casts the implied reader into the role of an unsuccessful antagonist, and he employs this tactic to show his own resilience and determination. In this way he uses his implied reader as a means to highlight aspects of his temperament through comparisons and angry tirades over what he perceives as challenges to his authority over his own life or his brother's care. In this way Eggers does use his implied reader as a vehicle for depicting individual attributes, thus complying with the autobiographical expectation that the author will convey a sense of his identity.

Eggers does, however, show a certain ambivalence to his reader and the role he expects his reader to take; this can be seen in the anger and defiance with which he addresses his reader. Eggers ostensibly casts the reader into the role of the unsuccessful persecutor, claiming his anger is directed at the implied reader's attempts to control him and to undermine his authority. However, his disproportionate rage and his statement "I worry about exposing [Toph] to bands like Journey" (Eggers, 2007: 49) hint that his anger stems not from the reader's disapproval but from his own doubts about his abilities to

raise Toph. By indicating his insecurities Eggers implicitly asks for reassurance from his reader that he is capable of raising his brother. Thus the authorial narrator appears to be unsure of how he expects the reader to react to his text: if with disapproval, he is allowed to be angry, or if with compassion, Eggers is permitted to be reassured about his abilities to care for his brother.

Eggers' relationship with his reader is thus a complex one; he rages against everyone who reads his work: "I hate you people, so many of you motherfuckers — When you sleep I want you never to wake up" (Eggers, 2007: 436-437). He then claims that his work is for the person reading it, that he puts his effort and pain into helping the reader: "Don't you know that I am connected to you? Don't you know that I'm trying to pump blood into you, that this is for you?" (Eggers, 2007: 436). It may be argued that Eggers, like Rousseau, does use his implied reader in an attempt to manipulate his reader's response. He implies that part of his anger is caused by the reader's inability to respond adequately to his suffering, which he painfully displays in an attempt to help the reader. He suggests that his suffering would be eased by the correct response from his reader. He indicates that the reader should respond with "tidal waves of sympathy and support, and never [leave Eggers] lonely again" (Eggers, 2007: xxxi). Despite the irreverent tone and obvious exaggeration, which indicate that Eggers does not expect to be taken seriously, there is a serious facet to his proclamation. Thus, although Eggers appears to be ironic, the reader may infer that he is genuinely asking for sympathy and understanding. In this way Eggers attempts to direct the response of his real reader.

The reader is further influenced in her response to the text by the context in which the autobiography was written and the difference between this context and the context in which she reads. Louise Rosenblatt states: “reading is a constructive, selective process over time in a particular context” (cited in Davis and Womack, 2002: 54). The autobiographer writes within specific cultural, historical and linguistic contexts; the reader, therefore must attempt to read the text in terms of these contexts. “Autobiography requires reading practices that reflect on the narrative tropes, sociocultural contexts, rhetorical aims and narrative shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text” (Smith and Watson, 2001: 10). Not only will the text itself need to be placed in context but the construction of the author’s identity will also need to be understood in terms of cultural and historical contexts. “[The] textual depiction of identity will of necessity, poststructuralists argue, comprise a composite of various culturally and historically specific subject positions” (Coullie, 1991: 6). Thus, in order to understand the author’s intentions it is necessary to look at the cultural and historical contexts in which he writes.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries portraiture was a well-established literary convention; it was used as a means of control, flattery and to set the bounds of accepted behaviour.

It was, in Saisselin’s succinct formulation, ‘the form of knowledge of man,’ the framework of comprehension within which man could know himself and be understood by others. A form of social control or instrument of political power, it served as the context within which the aristocrat could fashion a self-flattering image of his own influence and authority. (Mariner, 1992: 17)

Thus portraiture functioned not only as a means of knowing oneself, and communicating that knowledge to others, but, through the disclosure of that knowledge, it functioned as a means of influence. Through portraiture the subject was able not only to fashion an image of himself as he wished to be, and as he wished others to see him, but also to establish his authority and therefore exercise power through his ability to influence the deeds of others through his own example of acceptable behaviour. This literary convention greatly influenced Rousseau's *Confessions*.

In choosing portraiture as the framework of understanding for his life story, Rousseau demonstrates his dependency upon received representational models as he inscribes the proposed autobiographical enterprise within the bounds of existing literary tradition. (Mariner, 1992: 17)

It is important to understand the literary context within which Rousseau writes since his adherence to, or deviation from, its conventions will influence the reader's response to his text. The focus of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century portraiture was to present an image of the subject to the world, an aim to which Rousseau strives. However, while he works within a recognizable framework, he also deviates from its accepted norms. Portraiture was concerned not so much with displaying to the world an accurate reflection of the subject but functioned rather as a self-flattering means of establishing authority.

From the first, Rousseau will define the self-portrait to be presented in the *Confessions* against the institution of aristocratic portraiture, which he condemns for placing beauty over truth and for hiding the private individual behind the public mask. (Mariner, 1992: 16)

Rousseau claims to break with the tradition of eighteenth-century portraiture by displaying a portrait of himself that is true to nature; he claims his work is not meant to flatter him but to show his reader who he is, both the good and the bad. Thus just as Rousseau claims to adapt the existing model of confession to allow him to present a

unique truth, he claims to use and adapt the existing convention of portraiture to display a portrait of himself which is uniquely honest. However, it is here that a discrepancy may be seen between Rousseau's stated aims and his published text. Rousseau proclaims: "But let each one [of my fellow men] reveal himself at the foot of Thy throne with equal sincerity, and may any man who dares, say 'I was a better man than he'" (Rousseau, 1953: 17). This pronouncement indicates that his self-portrait will show a good man – indeed, no man can declare himself better than Rousseau, it also demonstrates that Rousseau does wish to influence the behaviour of his fellow men as he entreats them to follow his example. Furthermore, although Rousseau claims he is less interested in beauty than truth, the fact that historical evidence and earlier drafts of the text show that Rousseau did alter facts to improve his narrative, such as his redrafts of the scene in the Neuchâtel (1953: 557), proves that Rousseau did indeed place beauty above truth on certain occasions. Thus Rousseau does work within the conventions of portraiture, which undermines his proclamation to present a portrait in every way true to nature.

Dave Eggers is also strongly influenced by the literary context within which he works. His *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is informed by postmodern conventions. Unlike Rousseau, who claims he can and will display himself completely and accurately to his reader, Eggers works within the postmodern framework which argues that "all identity comprises a series of subject positions offered by language and culture, and that all subjectivity, that of the material person as well as that which is constituted textually, is non-unified, incoherent" (Coullie, 1991: 6). Thus the self, both material and textually constructed, is understood, conveyed and received through mediated means. In the same

way reality, postmodern theory argues, can only be accessed by mediated means. “[The] empirically observable, homogeneous, consistent and continuous ‘reality’ of humanism is re-envisioned as being accessible to us only through the mediation of language and culture, inconsistent and incoherent because discursively produced” (Coullie, 1991: 14).

The life and reality of the author of an autobiographical text that is perceived by the author is therefore mediated twice – the author’s life is filtered through culture and language and then the autobiography is informed by textual practices (Coullie, 1991: 14). In this way the autobiography becomes a metaphorical approximation of the author’s life.

Eggers claims his work will be a true story, relating the events of his life, even the unpleasant aspects:

[Even] if the idea of relating a true story is a bad idea, and even if the idea of writing about deaths in the family and delusions as a result is unappealing to everyone but the author’s high school classmates and a few creative writing students in New Mexico, there are still ideas that are *much, much worse*. (Eggers, 2007: xxiii)

In this way Eggers makes the implicit claim that Rousseau explicitly makes – that he will tell the story of his life, no matter how unpleasant. However, as has previously been demonstrated, Eggers goes on to state that while his story is true, it will not tell the complete and unmediated truth. “Many parts have been fictionalized in varying degrees, for various purposes” (Eggers, 2007: ix), he declares and follows this declaration with nine pages which detail various changes and omissions. The first alterations Eggers describes are the changes he makes to the dialogue in the text. He explains that sentences are written and then rewritten in order to sound more realistic and intelligent (Eggers,

2007: ix). He also alters certain characters' names and characteristics in order to protect the privacy of a friend who "justifiably did not want some of the dark portions of his life chronicled" (Eggers, 2007: x). Eggers goes on to describe two instances of location-switching and explains that there has been a compression of time in several chapters. He claims that this is generally referenced in the text but he does reiterate that "in the latter third of the book, much happens in what seems to be a short period of time" (Eggers, 2007: x). In this instance his alterations are not to protect the privacy of others but to improve the pace of the narrative. Finally, he explains certain omissions he has made, both to protect others' privacy and to improve the narrative. According to Eggers: "Some really great sex scenes were omitted, at the request of those who are now married or involved" (2007: xi). He also gives examples of sentences, paragraphs and passages that he cut, which indicates that he wants his reader to understand the type of exclusions he made in order to improve the narrative of his text. In this way Eggers indicates to his reader that his text is not the complete, unadulterated and accurate truth.

By drawing his reader's attention to the changes and omissions he makes Eggers implies that his intention is not to deceive the reader but rather to show the reader that his text is a metaphoric reflection of his life rather than an exact mirror image. Eggers draws attention to his use of instances and conversations that are unlikely to have taken place, or at least, unlikely to have taken place in the manner in which they are portrayed, but which he feels adequately represent the reality of his feelings and experiences. I have earlier discussed the most obvious examples of this, namely, those instances where individuals break out of character, such as those conversations with Toph which could not have

occurred, but which show the narrator's emotional reactions to Toph. Another illustration referred to previously is the conversation Eggers recounts concerning the fake obituary in *Might*, the magazine Eggers founded. Eggers shows his concern for effects the incident will have on his younger brother by having Toph explain, in inappropriately sophisticated language, the ethical considerations of such an undertaking. Eggers indicates to his reader that this conversation did not take place by telling the character he creates of his brother: "You're breaking out of character again" (Eggers, 2007: 316). Another example is the conversation he has with his friend John, during which they discuss Eggers' inclusion in his autobiography of John and Shalini's stories (Shalini is an Indian friend of Eggers' who almost dies in a freak accident).

"I cannot be used to get back at your dad. Your dad is not a lesson. You are not a teacher."

"You wanted this. You wanted the attention."

"Whatever. I'm just another one of the people whose tragedies you felt fit into the overall message. You don't really care so much about the people who just get along and do fine, do you? Those people don't make it into the story, do they? ... All to help make some point. I mean, isn't it odd that someone like Shalini, for example, who really wasn't one of your closest friends, is suddenly this major presence?" (Eggers, 2007: 424)

At the time this conversation supposedly took place Eggers had not yet written his autobiography and John, therefore, could not have known the role he or Shalini would play in the text. Thus Eggers uses this conversation to demonstrate his ambivalence to the ethics of writing his autobiography, to using his father and his friends' stories, as well as the exclusion of certain people from his narrative. In this way Eggers uses the structure of the text to question the integrity of the text.

Postmodern theory “challenges the ‘logocentric’ (the authority of the word, the possibility of final meanings or of being in the presence of pure ‘sense’)” (Bennett and Royle, 2004: 178). The implication of this is a postmodern sense that all an autobiography can ever be is, at best, a version of life rather than the “truth” of that life. It is necessary to read Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* in the context of postmodern theory since he uses his text to question, through the structure of his text, the ability of the autobiography to convey accurately the truth of a life. Eggers does not use his autobiography as an attempt to re-create his life in its entirety but rather to create a distorted version which represents his life and experiences.

When exploring the notion of truth in autobiography it is important to look not only at the context in which the author writes but also the context in which the reader reads the text. According to Louise Rosenblatt: “Each reader brings to the transaction not only a specific past life and literary history, not only a repertory of internalized ‘codes’, but also a very active present, with all its preoccupations, anxieties, questions and aspirations” (cited in Davis and Womack, 2002: 55). Thus the reader’s interpretation of the text is influenced by the context in which she reads it; her understanding of the final meaning will therefore not necessarily be that which the author intended.

An example of a conflict of contexts between that of the author and that of the reader is seen in the apparent sexism of Rousseau’s *Confessions*. Rousseau’s implied reader is male; his opening passage addresses his “fellow men” (Rousseau, 1953: 17), and thereafter he addresses his reader as “he”. In a modern context this refusal to

acknowledge a female reader may be offensive; however, in the eighteenth-century context in which Rousseau writes this would have been an accepted practice. In addition to this, Rousseau, throughout his text, looks for love and acceptance from both men and women; as he asks for the same love and acceptance from his reader it may be inferred that he would be equally happy to accept this from a female reader as from a male one. This calls into question the assumed gender of the implied reader. Rousseau ostensibly writes for men; however, one of his aims in writing his *Confessions* is to elicit love, and it is primarily from women that Rousseau requires love:

The first, the greatest, the strongest, the most inextinguishable of all my needs are entirely one of the heart. It was the need for intimate companionship, for a companionship as intimate as possible, which was the chief reason why I needed a woman rather than a man, a woman friend rather than a man friend. (Rousseau, 1953: 386)

Thus Rousseau's apparent sexism may be nothing more than an observation of contemporary conventions. Since this convention is at odds with modern notions of equality, the reader may derive meanings from the text which the author did not intend.

While the difference in contexts between the author and the reader may undermine the reader's ability to interpret the text, as in the case of the gender of the implied reader, the distance from the text afforded by this difference may enable the reader to understand more clearly the wider circumstances of the events Rousseau records. While Rousseau experienced the events he describes, and may therefore be seen to comprehend these actions better than anyone else, the fact that he is so close to the events may prevent him from understanding them clearly. An example of this would be the conspiracies Rousseau believes surround him. He explains his persecution to his reader:

Being forced to speak in spite of myself, I am also obliged to conceal myself, to be cunning, to try to deceive, and to abase myself to conduct that is not in my nature. The ceiling under which I live has eyes, the walls that enclose me have ears. Uneasy and distracted, surrounded by vigilant and malevolent watches, I hurriedly put on paper a few disjointed sentences that I have hardly time to re-read, let alone correct. I know that despite the huge barriers which are ceaselessly erected all round me, they are always afraid that the truth will escape through some crack. (Rousseau, 1953: 263)

While this passage indicates the truth of Rousseau's experience, the reader, reading in a modern context, may infer a different meaning from his account. Despite Rousseau's conviction that his friends conspired against him and that "Diderot and Grimm seemed to make it their business to set the *bosses* against me by informing them that if they were not more comfortably off it was all my fault" (Rousseau, 1953: 355-356), the reader is able to infer from Rousseau's increasingly paranoid accounts that this is probably not the case. It is more likely that Rousseau was suffering from paranoia and that his friends became too overbearing in their attempts to help Rousseau manage his affairs, something he would find unbearable, being unable (by his own admission) to tolerate any constraints set upon him. Thus the reader is able to see both the truth of Rousseau's experience and the factual truth of the events which Rousseau is unable to understand.

Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, on the other hand, was first published in 2000; the reader, therefore, reads the text in a similar modern context to that in which the author wrote. As postmodern theory is widely recognized, at least, amongst more educated readers, the reader is more likely to be willing to accept the undecidability of Eggers' text and his questioning of his autobiography's ability to convey his experiences of life. As the reader has some knowledge of the context in which Eggers

writes she is less likely to question the choices Eggers makes concerning the structure and content of his autobiography.

The meaning of the text is determined by the reader's interpretation, which, in turn, is informed by the reader's expectations. Since one of the fundamental expectations of autobiography is that the text will adhere to some concept of truthfulness, it is necessary to ask: "Are we expecting fidelity to the facts, to experience, to themselves, to the historical moment, to social community, to prevailing beliefs about diverse identities, to the norms of autobiography as a literary genre itself?" (Smith and Watson, 2001: 12).

The reader's expectations of both Rousseau and Eggers' texts are that the autobiographies will allow the reader to understand the author's experiences of life. However, Rousseau and Eggers differ in their approaches to depicting their lives. Rousseau claims he will tell the entire truth of his life, allowing the reader unmediated access to his thoughts, feelings and experiences. Rousseau's fidelity to the historical moment makes it necessary for the reader to read his work from within the (reconstructed) context in which Rousseau wrote as the difference in historical moments may impact on the reader's understanding of the text. Rousseau's subscription to contemporary conventions may conflict with the reader's understanding of these conventions in a modern context. Rousseau also claims fidelity to facts and to experience through his claim to tell the entire truth about himself; however, he cannot fulfill this claim, which, in turn, casts doubt on his depiction of his life. Eggers, on the other hand, does not claim complete fidelity to either facts or emotions. Eggers subscribes to the historical moment in which he writes through his application of postmodern conventions, through which he claims fidelity to experience,

but not to fact or to emotion. This means that any falsehoods, whether they are acknowledged or not, or whether the author draws attention to them or not, are expected. Thus the reader uses these falsifications to characterize the author. As Rousseau does not acknowledge errors in his work, these errors are seen either as mistakes or as a deliberate attempt on Rousseau's part to mislead the reader.

The aim of autobiography is to allow the reader to understand the person of the author. However, autobiography will only ever be able to present a version of the author's life. Therefore, when reading the text the reader participates in the process of creating meaning by evaluation of the information given and the way in which it is presented. Thus Rousseau's and Eggers' attempts to direct the reader's response to their texts may have an impact on the perceived sincerity of their accounts: as they are no longer simply trying to present the reader with an account of themselves, they also attempt to influence the meaning-making process of the reader, so that the reader will view them as they wish to be seen.

Conclusion.

Autobiography as a genre is becoming increasingly popular. Any text claiming to be autobiographical must subscribe to some measure of truthfulness; however notions of truth are contested. Autobiography is classified as non-fiction; therefore, any text claiming to be autobiography must, by definition, subscribe to the verifiable facts of the author's life. Should the text not adhere to the factual truth of the events of the author's life, what I have here referred to as microscopic truth, the text becomes a work of fiction and therefore is no longer an autobiography. The reader will not accept attempts by the author to pass off as fact events that did not occur in their life. Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*, for example, has been completely discredited and is no longer accepted as an autobiography due to the author's misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth.

However, despite the fact autobiography must, of necessity, subscribe to microscopic truth, the primary aim of autobiography is not to merely recount the facts of existence. Rather, autobiography exists to tell the subjective truth, the deliberative truth, of the author's experience of life so as to allow the reader to see what sort of person the autobiographer is. Therefore, if the reader gains an apprehension of the realities of the author's self and life, she will generally overlook some measure of factual inaccuracy. Such generosity is, of course, dependent on the reader's sense that the author is honest in recounting his experiences and does not attempt to pass off as fact information he knows to be false. That is, the reader expects the autobiographer to remain faithful to the deliberative truth of his life and not seek to deceive the reader.

Although the reader will not accept intentional attempts by the author to deceive, the structural limitations of the text, imposed by the textual framework of the autobiography, and the expectations of autobiography mean that the life story told by the autobiographer can never be a simple, wholly mimetic record of a life and self; it will always be multiply mediated. Therefore, total factual accuracy is not possible. It is not only factual truth which is mediated; the cultural norms which shape the autobiographer's identity mediate the deliberative truth of the author's account. As do the social constraints placed upon the reader by the publisher and by the reader's expectations. Furthermore, the autobiographer writes within a specific historical and cultural context which influences his understanding and account of his life. Thus the autobiographer will be unable to subscribe fully to either microscopic or deliberative truth.

However, beyond the deliberative truth of a life is an essential truth of that life, which is the truth that lies beyond the appearance of experiences and is not immediately apparent. Rousseau's implicit plea for the reader to understand that he is a good man points to an essential truth of Rousseau – which is that he wants to be loved and understood. In *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* Eggers' ambivalence to his reader, his alternating rage and implicit requests for understanding, as well as his alternating belief in the superiority of his methods of childrearing and his fear that the way he is raising Toph will damage his brother point to the essential truth of the insecurity Eggers feels. Just as microscopic truth is subordinate to deliberative truth; deliberative truth is subordinate to essential truth. The reader does not have access to the unmediated

deliberative truth of the autobiographer's life; however, the author's attempts to tell the deliberative truth point to a deeper truth which the reader may determine upon a deeper reflection of the text. It is this essential truth which characterizes the autobiographer and therefore fulfils the aim of autobiography to display a representation of the person of the author.

Rousseau makes repeated claims about the personal truth of his account, that is, the truth regarding what he feels and the sort of man he is. His explicit protestations indicate a fairly simplistic understanding of truth; although Rousseau understands the difficulties of adhering strictly to microscopic truth, he claims he shall reveal the complete truth of his personal life, which only he can know. Although he does subscribe, to a degree, to both of these types of truth, in the postmodern context which recognizes the complexities of truth and in which the reader now reads, the reader's belief in the honesty of Rousseau's account is compromised. Furthermore, Rousseau's attempts to manipulate the reader's response contradict his declarations to tell the simple truth of his experiences and to allow the reader to make up her own mind. This further compromises the reader's belief in his sincerity. Rousseau attempts to manipulate the reader's response to the deliberative truth of his life to point to what he believes is the greatest truth – that Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a good man. That “[never] for a moment in his life could Jean-Jacques have been a man without feelings or compassion” (Rousseau, 1953: 333). Although Rousseau's explicit understandings of truth are fairly simple, his motives for telling his story indicate that truth in his *Confessions* is more complex than he claims. Although he states his goal is to present a faithful portrait of himself and to offer himself as a model and an example

for men, his implicit request for love and understanding show that his motives are complex. Rousseau further complicates his simplistic claim to tell the truth of his life through his implicit hierarchy of truths. He claims that factual truth is subordinate to deliberative truth in his autobiography; he also indicates that deliberative truth is subordinate to the essential truth of Rousseau's goodness. However, this complicated perception of truth, which contradicts Rousseau's claim to tell the simple truth, points to a deeper truth – that Rousseau wanted to be loved and understood. The truth he tells, and his failure at times to subscribe to his own explicit claims of truthfulness, allow the reader to see a representation of the person of Rousseau.

Eggers, on the other hand, does not make any claims to the simplicity of the truth in his autobiography. He explicitly states that he is not entirely faithful to the factual or microscopic truth of his life. In addition to this, the surreal aspects of the text leave the reader in no doubt that not everything she reads is factually accurate. However, as *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* claims to be autobiographical Eggers must restrict himself, in the main, to describing real events. Paradoxically, the fact that Eggers draws attention to his misrepresentation of facts indicates that he is not trying to deceive the reader. This, coupled with the fact that the reader is likely to read the text in a postmodern context with an understanding of postmodernism's questions regarding the notion of simple truth, means that the reader will accept Eggers' account, despite him not subscribing strictly to the microscopic truth of his life. However, as the aim of the text is to reveal the person of the author and his experiences of life the reader will not accept major changes which interfere with the text's claim to tell the story of the author's life.

Nor will the reader accept changes which interfere with the subjective, deliberative truth of his account. Minor changes, however, which point to the deliberative truth of his life will be accepted as these falsifications uphold the ultimate aim of autobiography because they allow the author to convey more effectively his feelings and attitudes.

Thus it may be seen that there are many types of truth in autobiography. As an autobiographical text claims to recount the real events of a person's life the microscopic truth of the account is important. However, the facts of an autobiography are subordinate to the personal truth of the author's identity and experiences. Although both the microscopic and the deliberative truth of the text are important, the reader, reading in a postmodern context, understands that the mediated nature of all representation – of which autobiography is merely one genre – can never convey the complete deliberative truth or microscopic truth. While the reader does realize that she will never receive the unmediated truth, she will not accept deliberate attempts by the author to deceive.

The reader is interested in the deliberative truth of the author's experience, as well as his understanding and uses of truth in his autobiography, all of which allow the reader to recognize a deeper, essential truth of the author. Thus there is no simple notion of truth in autobiography, despite the fundamental claim of autobiography to be true. The truths within autobiography have to be hierarchized and contextualized in order for the text to fulfill its role as an autobiography by allowing the reader to understand the truth of the person of the autobiographer. Rousseau's and Eggers' explicit understandings of truth in their autobiographies differ greatly from each other. However, these diverse

understandings and deployments of truth illustrate the complex nature of truth in autobiography and the difference that may sometimes be seen between the truths the autobiographer claims to tell and the truths the reader infers from the text. The fact that both these texts are accepted as autobiographies, and therefore as subscribing to some form of truth of the author's life, indicate a broadening of the concept of what may be considered truthful and what may be considered autobiographical.

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