Autobiographical Texts: Acting within a Network
Observations on Genre and Power Relations in the German-Speaking Regions from 1400 to 1620

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As an expression of man's knowledge of himself, autobiography has its foundation in the... phenomenon that we call self-consciousness.... The history of autobiography is in a certain sense the history of human self-consciousness.

... an objective, demonstrable image of the structure of individuality...

– GEORG MISCH

For man can never actually know himself as he is known by God, who better knows what there is in man, and what he would do, than man knows himself.

– JAKOB ANDREAE

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The subject of both quotations is self-knowledge. While the twentieth-century scholar of autobiography presumes its possibility without question and interprets autobiographies as formulations of self-knowledge, the Protestant theologian of the sixteenth century is fundamentally sceptical about the possibility of self-knowledge. His scepticism takes on added weight when we consider that Jakob Andreae was himself the author of an autobiography, which this article will foreground, along with two other autobiographical texts as key examples. Andreae’s explicit position gives reason to doubt whether autobiographical texts of this period can be understood in their specificity and intentions by drawing on the categories of “self-knowledge” and “individuality.”

Starting from this doubt, I would like to pursue a different set of questions. Autobiographical texts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries quite clearly indicate that the authors see themselves as depicting and depicted “I’s anchored in a network of social relations, and that they understand their autobiographical texts as a particular communicative action within this network of relations. It is thus necessary to clarify the anchorage and function of autobiographical texts within authors’ respective networks before more particular questions can be asked. Moreover, the kinds of questions that are restricted, for instance, to the concept of the self as articulated in writing or to mentality require answers that recognize the connection between these circumstances on the one hand and, on the other, the networks and patterns of social relations in which they became embedded in the process of being written down.

The sources on which I base my study are some 200 autobiographical texts from the German-speaking regions – that is, including Switzerland – written during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Most of them are written in German, although some are in Latin and one in Hebrew. Frequently there is also a mixing of languages, so that expressions, sentences or entire excerpts in one or more other languages are interspersed with the main language. In contrast to “ego documents,” which originated in a court of law or through other

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