Autobiography as Social Practice in Early Modern German-Speaking Areas

Historical, methodological, and theoretical perspectives[1]

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Early modern autobiographical writings do not conform to a classical understanding of autobiography as a well-defined literary genre. The selves that have been articulated in these texts likewise are not very similar to the modern, autonomous individuals that we expect in autobiographical writing, at least in relation to European sources. Modern as well as pre-modern, European as well as non-European autobiographical writing have nonetheless been read widely by scholars interested in questions of individuality, and the genre of autobiography itself is still following the lead of Jacob Burckhardt, in spite of the arguments that have been raised against this view.[2] These texts have been used as material for biographical narratives, as well as questions of experience and subjectivity.[3] The following essay will look first at early modern autobiographical texts from a different angle, focusing on communication and writing strategies, thus providing in short form the results of a larger study.[4] It will, then, reflect in methodological and theoretical terms on what has been presented in the first part, addressing the more classical topics of scholarship on autobiography, as well as questions of authorship and agency and of reading the texts as historical sources.

I. Material, questions, and results

When Nicolaus Cusanus visited his place of birth, the small town of Kues on the river Mosel, in 1449, he decided to produce a very short autobiography, written in Latin (consisting of half a page of printed text). At that time, he was 48 years old and a doctor in canon law; he had made a career in the service of the Roman church and was about to be appointed cardinal. In addition, as is well known, he

1 Many thanks for critical remarks and comments to Hülya Adak, Thomas M. Safley, and the participants of the Wissenschaftskolleg Seminar on "Literary Theory: Comparative and/or Global II," Berlin, July 2003. – The first part of this essay was published in Jancke 2002c.

2 Burckhardt 1860, Misch 1949-1969, Niggl 1977 and Niggl 1989/1998; recent historical collections: Porter 1997, von Greyerz & Medick & Veit 2001, van Dülmen 2001; pointed criticism of the traditional approach: Bynum 1980/1982, Davis 1986, Sabean 1996, see also the review of van Dülmen 2001 by Jancke 2002a with further references.

3 Critical remarks on this way of dealing with autobiographical writing: Günther 2001.

4 Jancke 2002b; detailed references can be found there.

was a distinguished mathematician, philosopher, and theologian, as well as a prolific writer in a number of other genres. In his autobiography, which he ordered to be written ("*iussit scribi*"), he speaks about himself in the third person–"he" and "Nicolaus de Cusa." He is rather sketchy about his life and concentrates on a small number of facts–his parents' names, his father's profession, his graduation at Padua–but he doesn't mention the subject of his graduation, canon law, his services to Pope Eugenius IV, and his nomination for cardinal. He sums up in the following words: "And in order that all should know that the Holy Roman Church regards neither the place nor the family of birth, but is instead a very liberal donor of rewards for virtues he, the same cardinal, here ordered this story to be written to the praise of God ..."[5]

Let us stop here to look at what Cusanus is doing. The image he draws of himself does not consist of a full and richly detailed picture of his life. Instead it gives a few facts, reducing his life to a mere skeleton and omitting many things we would like to know. He mentions a very small range of topics–seemingly well chosen–among which his career, Pope Eugenius IV, and the relationship between the Pope and the new cardinal play a dominant role, but he leaves out many other topics. Rather than displaying a mere inability to express himself, the otherwise so articulate clergyman had a precise view of what he wanted as he let his readers explicitly know in the sentence quoted above: "And in order that all should know..." He addressed an audience that he called "*cuncti*," or "all"; but since his text is in Latin he must have meant scholars, most likely educated clergymen like himself. What he was doing, then, was *communicating* his self, that is, certain features of it, to other people, envisioning his career and himself in a single important relationship. Thus, his autobiography is a *social practice* that has an *audience* in mind, the action itself occurring at a certain *time*, in a certain *personal situation*, and being part of a certain *social context*.

We could go on now and explore this individual autobiography as an *individual* practice in detail. But let us first take a step into a more general direction and look at the other autobiographical writings of the period, concentrating on what can be said about autobiographical writing as a *social* practice. In order to do this, it is necessary first to consider contexts, then languages and audiences, and finally ways of acting in relationships.

1. Texts

I have collected 234 autobiographical writings by 179 persons. That is to say, several authors wrote more than one autobiographical text. All the texts have already been printed; that means that we have those which were given to a print-

[5] Cusanus 1983: 603 (written at Kues, 21 October 1449): "Et ut sciant cuncti sanctam Romanam ecclesiam non respicere ad locum vel genus nativitatis, sed esse largissimam remuneratricem virtutum, hinc hanc historiam in dei laudem iussit scribi ipse cardinalis...".

ing public–by the authors themselves or by some later editors who deemed the respective document worth reading by a wider audience. The texts cover their authors' lives in part or more fully, and the authors wrote them on their own, in some cases after being asked or urged to do so, but never so strongly that it could be interpreted as them having been forced to do so. In most cases, the authors wrote about themselves in the first person, while some chose to write in the third person, as we witnessed with Cusanus. Further, all of them were male scholars who might have known examples from antiquity. Others, for example abbesses and soldiers, chose the "we"-form, mostly mixed with the "I"-form, all of these stressing the fact of their belonging to a group or community.[6]

The texts cover a wide range of topics, either briefly, as in the case of Cusanus, or in detail. Two themes are especially prominent: (1) education insofar as it is received away from home, at schools and universities, in businesses, at courts, and in monasteries; and (2) adult dealings in professional functions in business, church, and politics. Besides strictly autobiographical topics, there are often others, most importantly theology, family, business, and politics. Some subjects, however, are always missing, among them very often the events of their childhood. Other themes are included which we might not necessarily consider as autobiographical in a strict sense.[7] Therefore, this could lead us to the conclusion that these writers might have lacked the capability to produce a proper autobiographical text. Yet, it seems much more fruitful to ask instead what the authors had in mind when they included one topic and omitted another.

In the wide field of egodocuments or self-narratives (*Selbstzeugnisse*),[8] this sample obviously contains more than autobiographies narrowly defined. Of the kinds of egodocuments classified by Benigna von Krusenstjern, however, my sample includes just autobiographical documents; the writer's person appears as a subject being described, not just as a narrator or commentator. The texts vary considerably in length, style, and genre, and they are often mixtures of various sorts; none of those features made me exclude a text. All of them were written between 1400 and 1620, the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, but most of them in the sixteenth century. My main interest was the situation of writing and communication. Therefore, I took the *period the authors were writing in,* not the *period they were writing about* as relevant for assembling my sources.

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6 For the sense of belonging to a group, articulated by a narrative perspective of "we" in autobiographical writing, see also Schlotheuber 2004; I am grateful to Eva Schlotheuber for giving me her essay in manuscript before publication and for many illuminating discussions.

7 More detailed discussion: Jancke 1996: 97-118.

8 This has been a much debated field recently in early modern and medieval history; see Jancke 2002b: 8f., Schulze 1996, Krusenstjern 1994; Arnold & Schmolinsky & Zahnd 1999, Schlotheuber 2004.

2. Contexts

All the autobiographical writings in the sample originate in the German-speaking lands, including Switzerland, the Habsburg lands, and Bohemia. That means that the authors spent at least part of their lives in those places and also made that fact a subject of their writing. Most of them were living in German-speaking lands at the time of writing, but not all originally came from there. Some immigrated from Italy, France, the Netherlands, or today's Slovenia or Croatia.

Nearly all the autobiographical writers were Christians (178) and male (171), and they possessed at least a rudimentary Latin education received at grammar schools or universities. Accordingly, many of them later worked as theologians, lawyers, and doctors, often in service of political authorities of the Holy Roman Empire, of territorial states, or of towns. Merchants are not found in large numbers (23). Artisans and teachers mostly practiced just for a time, afterwards often starting a scholarly career; at the time of writing almost all of them were active as scholars. A considerable number of male and female authors belonged to the nobility or the patriciate (one-third). So, autobiographical writing of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is not the bourgeois activity that we have come to expect. In total, some two-thirds of the authors belonged to a special secular or religious estate. Of the eight female authors, three were abbesses and four nobles. Most of the authors by far, male and female alike, have to be counted among the social elites of the Christian majority; a third of them were clergy. The only Jewish writer, Josel of Rosheim, was a merchant, community leader, and at the same time the most important Jewish political representative in the Holy Roman Empire of the sixteenth century.

The autobiographical writings lead us into varied social contexts. The writers set out to articulate a variety of autobiographical perspectives, according to their religious and gender affiliation, their social position, occupation, and status, and not least according to their motivations, abilities, and intentions. Moreover, the authors' perspectives often stood in opposition to others and could be fiercely contested. Polemical and apologetic texts are not uncommon. Some social milieus and occupations are strongly represented, the foremost being that of male scholars and clergy. Cusanus belongs to both groups, and he also shows some typical traits of such writers, in addressing the topics of professional success, upward social mobility, and an important social relationship with a male superior. In his autobiography, he articulates the perspective of a successful high-ranking Roman Catholic cleric, stressing his own qualifications and the recognition of those qualifications by a long-term employer of his services. Even if he did not know about other clerics and scholars who were also writing autobiographical texts, he in fact shared values, experiences, and behavior with many of those people, and like a growing number of others, he chose to communicate these through an autobiographical text.

3. Languages and audiences

That Cusanus wrote his autobiography in Latin seems to be self-evident and not in need of further exploration; he was after all a scholar and a Roman Catholic cleric, trained in Latin and using it as a common language on many occasions. Moreover, until the Reformation, all of his fellow scholars and clerics also wrote their autobiographical texts in Latin, with one exception: Johann of Soest (1448-1506), who was a physician–and therefore also had a Latin education–at the time of writing his autobiography but had been earlier a professional court singer and was still a poet writing in German. He chose the German language and the poetic form for his autobiography, too.

Cusanus and Soest exemplify the two possibilities that existed throughout the studied period for those who were Latin-educated. Roughly half of them turned to Latin, the other half to German, when writing their autobiographical texts. Mixtures of both also occurred very often. Their choice of language related them to their social surroundings, *expressing* the culture they belonged to and at the same time *shaping* that culture themselves. In either case, the language of the text played a part. Writing in Latin, which is the case for one third of all texts, authors related to other Latin-educated scholars as their social group as well as their audience. The relationships that mattered here were mostly relationships among men, representing a special type of male bonding, with ritualized forms of behavior among themselves, excluding the uneducated as well as those populations and scholars using another learned language than Latin. Modern scholars, for example Merry Wiesner-Hanks, have analyzed male bonding among sixteenth century artisans,[9] but it was a strong feature also of learned cultures, giving participants a distinguished status. All the female authors wrote in German or another vernacular, even if they were able to write in Latin and did so in other cases, like the Nuremberg abbess Charitas Pirckheimer. When addressing her fellow nuns, German was the adequate language for her, also being the language of her dealings with political and clerical authorities.

Writing in Latin or in German–or, for that matter, some other vernacular like French, Dutch, or Italian–did not simply draw a clear dividing line between scholars and non-scholars. In reality, scholars were themselves following different paths in this respect. And to complicate matters further, some scholars specifically addressed a scholarly audience in German, as did Daniel Greiser, a Lutheran clergyman and superintendent at the Saxon residence of Dresden (1504-1591), who wrote in 1587 as a very old man. His words are especially illuminating. In the introduction to his printed German autobiography, he declares that he does not intend in the least to address an uneducated public but mainly his clerical subordinates, the pastors in and around Dresden. This was not only

[9] Wiesner 1989.

made apparent by the Latin phrases he mixed into his German text but also, so he argues, by the contents of his writing: In describing his own life he was useful as a model for his professional colleagues and subordinates but not for common people. He tells his readers that if he had wished to be of use for the uneducated, he would have made religious doctrine his topic.

What we can see here is that even a printed text written in the vernacular could clearly be aimed at a limited, elite social group. So we have to look not just at the language of an autobiographical text but also at the writer him- or herself, at his or her knowledge of languages, and at the more or less explicit references to the intended audience. Most autobiographical writers (eight-ninths) had an audience in mind, and most of those specified which audience. For all social groups of writers, family and descendants came foremost. In this respect neither Cusanus nor Daniel Greiser was typical. But writing for family and descendants did not mean aiming at a strictly private and exclusive audience. Instead, kinship and other networks generally seem to have been part of a type of public. Most writers (three-quarters of those writing with an audience in mind) sought to reach their audience by manuscript, and this kind of distribution (for often manuscripts were copied and/or circulated) was a form of publication which sufficed the specified and personally close audiences the authors had in mind in so many cases. The authors who got their autobiographical writings printed, on the other hand, did not necessarily intend a general public but also some limited and specified group as audience, a point exemplified by the case of Daniel Greiser.

4. Acting in relationships

The autobiographical texts strongly suggest that authors were acting socially when writing them. This is most evident when we consider languages and audiences. Furthermore, it emerges clearly that autobiographical writers were not isolated individuals but social beings, belonging to certain social, professional, religious, and gender groups, moving in certain social contexts and relationships. This is, additionally, what they themselves described in their autobiographical writings. Let's look now at what they were doing exactly when writing autobiographical texts. I'll concentrate on two points.

First, all those who were writing for their family and descendants did so from a position of authority. They were heads of a domestic household, constituted by marriage, and they wanted to communicate useful information as well as an exemplary life to the next generation, mostly making their didactic intentions explicit. Insofar as the writers were male–and they nearly all were–their information as well as their example could be used directly by their male descendants. In that way writers strengthened their social position as heads of households as well as stressing their social roles as professionals. Scholars and clergymen seem to have been most active, but those writing as the heads of other types of house-

holds–convents, monasteries, bishops' and princely courts–should be included here. Nearly all female writers were heads of some sort of household at the time of writing, either as widows or as abbesses.

Second, male Christian scholars and clergymen emerge as the numerically dominant group of autobiographical writers. One type of relationship stands out as the most prominent among them: patronage. Cusanus, again, is quite typical here. What he describes sketchily but unmistakably is his relationship to the main patron of his life and career, Pope Eugenius IV. Since the Council of Basel when Cusanus abandoned his former patron, the count of Manderscheid, and his former support of the Council, in favor of supporting a papal church, Pope Eugenius IV had acted as his patron and Cusanus as Eugenius's client. By writing his short autobiography, Cusanus demonstrates this patronage relationship and honors his patron, the pope. His audience, "*cuncti*" (all), is also part of the action insofar as the act of honoring a patron needs others to stand by and appreciate it. His audience has to understand without further explanation the character of the relationship as well as the norms of behavior. So Cusanus is not just *describing* patronage but also *acting* as client. His autobiography is his *way of acting* here. The relevant social knowledge on the side of the audience could be taken for granted.

As in the case of Cusanus, autobiographical texts were often used as a way of acting directly within specific relationships. Autobiographical writing as social practice has many facets, several of which center around the world of scholars and their patronage relationships, and this continues into the sixteenth century and Protestant surroundings. In this respect, Cusanus was not in the least an old-fashioned writer, and the Reformation was no watershed that put an end to or limited such practices. On the contrary, the Reformation seems to have encouraged them. This would be another story, however.

The implications of this analysis are historical, methodological, and theoretical. First, we cannot go on telling the story of the rise of the Western individual, at least not in combination with autobiographical writing. Second, we will have to look at contexts, situations, and strategies as part of our methodology for discovering the uses of autobiographical writing. Third and last, such an approach will have consequences for our understanding of autobiography as a literary genre as well, situated as it is in a wide field of different ways of writing about oneself and very much concerned with shaping social relationships that matter.

II. Categories in question: autobiography, self, and authorship

This essay did not begin with a clear definition of autobiography. Similarly, I did not start my *research* with a clear-cut conception of what my sources would and should be. Quite the contrary: When I realized that early modern autobiographical writing for the most part did not conform to modern views of autobi-

ography as a well-defined literary genre, I decided to accommodate my own understanding in order to be able to grasp early modern views of this type of text.

I took such an approach for methodological as well as theoretical reasons. Being interested in the historical dimensions of our own societies as well as the historical dimensions of our contemporary scholarly knowledge means taking into account that there might be differences between our own categories and those of former societies. So, when I discovered that there are few early modern texts which could be categorized as autobiographies in a modern sense, but quite large numbers which might be called autobiographical writing in a wider sense, there were two options. First, I could have stated that evidently there was a sense of autobiography which was minimally developed and, consequently, disappointing for the modern scholar.[10] Second, the state of things might be seen as a starting point. There were few autobiographies, but lots of autobiographical writing, and it would not be worthwhile to dismiss all these fascinating, different, and creative texts simply because they were unfit for my categories. So I decided to follow this line of reasoning and to find out about the meanings, aims, strategies, and uses of early modern autobiographical writing. This also meant that there was a further methodological issue involved: In order to uncover what was implied in autobiographical writing for early modern writers, it would be necessary to contextualize the sources–in their own times and settings.

Using the methodological tool of contextualizing sources in an extensive way need not end in blind empiricism, as an aim in itself, amassing facts and information but getting lost without theoretical and conceptual orientation. Instead, contextualizing sources may lead to new insights and questions, helping to develop new theoretical perspectives that might then be tested on other material and maybe in different cultural settings. In my case, I decided not to collect all types of self-narratives, but just those that deal with their authors' lives briefly or amply and that the authors had written on their own. As a consequence, there are many writings included which are part of larger texts, such as family histories, city and convent chronicles, or biographical reference works. The texts comprise fewer topics than we would expect. For example, childhood would be a large and common topic in modern autobiographies from the late eighteenth century onward but is almost absent in early modern autobiographical writing. Also missing are self-reflection and description and analysis of emotional experiences, or of personal life with family and friends. There are other topics included that we wouldn't deem necessary for autobiographical writing, such as religious and theological polemics, naming of persons standing in some relation to the writer, listing of gifts given and received, prayers, and passages addressed to intended readers. Finally, autobiographical writing is strongly connected with a broad range of different types of texts, for example, poetry or hymns, account books or

[10] For this approach recently, see Velten 1995.

documents of possessions, polemics, didactic literature, or funeral sermons. There are almost no limits, and the writers' creativity is astonishing in finding themselves a place in existing conventions of writing and in combining elements of literary traditions, thereby adapting those traditions for their own uses.

The picture that emerges does not coincide with modern autobiography. Nevertheless, it is consistent in itself. Early modern autobiographical texts often are not an autonomous body of writing. Instead, numerous texts are part of a larger text. Frequently, they are a mixture of genres that deal extensively with the outer world and the relations of the writer to other persons, and they explicitly take up a dialogue with their readers. Moreover, full autobiographies from the period fit in with this picture in their main features: They are part of the larger field of autobiographical writing in their time. So, to mark this insight more pointedly, I have chosen to speak about "Autobiography as Social Practice" in the title of my paper.

For a theory of autobiographical writing, it might be useful to take the various possible traits that I have mentioned into account and add them to those features that we commonly deem to be connected with autobiography. We would thereby gain a broader range of possibilities within which to situate the texts that we are dealing with. Such an approach would have two advantages in respect to theory. First, the approach would be more inclusive, enabling us to widen our often very small basis of relevant and canonical texts. At the same time, it would make us more sensitive about mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of texts that are implied in the *categories* we make use of. We would have to think more explicitly about which texts to include in our sample, which to exclude from it, and the reasons why we should do so. Second, the approach would enable us to ask questions about why certain features would be combined by writers to make up a certain type of autobiographical writing, who did so, to what ends, with which strategies, and towards which audience. Our theoretical concepts thus would not prescribe a fixed combination of traits as elements of a static and a-historical concept. Autobiography would become one possible mixture of elements in a wide field of autobiographical writing. This would provoke our asking for the reasons underlying certain defined combinations, this way opening as well the view for different cultural and historical settings.[11]

To discuss concepts of autobiography and autobiographical writing is no mere debate of "how many texts" and "which texts." Implicit also is a way of looking for the self or, as I would prefer to say, selves or persons. In our scholarship, con-

[11] For a very fruitful theorizing of literary critics, mostly on modern autobiographical writing–taken into account in a very wide sense and called "life narrative"–and in similar directions as suggested here, see Smith & Watson 2001, esp. "Appendix A: Fifty-two Genres of Life Narrative," 183-207. See also recent work in the social sciences and anthropology on genres and context in autobiographical narratives: Chamberlain & Thompson eds. 1998.

cepts of autobiography and of the self are interrelated in many respects. Conventionally, we use autobiographical writings as sources for questions of the self. Privileging this type of text, we don't look further in search of other possible sources.[12] We also usually have a fixed set of characteristics in mind. The self we are looking for is an autonomous being, free from social and religious relationships and their obligations–but we don't speak about the support given in relationships–, a being concentrated on his inner self, his thoughts, emotions, and intellectual and artistic creativity, using his autobiographical writing for self-expression in the fullest possible sense. This very special self is said to be primarily a Western one; and not so explicitly, but distinctly, it seems to be a male, Christian, urban, intellectual, writer's or artist's self.

When looking at early modern autobiographical writing, *this* type of self doesn't seem to emerge very clearly. Instead, there is distinct stress on the outer world and the writers' social relationships. What shows up is no inner self but a person with many outward elements.[13] This result stands in analogy to those just mentioned about the forms of autobiographical writing.[14] So, obviously, there is a connection between both results, and I would like to draw the same theoretical conclusions in respect to describing persons. First, we should widen the range of possible characteristics of persons in order to realize which *concept of person* we find articulated in our respective texts. Second, we should contextualize our findings in historical and cultural as well as in personal and situational settings.[15]

In autobiographical writing, there are several *levels, articulating the writer's person*. First and most obviously, there is the person described with biographical facts, sometimes ranging chronologically from birth to the writer's present, but very often picking out some life span or just certain fields of life, not always narrated in form of a story with a plot. At least in early modern texts, there are many non-narrative and non-chronological ways of describing one's own person. Frequently the texts are very factual; often facts are interspersed among some argument or polemics. On the other hand, authors are very prominent in their role as writers, commenting on the aims and uses of their texts and addressing their readers throughout their text. So, on this level we see the writers acting directly, engaging in dialogue with an audience, describing parts of their selves, and shaping themselves as communicative actors. It is clearly recognizable that they make

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12 With a critical stance to this approach and, consequently, using other sources: Sabean 1996.

13 Contrasting these two concepts of person: Shweder & Bourne 1984.

14 See Kormann 2004, referring to Olejniczak 1996, both using the term "heterology"; on Kormann's important book, see also Jancke 2005.

15 On early modern concepts of person, see Ulbrich & Sabean 2003. At Free University, Berlin, there is also a research group "Selbstzeugnisse in transkultureller Perspektive" (Self-narratives in transcultural perspective) active focusing on concepts of person in autobiographical writing. See their homepage at <http://www.fu-berlin.de/selbstzeugnisse>; most recent publication: Jancke & Ulbrich eds. 2005.

use of the resources in writing that they have, and their practice of everyday writing is therefore relevant to our understanding of their autobiographical texts.

Equally clear is the authors' *agency as autobiographical writers*–they make use of resources and traditions in order to shape situations and relationships actively and consciously.[16] Insofar as they engage in autobiographical dialogue[17] their writing cannot be grasped by theoretical approaches, conceptualizing autobiographical texts as monologues. In this respect, as well as in others, early modern autobiographical writers present their own persons as involved in relationships, in acting and communicating with others, and in forming social positions or contending for them. Their agency as writers should lead us to reconsider not so much the death of the author as the *existence of the author*[18]–and the reader as well–and to take a new look at how writers deal with existing traditions and discourses, using them as resources in their social situations.

So, we can use *autobiographical writing as sources* in manifold ways. First, we can look at the literary traditions and conventions of writing to be found in these texts, and we can ask about the abilities of writers, their training, and the resources they were equipped with. We can further ask how they made use of the resources at their disposal. Often there were choices involved, such as that regarding languages in autobiographical writing. One important task would be to find out about such possibilities and the reasons why writers would take up one or the other alternative. Further, we can look at the role of the narrator or of the writer as a communicative actor. Here we can ask which role he or she is shaping for him- or herself, with whom and to what ends she or he might be engaging in dialogue. We can also ask about the situation of writing, about the author's position in life and society at this point, and about the incentives for writing that derive from this situation and position. For example, at the time of writing, most writers of early modern autobiographical texts were heads of some sort of household, ranging from a family household to a bishop's, prince's, or even the emperor's court, or to a convent's household. Such texts are shaped thoroughly by the writer's social position, which bears an important influence on an author's perspective on life and society. So, autobiographical texts are first and foremost sources for the writers' views as those views are shaped by their social positions, which are constituted in turn by factors of religion, status, age, and gender, among others. Lastly, we can look at biographical and other facts presented in autobiographical texts. Here we can ask in the traditional way what facts we can get hold of and how reliable the texts are in this respect. At this point we might find information differing from presentations in secondary sources and, more-

16 For this view of agency, see the work of Natalie Zemon Davis, for example Davis 1995: 203-212, Davis 2001a: 328.

17 Taking autobiographical dialogue into account as a decisive feature: Davis 1995: 5-62. 220-259; Davis 2001b.

18 See Jannidis 2000, also Biagioli & Galison (eds.) 2003, Chartier 1994.

over, differing from other primary sources. Concerning facts mentioned and described in autobiographical writings, historians' opinions differ widely. Some hold that there is no reliability to be found in autobiographical sources because of the subjectivity of the writers' perspectives. It has to be called to mind here that in all types of texts and sources there is a certain viewpoint toward reality implied, and in any case the viewpoint represents a social construction and has to be made explicit by scholars if they are to understand the source. Autobiographical texts are no different in that respect, and the much-lamented subjectivity might as well be used as one of the subjects for investigation. Other historians concentrate on the construction of reality at large in autobiographical writing, and this is also an important way of reading the sources as devices for presenting reality, and as ways of choosing material from that reality which is then woven into a narrative or argumentative strategy. We can combine those different approaches to facts and reality. There will be many ways autobiographical writing can contribute to our knowledge about societies and especially about their members' concepts of agency. What has been said above about patronage in early modern scholars' lives and autobiographical writings is one such facet of knowledge.

My arguments so far tend towards a certain approach to theoretical concepts. Our theoretical tools should be open to various elements in order not to exclude phenomena from consideration a priori, and the tools are very much in need of critical reflection.

Historical evidence played a large part in my argument. More precisely, the evidence of my sources themselves, in their forms and types, as well as their contents, was of consequence for conceptualizing our theoretical tools. I don't propose, however, to develop theory as an afterthought to empirical work in order to have so-called "objective" categories in a positivistic way. Of course, there are our own perspectives involved, and I would not want to silence them. So let me now add some remarks on what is at stake for contemporary society and what are my own views as a scholar living in a *modern* Western society.

Dealing as an historian with *early modern* societies, one of the most important factors with which I have to come to terms is the strangeness of early modern societies.[19] Constantly early modern sources confront scholars with things that are difficult to understand. There are matters that don't fit in with modern categories and that might not be clear in the least, like the body, sexuality, love, or friendship. There are terms with different meanings and a different extent of importance, compared with my own society, like "household" for instance–a very important term in political and conceptual language in early modern times, but today a less important one. There are facts of social life and social knowledge, so well-known and obvious for early modern social actors that they were never spelled out in their writings, like patronage.

[19] Pleading for a hermeneutics of strangeness towards historical societies: Medick 1992: 168.

All these are not just difficulties to be dealt with methodologically. This is one of those areas where encounters are not primarily determined by one's own terms of behavior or one's own understanding. At least there is the chance for a scholar to try to find out about conditions very different from her or his own. A scholar of *early modern* or of *pre-modern societies* generally might become used to testing the validity of his or her own modern categories, developing a stronger sense of their limits. It makes some sense in terms of contemporary politics and society in Germany to try to understand early modern autobiographical writing on their writer's own terms. Dealing with early modern sources might contribute to shaping our own theoretical concepts and to helping us build trans-cultural perspectives. Insofar as that endeavor allows us to glimpse outlooks beyond the hegemonic ones of our own society, the endeavor fulfills an important aspect of the professional role of historians, an aspect with political implications.

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