

READING NOTES on “Memory’s Plots” from Jill Ker Conway’s
When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography (New York: Knopf), 1998.

This introductory chapter provides a brief history of autobiography and characterizes it as one of the few genres that suspend readers’ disbelief and satisfy deep cravings (6). Jill Ker Conway describes the male life script of a hero on a journey full of test of his skills (*the Odyssey*), which returns the protagonist to his place in the world. She notes that in his *Confessions*, St. Augustine focuses on the inner spiritual journey instead of an outer one. Later Jean-Jacque Rousseau’s *Confessions* moved this inner journey away from sin to combine emotional and worldly events. Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* shifted to a plot of a “self-created economic man” (9), which appears in celebrities lives. Other plots include those of the “uncivilized” frontier hero, the modern quest for meaning in James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and life stories with “marginal” viewpoints (i.e., Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Jewaharlal Nehru, Mohammed Ali, and James Merrill’s account of coming out, or homosexual coming of age).

Ker Conway claims that women’s autobiography emphasizes the ways that gender and cultural forces work differently in women’s life stories. The view of women as “incompetent in or irrelevant to . . . politics and technology” (11) meant that they had little justification for telling their spiritual or political lives. Yet religious communities established the tradition for Western European women’s autobiography. Citing abbess Hildegard of Bingen, Dame Julian of Norwich, and St. Teresa of Avila, Ker Conway claims, “women’s accounts of their mystical experience set the pattern for describing a woman’s life in a way that shaped women’s subsequent narratives as definitively as the odyssey gave the underlying form to male autobiography” (13). In contrast to the visionary quality of sacred autobiographies, the “secular version of women’s narratives emerged in the bourgeois preoccupation with romantic love, marriage, family and property” (13). The “archetypal” form of a female life appeared in the romance plot, which linked the “quest for an ideal mate with property and social mobility” (13). The plot ends when the emotional, non-intellectual heroine finds a mate.

Interest in erotic adventure, family, property and the primacy of the emotional fulfillment of private life” (14) transformed the goal of the female plot to finding a husband instead of God; the steps to this goal appear in the dynamics of courtship. The Western heroine has little agency or self-definition; those who do seem scandalous. “(H)umanitarian concern . . . [encouraged] a new kind of woman autobiographer, the escaped female slave who could ignore the social taboos . . . about female sexuality” (15) The female slave’s story relied on the journey to freedom but did not “threaten gender categories because they fit with the image of the slave as victim, and because white readers could feel secure that such strength was safely contained within the boundaries of racial subordination” (15). In the second half of the 19th century, women gained the power to do good works but not to have or achieve ambitions. Women did not tell about their strategies for success and replaced passion with service as a “governing force” (16). Stereotypes “affirm the man of action and the suffering or redemptive female” (16). Life stories tell ways the individual “has negotiated the problem of self-awareness and has broken the internalized code a culture supplies” so we can reflect on our own lives (17).