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Title of Thesis: Autobiography in the Age of Democratic  
Revolution: A Study with Special Reference to  
Benjamin Franklin and Jean Jacques  
Rousseau.

## **Findings:**

The purview of the thesis is to look at the writing of autobiography in the eighteenth century in Europe and America, with particular focus on *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, and on *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau*. This period has been chosen for study since it was a time of great social and political change in the Western world, and witnessed two revolutions that changed the way people viewed themselves and the society to which they belonged. Benjamin Franklin played an important role in the American Revolution, and his autobiography is a document that records the working of an active revolutionary at a crucial time in his country's history. The work of Jean Jacques Rousseau played its part by laying the groundwork for the political philosophy that gained currency and anticipated the French Revolution in many ways.

A section of the thesis is taken up with examining the views of historians and political writers, to come to an understanding of this crucial phase of development in the western world. Definitions related to concepts of democracy provide an insight into the understanding of how individuals characterize the self, and relate directly to the projections of personality that shape an autobiography, building on the existing preoccupation in the western world with self-examination. Historians who seek a direct link between autobiographical writing and the records of the time period under study have been examined in this context. The historians Alexis de Tocqueville and R. R. Palmer were crucial to an understanding of the period in which fledgling democracies were being established. The notion of individualism is examined, since it directly links democracy to the writing of autobiography, although the term evoked a fear of lawlessness in conservative elements of society, and was seen as a cornerstone of democratic revolutions by liberals. Particular attention has been paid to the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, and of Karl J. Weintraub with respect to a philosophical understanding of the role assumed by autobiographers and historians.

An ancillary line of research in the writing of the thesis has been to look at the work of several critical theorists working on the art of autobiographical writing. The area of literature has received a great deal of attention since the 1960s, and views put forward on the subject are often at variance with each other. A part of this writing has lead to an examination of the

relationship between the writing of autobiography and the writing of fiction, and the amount of over-lap between the two has also merited attention, since the writing of fiction as well as the recording of non-fiction involves the narrative arrangement of that which purports to be reality, alternating the focus between personalities, and events.

The crux of the thesis has been to posit one alongside the other, to record and analyse the similarities and the variance between Franklin and Rousseau. The writings of both authors contain a sense of social prophecy, poised as they are at the start of modernity, and the dominant preoccupations of the age are reflected in their writings. Each autobiographer sees himself as having privileged access to the inner self, which by the 18<sup>th</sup> century has broken into its private and public faces. In the writing of autobiography, the most democratic of literary forms, the self-recording consciousness grew within a particular historical context. The two autobiographies under study were prompted by a novel vision of human life that viewed the self as a separate category from a social cluster. The political and cultural revolution spanned either side of the Atlantic and encompassed Western society as a whole, and this accounts to a certain extent for the impact of these two books.

Acknowledging that the protean subject of autobiography covers historical record, literary artifact, as well as personal and psychological revelation, the aim of this thesis has been to examine the texts as a means of arriving at an understanding both of the author and of the age to which he belonged.