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AUTOBIOGRAPHY WITHOUT BORDERS

By Rosemarie Bodenheimer

WHERE IS "Victorian autobiography" in the late 1990s? Everywhere and nowhere. Always contested as a genre, autobiography has stretched its fragile boundaries and diffused itself among the many forms of self-representation that interest contemporary critics: travel narratives, letters, journals, fiction, poetry, essays, biography. This diffusion is in many ways a fruitful development, although it raises the question of whether "Victorian autobiography" is still a meaningful category to use in describing critical work. Although I concentrate here on a number of recent books that flourish the word "autobiography" in their titles, I come to this review with a sense that some of the most vital work on Victorian self-representation may be flying under different banners.

The 1980s and early 1990s produced some defining work, both in autobiography theory and in studies of Victorian autobiography. Avrom Fleischman (1983) and Linda Peterson (1986) concentrated on the narrative patterns, adapted from literature, myth, or spiritual autobiography, with which Victorian autobiographers constructed their stories and themselves. Jonathan Loesberg (1986) defined the rhetorical possibilities of the retrospective form for thinkers like Mill and Newman who found in autobiography a way to substantiate shifts in their philosophical positions through the powers of narrative. In these books, as well as in more general theorizing, the perennial questions of autobiography theory were debated and re-debated. Is autobiography a definable genre, a narrative bordering ambiguously on fiction and biography, or an effect of all writing? Does it refer to truths about a life, or is it necessarily fictional? What is the status of the "I," split between the speaking and acting subject, and how can we talk about the temporal split between the present writer and the past subject of autobiography? Is the self prior to autobiography, or is it an effect of writing?

The intensity with which such questions were asked subsided in the second, largely feminist, wave of autobiography criticism, which exploded the canon, historicized "literariness," and read autobiography as a form of cultural biography. Books by Julia Swindells, Valerie Sanders, Regenia Gagnier, and Mary Jean Corbett investigated the narrative self-representation of women and working-class autobiographers and elaborated the differences between autobiographies of middle-class literary men, read as narratives that create "autonomous" liberal subjectivities and professional identities, and the autobiographies of women, for whom class allegiances and gender prohibitions constrain and divide the expression of self. It was not just that the familiar roll call — Carlyle, Newman, Mill,

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Ruskin, Gosse, with or without Darwin or Trollope — was expanded to include Harriet Martineau, Margaret Oliphant, and others. During this period of Victorian studies, a significant divide was created between the possibilities for bourgeois male and female self-representation.

Mary Jean Corbett's *Representing Femininity* (1992), the most recent major book in this group, offers excellent discussions of the many ways in which women shaped autobiography so as to protect their identification with the private sphere and avoid the powerful Victorian disapproval of self-promotion and self-exposure. It is characteristic of contemporary work in ranging widely — from a chapter on different models of professional self-construction in Wordsworth and Carlyle, through studies of familiar and less familiar women's autobiographies, late-Victorian actresses, and the early twentieth-century Suffragette Movement. As a well-researched cultural study, it is also typical in using the conflicts represented in autobiography as straightforward evidence for the cultural situations of women.

And after Corbett? Despite the fact that we are more aware than ever of the Victorians' immense interest in writing, reading, and talking about life writing, and despite all the work of retrieval that has brought us in touch with scores of forgotten autobiographies, the study of Victorian autobiography is not headed clearly in any new direction. Of the two books that will receive the most extended reviews here, Laura Marcus's *Auto/biographical Discourse* concerns not autobiographies themselves but ways of talking about them, while Oliver Buckton's *Secret Selves* will most likely be read primarily as a contribution to masculine and gay studies. Although other recent books turn to familiar, for the most part male autobiographers, work that breaks new ground has yet to appear.

This may be an accident of timing, or it may be that the study of autobiography has been undermined by the critical devaluation of Romantic individualism and by the corresponding assumption that autobiography — unless it is written by women or other marginalized figures — asserts by its very nature an autonomy of the self unwelcome to postmodern critics. The problems this assumption can raise are manifest in Martin Danahay's *A Community of One: Masculine Autobiography and Autonomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1993), which defines autobiography as a form that creates autonomy by reducing "the social horizon to the interplay of a self and an other" (14). The possibility that an autobiographer would use the figure of another precisely as a way to signify the instability or multiplicity of the self is for Danahay another reduction of the external world to the narrow horizons of the self, while Victorian attempts to repress self-consciousness in the name of social responsibility only deepen the traps of inwardness that afflict his subjects from Wordsworth to Arnold. When words like "autonomy" or "individualism" acquire an unexamined negative charge, the creative exploration of autobiography can all too easily shut down. It is time, I think, to take a skeptical look at the assumption that famous autobiographies create whole or triumphant selves, and to re-extend the privileges of fissure, circularity, and many-voiced discourse to the life writing of men.

If the spectre of the man of letters as bourgeois hero has come to haunt autobiography, so might those perennial questions about the nature of the self. On the one hand, there is a general consensus that we must talk about the self as an artifact of writing. When it comes practically to writing about autobiography, however, we talk about the translation of life experience into autobiography as though the self were alive, well, and biographically accessible. This is probably all to the good, for surely the answer to the question

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of whether autobiography creates or represents a self is that it does both. But the currents of thinking and writing about autobiography might be freshened if we were to own up to both, and to pursue them, explicitly, together. Instead, the debate about the self has given way to arguments about cultural identity which tend to find their resting points in designations of gender identification or anxiety. Other questions about how autobiography works are left to one side. The relation between subjectivity and the act of retrospection, the ways a narrative creates a model of being in time and history, the relation between the issues of the protagonist and the habitual narrative gestures of the autobiographer — these are topics special to the form of autobiography that are worth preserving and pursuing.

Secrecy and disclosure are compelling to us: given powerful cultural interdictions on Victorian representations of femininity, masculinity, homosexuality, and marriage, we need to ask what could be said, what could not be said, what was suggested anyway, and how all these matters were tied to publication and public controversy. These questions are important because they bring us close to Victorian ideas about the proper regulation of biography and autobiography, privacy, and publicity. Very much like our nineteenth-century predecessors, we are fascinated by the relation between revelation and concealment, though we couch our interest in different languages. If the Victorians talked about biographies and autobiographies as exemplary lives, affecting stories of pain or loss, narratives of crisis, change and endurance, beneficial discoveries of self-knowledge, or reprehensible acts of self-display, we read them to articulate ideologies of power, gender or class, and to display what we imagine to be hidden, secret, or unconscious in their texts. How different, finally, are these questions, and the desires which draw us to them? What could be learned by considering what nineteenth-century people looked for and found, embraced and resisted in life writing? What is the difference between Victorian inflections of secrecy and disclosure and the assumptions which guide our own attempts to disclose — and master — nineteenth-century texts?

Laura Marcus's *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (1994), an ambitious history of the terms in which autobiography has been discussed from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present day, begins to open this field of inquiry. Marcus's study digests, integrates, and assesses an immense amount of material, showing the continuities and the changes in the questions and anxieties generated by autobiography in these 200 years. She sees autobiography as "a hybrid form" which "unsettles distinctions, including the division between self and other. In this sense it becomes a destabilizing form of writing and knowledge" (15). As the slash in her title indicates, Marcus understands the close kinship between theories of biography and autobiography, especially as they were elaborated during the nineteenth century, when the term "autobiography" was gradually disengaged from its parent form. She manages with admirable ingenuity to weave together a series of chapters which make auto/biography the central term in what turns out to be a fertile strand of cultural and intellectual history.

Although the book as a whole is worth reading for anyone interested in autobiography, the first three chapters are of special interest to Victorianists. Chapter One, "Nineteenth-Century Discourses," delineates the Victorian anxiety about the separation of self-biography from biography, and the history of attempts to define and contain what true autobiography should be. Marcus introduces her readers to a range of nineteenth-century writers and texts, including John Foster's "On a Man's Writing Memoirs of Himself," James Field Stanley's *Essays on the Study and Composition of Biography,* Isaac D'Israeli's

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writing on autobiography, A. O. Prickard's essay on *Autobiography,* and review articles by Edith Simcox and Margaret Oliphant. From such work, she develops a set of themes: the attempts to distinguish between autobiography as exemplary self-knowledge and the exercise of vanity or (later in the century) morbid and isolating self-consciousness; the class-inflected question of who is worthy to write autobiography or to be the subject of biography; the attempt to classify autobiography, and capture it for literature. Throughout she threads the recurrent topics that will appear in different forms up to the present: the self as a locus of special value and special danger; the embattled crossings between public and private, self and other; the distinction between "high/literary" and "low/memoir" forms of autobiography; the exclusion or inclusion of women writers as autobiographies were valued and revalued, and the tendency to see autobiography in decline at the moment of its emergence as a defined form.

The second chapter studies turn-of-the-century interest in the linkage of autobiographical expression and genius, the way autobiography became evidence in the new sciences of psychology and ethnography, and the disciplinary debates about the knowledge-value of biography and autobiography, in which science becomes opposed to literature. Moving from Leslie Stephen to Sigmund Freud, Marcus develops a compact and suggestive set of topics, too numerous to detail here. The third chapter focuses on the discourse of "the new biography" in the British modernists Woolf, Nicholson, and Strachey, and includes sections on Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf as critics of biography, the problem of fact and fiction, the implications of a biographer's identification with his subject, the "killing of the fathers" in Strachey and Gosse, and a wonderful analysis of the ways *Orlando* dramatizes and satirizes the discourse of biography. As these lists suggest, the contents of Marcus's chapters are anything but predictable.

Marcus goes on to study the German line of theorizing autobiography as historical consciousness from Dilthey through Misch and Gusdorf to Pascal and Weintraub. Then she turns to contemporary theories, giving a chapter each to questions of the subject, questions of genre, and the current hybridizing tendencies in the writing and criticism of autobiography. It is difficult to do justice to the book because it is so various and richly informed. I can only say that Marcus is fair-minded in representing the ideas of her subjects and in suggesting their limits as well as their connections with each other. Along the way, she unobtrusively renews and questions topics that have been too easily abandoned. This constant play of connective intelligence keeps alive and suggestive a project so large that it could all too easily have turned into a shapeless encyclopedia.

The appearance of *Auto/biographical Discourses,* with its broad retrospective view, seems especially timely at a moment when the boundaries of the genre threaten to disappear. Among other recent monographs, Oliver Buckton's *Secret Selves: Confession and Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Autobiography* (1998) is the most responsive to the diverse currents of contemporary thinking about autobiography. Because it focuses on the history of homosocial and homosexual autobiography, Buckton's book will be read alongside other recent critics who have mapped out the terrain of masculine and gay studies in the Victorian period; he treats the Kingsley-Newman controversy, John Addington Symonds's *Memoirs,* the late work of Oscar Wilde, and Edward Carpenter's *My Days and Dreams: Being Autobiographical Notes.* In the context of this review, I want to emphasize Buckton's welcome ability to merge theoretical dexterity and attentive studies of texts in his own highly readable narrative.

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Although *Secret Selves* is concerned with the particular secret of "same-sex desire" as it was negotiated in late-Victorian England, its ways of imagining secrecy are relevant to autobiography generally. Buckton calls secrecy "a central and productive component of autobiographical discourse itself. 'Secrecy' is used to indicate a dynamic oscillation between self-disclosure and concealment, a technique for arousing the reader's interest and establishing a relation based on shared knowledge, while preventing the disclosure of traits that might be incriminating, scandalous, or simply incompatible with the version of the self being represented" (2). This quite generous notion of secrecy is matched by a similarly capacious idea of confession as a form. As Buckton understands it, confession constitutes the self that is supposedly being revealed, while "'confessional' writing frequently reverberates with and reproduces the secrecy it claims or appears to eschew." It "approaches, rhetorically speaking, the form of the dramatic monologue in which the construction of a specific narrative persona enables the work of confession to take place" (11). Buckton's commitment to the constructive position is deftly accomplished in the ritual positioning of the introduction, although he, like everyone else, talks freely about the relationship between experience and autobiographical writing when it comes to actual discussions of texts, the motives which brought them into being, and the public controversies which shaped the construction of their narratives.

The four essays which make up the book are somewhat different in their actual operating procedures, which depend on the familiarity of the materials at hand. The first chapter retells the Kingsley-Newman controversy as a story of competing definitions of masculinity in which Kingsley plays a central role. Buckton is interested here in the various ways in which Kingsley's accusations could be understood to take on sexual as well as religious implications. His chapter plays out the homosexual implications at work in the language of perversity, celibacy, secrecy, effeminacy, and pollution, suggesting that the ferocity of Kingsley's attack lay in Newman's power to represent what he had vanquished in his own — and the dominant culture's — definitions of masculinity as hearty (and married) manliness. Newman is presented as the master of the situation, both in arranging this opportunity for public autobiography and in responding to the undertow of Kingsley's remarks by representing himself as a suffering and vulnerable yet masculine figure of heroic effort. Because this chapter does little with the *Apologia* itself, it is something of an anomaly in the book, except in its exploration of the ways that Newman may have figured as a specular "other" for Kingsley.

The way autobiographers construct themselves vis-à-vis the figures of others who represent rejected versions of themselves remains one of the book's major themes, developed from observations about specularity in Paul de Man's "Autobiography as De-Facement." The chapter on Symonds shows how the autobiography, written presumably to heal the split between Symonds's respectable public life and his secret homosexuality, continues throughout to produce splittings between his acknowledged desires and images of pederasty transferred to other characters. Buckton traces the evolution of Symonds's connection between sexual desire and aesthetic writing, beginning with his revelatory reading of Plato and moving toward a disillusion with literary expression. Like the later chapter on Carpenter, this one offers interesting, wide-ranging commentaries on the biographical situations which shaped the revelations and evasions of the texts, the relations between autobiographical and non-autobiographical writings, and the models of homosexual desire that they embrace or reject.

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In the chapter on Oscar Wilde, Buckton's originality and sophistication as critic and reader shine out in readings of *The Picture of Dorian Gray, The Importance of Being Earnest,* and *De Profundis.* Buckton wants to release Wilde from the "totalizing effects invoked by the face of Wilde's sexuality" (110) by re-reading his work against the single identity as homosexual that was created by the trial and reproduced, he alleges, in the work of current Wilde critics. Given a fin-de-siècle public attuned to "symptomatic readings," Buckton reads Wilde's work as a series of approaches and resistances to being read autobiographically. The guilty secret at issue in Wilde's texts, Buckton argues, is not "homosexuality" so much as a figure of uncontrolled consumption — greed, gluttony, debt. Thus *The Importance of Being Earnest* "mocks the singular notion of authentic identity that has been viewed as the key to 'autobiography'" (121). Both the play and *De Profundis* receive brilliant readings, the latter shaped again around the notion of "Bosie" (Lord Alfred Douglas) as a specular figure both rejected by and implicated in the narratorial self. "Far from being a work in which Wilde repents of his crimes and confesses his guilty past life," Buckton concludes, "the letter is a celebration of the power of secrecy to free desire from the irritating or tragic incursions of public scrutiny" (160).

And will straight male Victorians re-enter discussions of autobiography stripped of their autonomy, re-dressed in their secrets, their narratives producing and reproducing their dilemmas on the borders of public and private realms? That remains to be seen, for the recent books which turn to them eschew the theoretical and cultural concerns of the past fifteen years, and present autobiographies for the sake of their manifest life stories. Clinton Machann's *The Genre of Autobiography in Victorian Literature* (1994) resolutely portrays autobiography as a referential art and a recognizable genre, calling upon Phillipe Lejeune's often-quoted definition of autobiography as "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" (qtd. in Machann 3). The more complicated aspects of Lejeune's musings do not, however, make their way into the subsequent narrative. Machann provides brief (10–20 page) chapters about eleven Victorian autobiographies – the usual suspects plus Harriet Martineau, Robert Dale Owen, Walter Besant, Herbert Spencer, and Francis Galton. The chapters are primarily summaries which describe the phases of each story, with some general remarks about the (unexamined) relation of narrator and protagonist, some brief notices of well-known issues raised by the texts, and occasional comparisons to other autobiographers. These sketches provide introductions which consolidate the terms in which such texts were traditionally discussed, but they offer little in the way of original reading.

Theologian John D. Barbour also relies on Lejeune's definition in his study, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (1994). Barbour makes quite a comprehensive historical survey, moving up to the present moment in his survey of the ways autobiographers tell loss-of-faith stories and negotiate between their old loyalties and their new insights. His early chapters treat Newman as an instance of "Christian deconversion," Carlyle and Mill as examples of the way religious faith can function as a metaphor to interpret a secular crisis, and the "aesthetic critique of Protestantism" in Ruskin and Gosse. Although Barbour is primarily interested in studying the religious process in these stories, he is schooled in the work of Avrom Fleischman and Linda Peterson, and has interesting things to say about narrative conventions, and the dramatic and philosophical benefits of making a confused and drawn-out process of questioning

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and doubt conform to "the model of a conversion story with a suddenly resolved crisis" (50).

Personal transformation is also the key to autobiography for Carolyn A. Barros, in her *Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation* (1998). Barros is quite aware of poststructuralist approaches, but she roundly rejects the hermeneutics of suspicion, arguing that obsessing about the split "I," or the relation of the self to language leads only to dead ends, and that reading autobiographies through specific literary or mythic patterns is equally limiting. Appealing to earlier narratological theory, she defines transformation as the essential element of narrative, and defines autobiography as a narrative of "someone telling someone else 'something happened to *me*'" (6). Her extensive chapters on Newman, Mill, Darwin, and Oliphant carefully elaborate what she calls "autobiography's three rhetorical/heuristic perspectives — persona, figura, and dynamis" (11) in order to articulate the conditions and the figures for change embedded in each text. These three categories, roughly corresponding to the narrator-protagonist, the central metaphor for the kind of change described, and the motive force of the change, are so broadly defined that they serve primarily as tools to organize readings which meditate on each phase of development, and name each model of change, at the cost of thinning out the richness of the original narrative.

Machann, Barbour and Barros all discuss Mill's *Autobiography,* which can serve as a touchstone here. Machann's Mill is "the quintessential man of ideas" (28) who is "remarkably naive and unaware in describing himself and his motivations in relation to other individuals," although he is "conscious of presenting a distinctive narrative of his self-development" (32). The crisis chapter is packaged as an instance of the Romantic crisis pattern which functions as an "insert" within the larger narrative of phased mental development (32). Barbour's Mill is the man of emotional crisis who turns despite his atheism to the religious metaphor, likening his doubt and depression to a "conviction of sin" (43). Barbour is interested in the gap between Mill's dramatic rendition of his crisis and the fact that it entails "no explicit rejection of early utilitarian and associationist theory." He reads the presentation of the crisis as a way to convey "in dramatic form what he does not avow explicitly: that James Mill's philosophy was "inadequate and even harmful and that his recovery of his own emotional capacity and his sense of freedom was experienced as a radical transformation" (45–46). The comparison to "sin" points to "the sense of betrayal and disloyalty that Mill must have felt with regard to the former center of his allegiance and trust" (47), while Mill's turn to Harriet Taylor is read as "an act of self-surrender akin to the convert's yielding of his will to God" (46–47). Barbour offers a humane sense of the range of emotions involved in moments of conversion, as well as a keen understanding of the desire to render fuzzy life passages as "ultimately significant" dramas of the soul (51).

Barros's Mill makes a thoroughly sane and successful transition from the young logical reasoning machine deferent to his teachers, to a self-educating social Romantic who has integrated poetry and philosophy. Describing the dominant metaphor for transformation as "re-education," Barros offers a strangely pure narrative, free from speculation about the latent relationships with James Mill or Harriet Taylor, or issues of determinism and freedom. Because her method leads her to characterize the various phases of a subject's career in set phrases — the "Utilitarian" becomes the "social Romantic" — Barros does not deal with the way internal turning points are themselves captured in narrative, or with the effect of retrospection.

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She is hardly alone, however, in avoiding the tricky task of reading autobiography backwards. *Mortal Pages, Literary Lives* (1996), edited by Vincent Newey and Philip Shaw, contains a variety of essays by British critics on auto/biographical texts ranging from Wollstonecraft's *Letters in Sweden* to the *Memories and Adventures* of Arthur Conan Doyle. As its title might suggest, the collection embraces the literary as well as the cultural argument, and gathers together many examples of life writing and of critical practice. By way of concluding this review, I will focus only on a refreshing piece by Philip Davis entitled "Why Do We Remember Forwards and Not Backwards?" — a question borrowed for the purpose from F. H. Bradley. Davis launches a complaint against Victorian autobiographers who organize their narratives as if the activity of memory were not part of the process; he excoriates the "unredeemed chronological successiveness" (82) of the sentences in autobiographies like Mill's, and the Victorian ideal of progress to an adult end in teleological narratives that represent "a false model of existence and adulthood" (93). For him, truly autobiographical moments are those which foreground the temporal synchronicity and the emotional entanglement of the present writer with the past self — moments such as he finds in Dickens and in Newman. "Autobiographical thinking is that which results when, at bottom involuntarily, a person cannot solve his problems except by being and remaining that person" (95), Davis declares; and such thinking can be discerned by considering the activities of an autobiographer's sentences, and the gaps or disjunctions between them.

Davis's passionately "referential" view of autobiography moves toward a near-religious sense of the self's ontological mystery that may be glimpsed at moments in "true autobiography." Some of us would not follow him there. Yet there is a vitality in his questions that is absent in accounts of autobiography which pay little attention to the simultanaeity and entanglement of past and present inherent in its narrative gestures, or to the experience of reading the peculiar motions of an autobiographer's narrative from one sentence or section to the next. Defining the cultural and biographical contexts for autobiography is just one step in the understanding of what the writer has at stake when she or he makes the deliberate decision to write, and then to publish, a sustained retrospective narrative. If we were also to consider autobiography as dramatic monologue — involving not only the emotional and temporal play between narrator and protagonist, but also the third party who presides over both — the special pleasures and opportunities of the genre, as well as the terms of its kinship with other genres, might once again emerge.

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