CHAPTER 13

Romantic life-writing

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Autobiography came of age in the Romantic period. The term was coined at that time: according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* it was used by William Taylor in 1797 as an alternative to 'self-biography', 'confessions', and 'memoirs'. This essay explains why the form came to prominence, examines the manner in which some of the finest writers of the time approached it, and offers some notion of how Romantic autobiography differed from that in subsequent decades. I have been guided by Adam Smyth's suggestion that an influential conception of autobiography would be 'a narrative that is retrospective, chronological, whose central theme is the development of the author's personality' (Smyth 2010, 13).

The emergence of autobiography into the literary mainstream may be explained by a single name: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Sometimes described as the first Romantic, he completed his *Confessions* in December 1770, the year of Wordsworth's birth.[1] It confronted readers with such topics as an account of his mistress, Madame de Warens (O'Rourke 2006, ch. 1). In Britain it was improper to speak of such matters in print, whatever was thought acceptable in France. Almost as bad was to suppose such things would interest readers, as contemporaries did not hesitate to point out:

> This was the man whose vanity and presumption so imposed on his understanding, as to lead him to imagine that mankind would lend a ready ear to the most trifling, to the most dull, to the most impertinent, to the most disgusting relations, because they concerned ROUSSEAU! (*Monthly Review* 1783, 150).

These arguments were crucial to the reputation not only of Rousseau but of autobiographical discourse of any kind, and for decades the form was thought to harbour indecency and immorality, the resort of shameless egotists (Treadwell 2005, chs. 1 and 2). Rousseau's *Confessions* elicited critical disapproval, but proved popular with readers, sparking a bidding war even before its first appearance on the Continent, and selling in large

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quantities after British publication in 1783. The critical response continued for years, often in the form of *ad hominem* attacks on Rousseau himself, and for that reason the reputation of the *Confessions* 'overshadowed' the period (Ibid., 41), raising anxieties about the propriety of autobiography as a form.

Rousseau's faith in the emotions allied him with the cult of *sensibilité* (Damrosch 2007, 288), which licensed discussion of subjects formerly considered off limits. Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*, first published in 1784, spoke unashamedly of what we would call depression, some of her poems being variations on the state of mind described by Goethe in his *Sorrows of Young Werther*, which made suicide fashionable: 'Towards the deep gulph that opens on my sight / I hurry forward, passion's helpless slave!' (Smith 1786, 22).[2] Decades before, such matters were seldom mentioned, and then in terms that indicated scant insight into human psychology; by the 1780s it was *de rigueur*. That explains the popularity of William Cowper's *The Task* (1784), a blank verse meditation by a man who had suffered mental breakdown.

> I am conscious, and confess
> Fearless, a soul that does not always think.
> Me oft has fancy ludicrous and wild
> Sooth'd with a waking dream of houses, tow'rs,
> Trees, churches, and strange visages express'd
> In the red cinders, while with poring eye
> I gazed, myself creating what I saw. (Cowper 1980–1995, ii 194)

It is hard to imagine anyone writing like this before Cowper, harder still to imagine anyone admitting they did 'not always think'. To say that, you had not only to be able to hold yourself up to ridicule, but to be in possession of some fairly sophisticated psychological insights. What Cowper understood was that 'not thinking' – that is, an absence of conscious intellectual activity – permitted the mind access to other kinds of process that were no less important. In this case he witnesses 'strange visages . . . In the red cinders'. Such honest self-analysis is the stuff of autobiography, and there is no doubt Coleridge and Wordsworth learnt from it. (There is no space in which to discuss it here, but the most obvious place in which Coleridge reveals how much he had learnt from Cowper is 'Frost at Midnight' (1798)).

The Prelude might be held to comprise a powerful argument that autobiography came to maturity at the same moment as English Romantic poetry; it is 'a record of Wordsworth's life up to the point at

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which he conceived *The Recluse* in 1798' (Gill 1991, 11). (*The Recluse* was an epic poem that was to expound a philosophy by which love of nature would lead to love of mankind; despite a number of false starts Wordsworth never completed it (Wordsworth 1982, 340–77)). Yet his principal aim was not to write a memoir. Although *The Prelude* takes its structure from its author's life, much of it is commentary on the historical present. For instance, having described the occasion in 1790 when he and his College friend Robert Jones crossed the Alps without realising it, Wordsworth exclaims:

> Imagination! lifting up itself
> Before the eye and progress of my Song
> Like an unfather'd vapour; here that Power,
> In all the might of its endowments, came
> Athwart me; I was lost as in a cloud,
> Halted without a struggle to break through,
> And now recovering to my Soul I say
> I recognize thy glory. . . (Wordsworth 1991, vi.525–32)

Wordsworth's celebration of his mental powers is a principal element of his poem, and reflects Cowper's influence. But none of that is necessary to autobiography, and when judged as such *The Prelude* is found wanting: many events, incidents, and people find no place there, and it has scant regard for chronology. For the correct facts in the correct order, readers are better advised to read a biography. The ebb and flow of *The Prelude*'s narrative is dictated by the desire to attest to its author's imaginative power. It is because Wordsworth presents himself as prototype of the enlightened man of an unrealised millenarian future that he finds it necessary to say how he became the way he is so that others might follow. If this is autobiography, it is of a singularly wayward and distracted kind. Wordsworth is more directly autobiographical in his correspondence, prose recollections (most notably in his 'Autobiographical Memoranda'), and poems less preoccupied with *The Recluse* – 'Resolution and Independence' and 'Composed by the Sea-Side, near Calais', for instance. Yet they were the kind of shorter poem Coleridge dismissed as unequal to Wordsworth's genius: see, inter alia, Coleridge's letter of 14 October 1803 to Thomas Poole (Coleridge 1956–1971, ii.1012–3).

Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) could not have been written without knowledge of *The Prelude*, but then its author was one of the few acquainted with Wordsworth's poem, and by the time he mooted his own 'Life' in September 1803, he knew its earliest drafts.[3] Work began on *Biographia* soon after publication of Wordsworth's collected *Poems* in late April 1815, several years after their friendship had foundered. By then,

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Wordsworth's poetry had taken a critical battering (most obviously from Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review*), and Coleridge understood how it might be defended. But he wanted also to settle some scores. For one thing, he wanted to claim credit for Wordsworth's originality, leading him to fabricate (in chapter 14) an account of how *Lyrical Ballads* came into being – which some scholars continue to accept as true (Wu 2015, ch. 9). In chapter 17 he took pleasure in criticising some of the ideas in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* without admitting he had played a part in formulating them. Even the definitions of primary and secondary imaginations in chapter 13 of *Biographia* are designed to expose the inadequacy of the account of imagination and fancy given by Wordsworth (Jackson 1997). So is Coleridge's book autobiography? Undoubtedly, even if its author's resistance to 'any formal attempt at sustained self-representation' challenges our notions of what conventional autobiographies should be (Mudge 1986, 33).

Byron was more popular in his lifetime, and sold many more books, than Coleridge and Wordsworth put together. He wrote his autobiography 'with the fullest intention to be "faithful and true" in my narrative, but *not* impartial – no, by the Lord! I can't pretend to be that, while I feel' (Marchand 1973–1993, vii.125). If that is to be credited, his memoirs were probably as concerned with self-justification as those of Rousseau. Had they been published, they might have constituted the best argument for the emergence of autobiography into the mainstream of literary fashion during the Romantic period, except that they were entrusted to Byron's friend Thomas Moore, who consigned them to the flames of John Murray's drawing-room hearth.

As Moore must have suspected, the effect was to stimulate an already intense appetite for biographies and reminiscences of the noble Lord, regardless of quality – and by good fortune Moore was able to furnish one which Murray published in 1830.[4] Readers had for years been desperate for tittle-tattle about Byron, in part because they were teased by the personae through which he projected himself into the culture. It was a deliberate strategy. In 1821 Byron noted the manner by which he was compared 'to Childe Harold – to Lara – to the Count in Beppo' (Marchand 1973–1993, ix.11), as well as to such historical figures as Napoleon (Bainbridge 1995, ch. 4). The success of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) was due to the belief it was 'thinly disguised autobiography' (Douglass 2004, 8), and, as one critic has noted, Canto III 'renews the figure of the author in the form of Byron reflecting on his own figure' (Treadwell 2005, 191), making it more autobiographical still. It is in those

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works which seem most revealing that Byron is most elusive, as contemporary reviewers sensed: 'Childe Harold may not be, nor do we believe he is, Lord Byron's very self, but he is Lord Byron's picture, sketched by Lord Byron himself, arrayed in a fancy dress' (*Quarterly Review* 1818, 217). Autobiographical strategies are everywhere to be found in Byron's poetry; he is not Manfred, Cain, or Sardanapalus, but our impulse as readers is to infer his ventriloquising presence in their shadow.

Part of the problem with 'self-biography' was that throughout the period 1780 to 1830 it remained the soiled, disreputable thing Rousseau had left it (Duffy 1979, 32–5), that stigma being renewed by such works as *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821).

> Nothing, indeed, is more revolting to English feelings, than the spectacle of a human being obtruding on our notice his moral ulcers or scars, and tearing away that 'decent drapery,' which time, or indulgence to human frailty, may have drawn over them: accordingly, the greater part of *our* confessions (that is, spontaneous and extra-judicial confessions) proceed from demireps, adventurers, or swindlers: and for any such acts of gratuitous self-humiliation from those who can be supposed in sympathy with the decent and self-respecting part of society, we must look to French literature, or to that part of the German, which is tainted with the spurious and defective sensibility of the French. (De Quincey 2013, 3)

This admission of the problematic status of confession, placed at the beginning of De Quincey's *Confessions*, betokens an awareness on its author's part that he was taking an artistic risk. It did little to forestall disapproval. 'Better, a thousand times better, die than have anything to do with such a Devil's own drug!', said Thomas Carlyle, while the *Eclectic Review* described the *Confessions* as an 'apology for a secret, selfish suicidal debauchery' (Morrison 2009, 210–1). Critics could sneer, but booksellers knew better: confessions made money. Harriette Wilson's *Memoirs of Herself and Others* (1825), written with the intention of extorting money from former clients, sold 7,000 copies at its first appearance and many more after it was pirated (Wilson 2003). Two thousand copies of De Quincey's *Confessions* circulated in periodical form, and between 1822 and 1826 it went through four successive editions as a book, each time selling 1,000 copies (St Clair 2004, 596–7, 657).

The expectation of scurrilousness explains the marketability of many autobiographical works, even those presented as fiction. Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) was thought to be a veiled account of its author's pursuit of William Frend, and contained rewritten versions of correspondence between her, Frend, and William Godwin, which made it

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a *succès de scandale*.[5] Lady Caroline Lamb's anonymously published *Glenarvon* (1816) was known to recount her affair with Byron, and the first edition of 1,500 copies quickly sold out (Douglass 2006, 151).[6] Similarly, those who purchased Charles Lloyd's epistolary novel *Edmund Oliver* (1798) believed it contained lurid accounts of Coleridge's laudanum binges. Some biographies contained the same (unspoken) promise. Godwin's partly autobiographical *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1798) described its subject's unhappy affair with Gilbert Imlay, a married man, and provided ammunition for attacks in subsequent years (Clemit and Walker 2001, 32–6). No wonder, then, that in 1805 Wordsworth preferred to keep the completed manuscript of the thirteen Book *Prelude* to himself, its autobiographical content rendering it improper. Other autobiographers who wrote with no intention to publish in their own lifetimes included Mary Robinson, Henry Crabb Robinson, Benjamin Franklin, Anne Richman Lefroy, Elizabeth Lynn Linton, and Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan. When authors did recount their life stories for immediate publication, the result was almost always less revealing than what we find in their private papers.

The exception is William Hazlitt. Who else would have compiled a detailed account of a love affair that exhibited its author in the worst conceivable light – and publish it while the affair was still dragging on? But then Hazlitt was an admirer of Rousseau's *Confessions*, having read it in French (Paulin 1998, 217–8, 261–2), and seems to have written about himself from an early age, for his letters to his father from the Unitarian New College in Hackney, dating from the 1790s, are among the most evocative he ever wrote. In 1821 he published 'The Fight', a remarkable description of a sporting event held outside London, narrating the trials and tribulations of someone travelling out of the capital to reach the venue near Hungerford. The modern taxonomy might be 'documentary', as its ambition was to evoke the vantage point of a boxing enthusiast, but it is as autobiographical in style as it is in substance.

Hazlitt's gifts were ideally suited to the new genre: he missed nothing, had an incredibly retentive memory, and could articulate his perceptions with a crispness and accuracy few could rival. In early 1817 he published a brief memoir of his earliest meeting with Coleridge. Returning to it in 1823, he expanded it into one of his finest essays, 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' (Hazlitt 1998, iv.120–1). Hazlitt was intent on explaining what was special about the writers he had known in youth, why their vision had been important to him, and (most of all) how those hopes had failed. Though 'My First Acquaintance' appeared only as one item in a periodical, *The*

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Liberal, it attracted critical attention because the journal's editor was Leigh Hunt and a fellow contributor was Byron. Hazlitt's essay was condemned as 'disgusting', a 'prosaic piece of egotism', and a 'display of personal conceit and vanity' (Ibid., ix.232). Perhaps such hostility was inevitable: concentration on the author's early youth was too redolent of Rousseau to escape criticism.

By the time 'My First Acquaintance' appeared in print, Hazlitt was completing a book that would test the genre to its limits – *Liber Amoris* (1823). It confronts the reader with evidence concerning its author's infatuation with his landlady's nineteen-year-old daughter, in the form of conversations and intimate correspondence. Those materials are presented in their starkest form, apparently unmediated by editor or commentator – the raw materials of autobiography. Even so, Hazlitt was responsible for transcriptions of the conversations, having focused and shaped them. He also revised the letters, and generated some from scratch.[7] Richardson had attempted something like this in *Clarissa*, but that was a fiction, whereas the relationship described by *Liber Amoris* had actually taken place – and, at the time of writing, was continuing.[8] No one before Hazlitt had subjected a real-life relationship to such forensic treatment, and, so far as I am aware, no one has tried it since.

Not only is *Liber Amoris* autobiography, it is autobiography taken to its extreme. Together with 'My First Acquaintance', 'The Fight', and *The Spirit of the Age*, it can be seen as part of a larger narrative which Hazlitt would continue almost up to the moment of his death, with such late writings as 'On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth', 'The Free Admission', 'The Sick Chamber', 'The Letter-Bell', and 'London Solitude' (Hazlitt, 1998, vol. 9; Hazlitt 2007, ii.353–5). It draws on two aesthetic principles. The first is that art, being entwined with life, should contain what Hazlitt called gusto, 'power or passion defining any object' (Ibid., ii.79). And what could better embody such intensity than the words used by those involved, unmediated by the intrusive presence of a commentator? The second principle is disinterestedness – the ability to transcend one's own vanity so as to portray things as they are, without the filter of self-admiration. That explains why Hazlitt does not emerge from the book in a favourable light: he did not hesitate to render his words with scrupulous accuracy, regardless of the consequences for himself.

For these reasons, *Liber Amoris* is more demanding of readers than any other autobiographical work of the period, and was controversial from the moment of its publication. To the horror of critics, Hazlitt seemed to be saying one's most intimate affairs were a fit subject for publication, and so

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appeared to pre-empt the debate about what was morally acceptable (North 2009, 64–8). The reaction was predictable: J. G. Lockhart was representative in declaring: 'we call down upon his head, and upon the heads of those accomplished reformers in ethics, religion, and politics, who are now enjoying his *chef-d'oeuvre*, the scorn and loathing of every thing that bears the name of MAN' (Lockhart 1823, 646). Lockhart is echoed by those who argue for Hazlitt's elimination from the curriculum today (Wu 2000; McCutcheon 2004).

Throughout the period, critics cautioned readers against autobiography. In an article surveying ten working-class life-writers, Lockhart condemned 'the mania for this garbage of Confessions, and Recollections, and Reminiscences, and Aniliana' (*Quarterly Review* 1827, 164; Treadwell 2005, 76–8). Such comments implied a more general disapproval. A conduct-book of 1827 warned readers that 'the biography of women who have been conspicuous, and too often notorious, is ill adapted to your studies' (Dow 2012, 96). There were two obvious strategies that enabled authors to circumvent charges of immorality: one was to present their memoirs as a travel book (Jump 1999, xv); another was to frame it as a moral or religious treatise, as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna did in her *Personal Recollections* (1841), which begins with condemnation of those who pander to 'the prying spirit that some are but too ready to cater to, for filthy lucre's sake' (Tonna 1841, 3). Working-class autobiographers often framed their life-stories as a journey towards religious salvation, perhaps because of the influence of Bunyan and Wesley, as with James M'Kaen's *Life* (1797) and Mary Saxby's *Memoirs of a Female Vagrant* (1806) (reissued by the Religious Tract Society in 1820). (See David Vincent's chapter in the present collection for the latest on working class autobiography).

Women writers were particularly vulnerable to criticism. Fanny Burney was among the most successful novelists of the period, but her biography of her father, Charles Burney, attracted negative comment from John Wilson Croker in the *Quarterly* (Delafield 2012, 29). In that light, it was an act of open defiance to prepare her own letters and journals for publication. She would not live to complete the task, which was completed by her niece, who saw what was, in effect, Burney's autobiography into print in a seven-volume edition between 1842 and 1846. By plundering her own life-writing, Burney acknowledged a paradox: writers are at their most autobiographical when not trying to be so. 'I think even to madness & torture of the past', Mary Shelley told a correspondent in 1823 (Bennett 1992, 298); she would have refrained from saying so in a more formal account of her life.

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Burney's letters and journals entered a culture intolerant of emotional intensity. The Victorian response to Keats's love letters to Fanny Brawne is symptomatic: Matthew Arnold condemned their author for 'the abandonment of all reticence and all dignity of the merely sensuous man, of the man who is passion's slave'; Gerard Manley Hopkins complained 'his work is at every turn abandoning itself to an unmanly and enervating luxury' (Najarian 2002, 96–9, 100–2; Schoemaker 1999); while Algernon Charles Swinburne declared: 'if they [the letters] ought never to have been published, it is no less certain that they ought never to have been written; that a manful kind of man or even a manly sort of boy, in his love-making or in his suffering, will not howl and snivel after such a lamentable fashion' (Keats 1958, i.4). Their reaction indicates the degree to which intimate correspondence had become unacceptable when formally published. That shift in taste prompted Victorian autobiographers to concentrate more on external circumstance than on interior response. Autobiography was felt to be at its most proper when aping the *Bildungsroman*,[9] recounting a story of honourable struggle, an apology of which the virtues were modesty, discretion, and reticence (Nadel 1982). Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Anthony Trollope each kept his autobiography in manuscript, leaving publication to heirs, seeing it as their opportunity to shape the manner by which an unknown future would perceive them. Other than settling old scores (John Stuart Mill's unsympathetic portrait of his father and Spencer's condemnation of his uncle, for instance), they tended to withdraw from the realm of the personal, producing works attesting to their respectability, aspiring on occasion to the frigid austerity of Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864). Mill's account of his mental crisis might be held to exempt his posthumously-published *Autobiography* from such strictures, but modern commentators concur in regarding it as 'an obstacle' to further investigation, 'misleading' to those who wish fully to understand its subject (Capaldi 2004, xii–xiii).[10] Modern scholars of Trollope find his *Autobiography* unhelpful when discussing 'his marriage, his feelings for Kate Field, his relationship with his sons, let alone the secrets of his inner life' (Trollope 2014, p.x).

Smyth argues that 'generic unfixity and experimentation was a central trait of early modern life-writing' (Smyth 2010, 14), and something similar could be argued of the Romantics, who were more adventurous than the Victorians when deciding what to say, and how to say it. The newness of the form made them want to challenge its conventions and test its boundaries; for a brief while, at the start of the nineteenth century, autobiography was, as Stephen Behrendt has observed, 'a form (or vehicle) of discourse in

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search of a genre: it had not yet acquired the author-reader protocols or the literary conventions that define and distinguish other, more established genres' (Behrendt 2009, 147). For that reason, it was uniquely susceptible to creative innovation: it provided the structure for Wordsworth's greatest long poem and Coleridge's most famous prose work; Byron used it to project aspects of his constructed self into the public imagination, while Hazlitt turned his unflinching gaze on a scandalous episode in his private life. There was more conscious manipulation of the genre during this period than in the remainder of the nineteenth century, when authors would compose autobiographies that seem pious and disembowelled by comparison. Writers of the Romantic period were more likely to interrogate generic norms or deal in intimate self-revelation, such as Charles Lamb in his essays of Elia[11] or Fanny Burney in her letter book of 1811 (which describes the after-effects of her mastectomy (Sabor 2012)). Autobiography was for them a means of exploring aspects of the self to which their Victorian counterparts did not readily invite visitors, preoccupied as they were with the judgement of posterity.

Notes

1. Rousseau was deeply indebted to Augustine's *Confessions*; for discussion, see Hartle 1983; Riley 1986; Hartle 1999.
2. Some reviewers were alarmed by Smith's poems, and identified their melancholy with her; see Wu 1997, 68.
3. According to Coleridge's notebook, Wordsworth recited his 'divine Self-biography' on 14 January 1804.
4. The biographers who followed are listed by Douglass 2004, 16ff.
5. Recent critics such as Rajan 1998 have questioned its autobiographical intent.
6. Most readers appear to have been outraged by it; see Douglass 2004, 185.
7. So far as I am aware, no editor has yet provided a detailed collation of Hazlitt's surviving correspondence and the texts published in *Liber Amoris*; Charles E. Robinson is currently undertaking that task in preparation for his forthcoming edition of Hazlitt's letters.
8. It should be pointed out that *Liber Amoris* resolves the story of the affair so as to provide the book with a conclusion; see Jones 1991, 348.
9. For a consideration of Harriet Martineau's autobiography as *Bildungsroman*, see Linda Peterson's introduction to her Broadview edition of the work.
10. Capaldi 2004 is surely right to suggest that the *Autobiography* is, to a large extent, shaped by Mill's position as 'the conscience of Victorian England' (31). One of the most persuasive defenders of Mill's volume is Levi 1991.
11. There is a strong case also for regarding Lamb's 'Letter to Robert Southey, Esq.' as autobiography; see Ruddick 1991.

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