"Lives Without Narrative": Romantic Lyric as Autobiography

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Autobiography, that 18th century neologism, has never had a fixed or stable meaning, having recently been replaced by the "memoir" label by commercial publishers, and folded into the umbrella term, "life writing," by an academic community interested in a broad assortment of "personal" texts and documents (diaries, essays, letters, poems, blogs, as well as traditional autobiographies). A compound of three Greek words—self, life, writing—autobiography implies a narrative element in the writing of a life. Thus by the mid-19th century, the term had come to designate the large-scale retrospective life -narrative in the tradition of St. Augustine's *Confessions* By then, the self-reflexive tenor of the extended first-person life-narrative and its hermeneutic challenge of self-knowledge had become problematic, as Leigh Hunt wryly observed about the revised edition of his autobiography, which first appeared in 1850, revised in 1860: "I now send it a second time, and with additional matter, into the world, under the sure and certain conviction, that every autobiographer must of necessity be better known to his readers than to himself" (448).

By the time Hunt wrote his autobiography, the term had not only become part of the critical nomenclature but had also been embraced as a fictional device in novels such as *Jane Eyre*, subtitled "An Autobiography," *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations*. Indeed, the life and experiences of Copperfield are close enough in some regards to Dickens's own to warrant the label of "autobiographical novel," even if the opening sentence, "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show" (1) suggests the novelist more than the autobiographer. In the postmodern later 20th century, any necessary connection between text and life falls mostly by the wayside in a critical climate where the self itself becomes a textual fabrication or fiction. Thus, by 1980, William Spengemann in *The Forms of Autobiography* includes *Sartor Resartus*, *David Copperfield*, and *The Scarlet Letter* in the category of "Poetic Autobiography," and in his recent book [*Sex, Lies, and Autobiography*, 2006] James O'Rourke discusses *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and *Lolita* as autobiographies. Twentieth century novelists too have capitalized on autobiographical fiction, to the point where, by mid-century, J.D. Salinger could make fun of "all that David Copperfield kind of crap" with Holden Caulfield's vernacular assertion, "I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything" (1) even as the first-person narrator presents a poignant autobiographical account of his recent misadventures.

If the line between genuine and fictional autobiography has been blurred and become a source of scandal in the case of fraudulent memoirs pretending to be genuine, when autobiography is assimilated into the larger and more amorphous category, life-writing, the narrative dimension recedes and appears to be less of a requirement—at least once the definition of autobiography calls for something other than or different from an overarching retrospective life-narrative. Thus diaries, letters, and lyrical poems could be loosely construed, if not as "autobiography," then at least as autobiographical, especially if they contain narrative stretches or segments. Another kind of life-writing which Michel Beaujour has proposed as a separate genre, the "autoportrait," "distinguishes itself from the autobiography by the absence of a continuous narrative." Montaigne's *Essais*, Rousseau's *Rêveries*, and Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* eschew narrativity because "the operative formula of the autoportrait is . . . "I will not recount what I have done, but I am going to tell you *who I am*'" (8-9)

While narrative in some forms of life-writing is diminished, absent, or irrelevant, strictly speaking, the narrative element of autobiography is in some sense constitutive, recognized in recent theoretical treatments, notably by John Eakin in *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008) and *How Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999). In Eakin's "shifting attitudes toward narrative over a period of fifty years," the "narrativity of selfhood" has emerged as "not only social but [also] somatic" built into the fabric of the lived experience and into the life of the body [private e-mail communication, September 2010]. Following in Eakin's footsteps, I can't believe or even imagine autobiography as a genre (to use that old-fashioned word) that doesn't have *some* narrative element, even if only in shorthand or fragmentary form.

That poetry can be autobiography as a full-scale retrospective narrative has been demonstrated by Wordsworth in *The Prelude* (1805), his blank verse epic covering the first thirty-five years of his life, replete with the famous "spots of time" that anchor his sense of personal identity as Nature's chosen son. But what of the shorter famous Romantic lyrical and self-reflexive poems written by Wordsworth and others in the early 19th century? Can they be read as autobiography? A feature of "the greater Romantic lyric" as practiced by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Percy Shelley, Keats and others is that the speaking voice in these poems is not some fictional persona-as in the famous Renaissance sonnet sequences where the confessional statements of the speakers cannot be directly correlated with the experiences or feelings of their authors. In the greater Romantic lyric, characterized by M.H. Abrams in 1965, the speaker, engaged in a meditation in a particular landscape "achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem" (201). The speaking voice clearly is the author. The intense pathos in the Romantic crisis lyric may be disconcert-

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ingly melodramatic, as in Coleridge's lament in "Dejection: An Ode", "now afflictions bow me down to earth:/ Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth"(82-83), or in Shelley's "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" in "Ode to the West Wind" (54). But there is no doubt that these speakers are the poets. Indeed, in the age of what I have called the *autobiographization* of literature (Stelzig 3), the calculated pathos of these poems that combine "reminiscence and meditation" and that often turn on a personal crisis (Abrams 229, 227) depends on this very identification.

Even though such lyrical effusions from the early 19th century do not seek to present the poets' subjective feeling states in the larger narrative context of their lives, the proximity of their speaking voices to their actual life-experiences and identities justifies their being characterized as not only confessional but also, if not as autobiography, then in some instances at least as autobiographical. Let me suggest that these lyrical-meditative utterances can be located on an autobiographical spectrum, depending on how little or how much of a narrative element there is and to what degree or extent the speaking voice in the poem corresponds to the poet's lived experience. I will briefly glance at several of these poems to see where on an autobiographical spectrum they might be located.

The poignant confessional note in many of the familiar Romantic lyrics, such as the examples from Coleridge and Shelley, is not by itself enough to vouch for their status as autobiography in the absence of a narrative dimension or component. To glance for a moment across to the Continent, the same holds for the powerful laments, for instance, of Hölderlin's "The Middle of Life"-*Weh mir, wo nehm' ich, wenn/Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo/Den Sonnenschein/ Und Schatten der Erde?* [Woe is me, where shall I take/ When winter has come, the flowers, and where/ the shade of the earth?, 8-11; 134]-or Nerval's "*El Desdichado*": "*Je suis le ténébreux—le veuf,l'inconsolé,/Le prince d'Aquitaine á la tour abolie;/Ma seule étoile est morte,-et mon luth constellé/Porte le soleil noir de la Mélancholie*" [I am the shadowy one—the widower,/ The prince of Aquitaine banished to the tower;/ My only star is dead—and my constellated lute/ Bears the black sun of Melancholy, 1-4,156] . These powerful highly stylized lyrical utterances are confessional *cris de coeur*, and not autobiography. To return to England, John Clare's sonnet, "I Am," is scripted in the same mode:

> I feel I am; I only know I am,
> And plod upon the earth, as dull and void:
> Earth's prison chilled my body with its dram
> Of dullness, and my soaring thoughts destroyed,
> I fled to solitudes from passions dream,
> But strife persued—I only know, I am,
> I was a being created in the race
> Of men disdaining bounds of place and time:-
> A spirit that could travel o'er the space
> Of earth and heaven,like a thought sublime,
> Tracing creation, like my maker, free,-
> A soul unshackled—like eternity,
> Spurning earth's vain and soul debasing thrall
> But now I only know I am,- that's all.

Had Clare written, "I Was," he might have been writing narratively and thus, at least potentially, autobiographically, but he presents instead a stark lyrical lament fixed strictly on his feelings at the moment of writing. Because, like Hölderin's and Nerval's, the peasant poet's is an existential, not a narrative statement expressing his sense of radical self-alienation and abandonment, "I Am" does not add up to autobiography, i.e., not to a retrospective or narrative presentation of his identity and experience, but only to a shorthand kind of self-writing or "autography."

The lyrical laments of these poets do not present enough of the poet-speaker's identity or situation to qualify as (Beaujourean) verse autoportraits. However, the greater Romantic lyric can contain the narrative dimension that defines autobiography as illustrated in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." In his lyrical meditation in the landscape surrounding the ruined abbey, Wordsworth presents a schematic overview of his life up to the moment of speaking/writing (at the age of 28). The focus of his extended autobiographical reflection is his changing relationship to nature, which he divides, in schematic and shorthand form in this 159-line poem, into three stages. From "the coarser pleasures of my boyish days," (73) when nature to him was "all in all" to, the second stage as the twenty-three year old's first visit to Tintern, " more like a man/Flying from something that he dreads, than one/ Who sought the thing he loved" (lines 72-73). Unspecified in the poem, though his biography one acquires a context for his "dreadful" and disturbed state of mind in 1793 during the Reign of Terror in France. The third stage is the moment of composition, in 1798, when Wordsworth knows that he is "changed . . . from what I was when first/ I came among these hills" (66-68). In this stage he has achieved a philosophic and even cosmic awareness of "a motion and a spirit, that impels/ All thinking things, all objects of all thought,/ And rolls through all things" (1 100-102).

As suggested by the motif of dread associated with the second stage, Wordsworth's tripartite schematic overview of his life in his later twenties would require biographical information to explain this memoir-like reprise of his relationship to nature that includes the three dimensions of time. Undoubtedly, however, "Tintern Abbey" is structured according to the narrative and temporal arc that defines the full-scale narrative autobiography. Thus, in contrast to the short lyrics by Hölderlin, Nerval, and Clare which I place at one end of the autobiographical spectrum (as "least autobiographical"), Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" I would place at the other end, as "most autobiographical."

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My final example is Keats's exquisitely descriptive and evocative "To Autumn," which I consider as a limit case: in evoking the season and his own mortality, Keats avoids both narrative and even the first-person pronoun. Keats's beautifully observed descriptions of autumnal scenery never explicitly invoke the idea of mortality associated with such autumn poems going back to Shakespeare's famous sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold"), but the sense of death, and Keats's acceptance of it as part of the natural—and human—cycle, is a powerful presence in the poem. Despite the absence of a first person speaker, the poem is, as generations of readers and critics have sensed, covertly autobiographical:

> Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?
> Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,-
> While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
> And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
> Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
> Among the river sallows, borne aloft
> Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
> And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
> Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
> The red-breast whistles from the garden-croft;
> And gathering swallows twitter in the sky. (lines 23-33, Perkins 1271)

Walter Jackson Bate has noted that to "document" the "considerations that enter [into the poem] would involve . . . a recapitulation of much of his life" (159) and Helen Vendler has concluded that "by the time we come to the ode 'To Autumn' . . . Keats "has attained his final rich insights about writing, living, and dying" (xxi). Because Keats does not figure in *propria persona* in his final ode, its tragic if subliminal autobiographical-ness can only be suggested by reference to the facts of his short life. Thus this limit case also suggests the larger truth that at some level the issue of whether a text is or is not autobiographical requires the test and the confirmation of biographical information and evidence (including, in Keats's case, his letters). That is, at some point — and despite of or in addition to Lejeune's famous *pacte autobiographique*—autobiography depends on biography to authenticate the credibility of its generic standing.

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Richard Westall's Labours of Love

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In "Westall's Labour of Love for the Romantics," a review of drawings and prints at the Art Council Gallery in St. James's Square by "A Collector," which appeared in the London *Times* (July 25, 1959), the author writes that the exhibition inspired him to rummage through his collection "with an eye freshly attuned to Romanticism." There he found a folder in which he had saved "little sketches or unmounted drawings by Richard Westall, R.A. (1765-1836). No man ever laboured harder in the Romantic cause than Westall," the critic continues, describing how Westall "spent much of his life designing illustrations for editions of the poets." The exhibition included several such drawings " including a most dramatic illustration of Byron's *Mazeppa.*" The collector describes his little haul of Westall 'scraps' " full of properties of the more obvious forms of literary Romanticism—bards striking the lyre, an ancient minstrel playing the lute to a group of pensive swains, monks grouped gloomily by a church porch." Sometimes there was a "touch of the ridiculous about his work, and sometimes he could be mawkish in the extreme" although both the ridiculous and the mawkish crop up within the Romantic genre and, as has been acknowledged, the distance between the sublime and the ridiculous is a slight one.

The mention of Byron may give the reader a clue to who Richard Westall was. For the artist painted a number of portraits of the poet—the best being one owned by the National Portrait Gallery in London.

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