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Romantic Autobiography

"It is a thing unprecedented in literary history," Wordsworth wrote in 1805 of *The Prelude* (his poem "on the growth of a poet's mind"), "that a man should talk so much about himself."¹ Wordsworth's claim echoed that of Rousseau, whose *Confessions* (1782) had opened with the confident assertion that "I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, when complete, will have no imitator." Forty years later, Thomas De Quincey – the greatest confessor of the age, and also its greatest literary imitator – declared that there were "no precedents that I am aware of" for the type of "impassioned prose" employed in his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1822).²

Autobiography is an inherently Romantic form. By 1850, when Wordsworth's "divine self-biography" (as Coleridge called *The Prelude*) was published, talk about the self was understood to have been the current charging the first half of the century, the impulse not just of poetry and confession but of criticism, philosophy, literary prefaces, journalism, and journal writing. The word itself is a product of the age. Madame De Stael, searching for the right name, described writing of this sort as "narratives of self made by oneself,"³ but Isaac D'Israeli, in his *Miscellanies; Or Literary Recreations* (1796), introduced the expression "self-biography."⁴ The first cautious appearance of "auto-biography" appeared in a review of D'Israeli's book by William Taylor, who expressed his doubts about the "legitimacy" of "self-biography." "It is not very usual in English," wrote Taylor, "to employ hybrid words partly Saxon and partly Greek: yet *autobiography* would have seemed pedantic."⁵ While self-biography is rejected as "hybrid," or an impure mix, autobiography is seen as "pedantic," or too fussily precise: the lexical instability of the terms is curiously pertinent.

Popular eighteenth century memoirs by "fallen" women such as Constantia Phillips and Laetitia Pilkington had themselves been a hybrid of fiction and "true story,"⁶ while the most popular novels of the Romantic age – such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or James's Hogg's *The Private Memoirs*

and *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1823) – were written as “confessions” or else narrated in the intimacy of the first person. John Cleland’s novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749) fed into the hunger for female sexual confession and 100 years later, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* (1848) continued to mine the seam between revelation and romance.

If biography is the bastard child of truth and invention,⁷ then “self” biography is doubly unstable. It suggests a genre freakishly inverted – a self-generated child created from bits and pieces of writing that belong elsewhere. Self-biography – the word has the same shock-value as “self-murder” – might be seen as the literary equivalent of that other hybrid Romantic form, Frankenstein’s creature, as the spread of Romantic autobiography was regarded as equally monstrous. When the “pedantic” term next appeared in print, it was in an 1807 review written by the poet, historian, and biographer Robert Southey, a figure himself perceived as a pedant by Byron and Hazlitt among others. Southey’s review announced “an epidemical rage for auto-biography,” and this image of self-writing as a rampant disease recurred in 1827 when *London Magazine* noted that “the malady of memoir-writing continues to rage.”⁸

Coinciding with Isaac D’Israeli’s use of “self-biography,” the German romantic writer Jean Paul coined, in his novel *Siebenkas* (1795–1797), the term “doppelganger.” “Doubles,” he explained in a footnote, “are such people who see themselves.” In Romantic literature the double is not a supernatural creature from another realm, but an internal other, and it is intriguing to note that the “rage,” as Southey called it, for autobiographical writing comes hand-in-hand with the fascination in European fiction for doppelgangers and split-selves.

Autobiographers are also “such people who see themselves” and Romantic autobiography – in which the narrator reflects upon himself as the author as well as the subject of the narrative – plays with this sense of double consciousness. Writing about his childhood, Wordsworth remarked that “I seem/ Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself/And of some other being.”⁹ For Wordsworth, talking about himself had nothing to do with providing a written record of guests entertained or symptoms endured; Wordsworthian autobiography examined a self invisible to the poet whose past is a form of self-haunting. The Romantic interest in returning to childhood – what Wordsworth called bridging “the vacancy between me and those days”¹⁰ – becomes a means of exploring doubleness. In *Suspiria De Profundis*, his sequel to *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, De Quincey describes the experience of remembering earlier versions of the self:

An adult sympathises with himself in childhood because he *is* the same and because (being the same) he is *not* the same. He acknowledges the deep,

mysterious identity between himself, as adult and as infant, for the ground of his sympathy; and yet, with this general agreement, and necessity of agreement, he feels the differences between his two selves as the main quickeners of his sympathy.¹¹

Bridging the vacancy between “me and those days” is essential to Wordsworth’s exploration of the “deep mysterious identity” between adult and infant, but the journals of his sister Dorothy were concerned instead with bridging the vacancy she perceived between herself and William. Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journals*, written for Wordsworth’s consumption alone, did not appear in print until carefully selected passages were quoted by their nephew Christopher Wordsworth in his *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* (1851). In contrast to the more performative selves of autobiographical texts produced for publication, *Grasmere Journals* presents an identity slipping out of focus as her brother anticipates married life. The brief entries, made over a period of two and a half years, culminate in her description of lying on her bed during William’s wedding, “neither hearing or seeing anything.”¹² Instead of the “two consciousnesses” explored by her brother, or the self-division apparent in the diarist who splits in two to talk to herself, Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals give an account of sharing a consciousness, of filling William with her self and of being filled by him.¹³ Together, they form one mind. A similar experience of selfhood is given by John Keats in a letter to his brother, in which the poetical mind is portrayed as having “no self – it is every thing and nothing” and the poet is defined as a man with “no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body.”¹⁴

This chapter will focus on two best-selling Romantic autobiographies – Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* and Harriette Wilson’s *Memoirs of Herself and Others* (1825) – in which the authors, by continually filling other bodies, turn self-reflection into a hall of mirrors. De Quincey, a “transcendental hack,”¹⁵ and Harriette Wilson, a former courtesan, have been chosen not simply because they allow us to consider versions of what are considered high literature and low (De Quincey called the “confessions of demireps” a “spectacle of moral ulcers or scars”¹⁶), but because they provide prime examples of the paradoxical referentiality of Romantic autobiography, a genre that finds its authenticity in the assimilation of other texts. In these debut self-biographies, De Quincey and Wilson present themselves as in conversation with the greatest poetic autobiographers of the age: De Quincey with Wordsworth and Harriette Wilson with Byron. Notably, the title of neither book employs the term “autobiography,” and each writer makes plain at the outset that his or her book is not what it seems. De Quincey confesses that his “self-accusation is not a confession of

guilt,"¹⁷ and that opium and "not the opium-eater" is the "true hero of the tale,"¹⁸ while Harriette Wilson presents memory as malleable and the self recollected in memoir as a masquerade.

Towards the close of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, in a passage typical of his particular blend of autobiography and fantasy, De Quincey pictures for the reader a striking series of prints by Piranesi called *Dreams*, which were in turn described to him from the "memory of Mr. Coleridge." It is possible that Coleridge himself had never seen these exact images – the series is not known to exist¹⁹ – and so De Quincey's description constitutes a *mise en abyme* of sorts: what he imagines Coleridge to have imagined Piranesi to have imagined.

Some of them ... represented vast Gothic halls, on the floor of which stood all sorts of engines and machinery, wheels, cables, catapults &c &c expressive of enormous power to pull forth, and resistance overcome. Creeping along the sides of the wall, you perceived a staircase; and upon it, groping his way upwards is Piranesi himself: follow the stairs a little further and you perceive it come to a sudden abrupt termination, without any balustrade, and allowing no step onwards to him who had reached the extremity, except into the depths below.²⁰

De Quincey is tantalized by what he calls the "endless self-multiplication" of the artist, who is doubled, trebled, as he "toils," repeatedly caught in freeze-frame between the perilous staircase and the bottomless drop. "Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi?" he asks. "You suppose, at least, that his labours must in some way terminate here?" But when it seems that there is no way forward, a second flight of stairs appears on which Piranesi is once more "standing on the very brink of the abyss," and on a third "still more aerial" staircase, "again is poor Piranesi, busy on his aspiring labours." And so it goes on, "until the unfinished stairs and Piranesi are both lost in the upper gloom of the hall."²¹

In her reading of this famous passage, Susan Levin suggests that De Quincey identifies Piranesi's "aspiring labours" with his own as an autobiographer.²² The artist as he appears and reappears on free-floating flights of stairs is an image of De Quincey himself, facing his own duplications, ascents, and abysmal plunges as he writes his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. What De Quincey is drawn to is the figure's "endless growth and self-reproduction," growth being the subject – and working title – of Wordsworth's own ever-evolving autobiographical poem, which he intended to be published only after his death. *The Prelude*, as it was posthumously named, was referred to during Wordsworth's lifetime as "the poem on the growth of my own mind." Its growth took place before De Quincey's own eyes. A two-part version was written in 1798–1799, expanded to thirteen

books in 1805, and published posthumously as fourteen books in 1850. Wordsworth reworked the poem for over forty years, the last full-scale revision taking place in 1839. De Quincey, a friend of Wordsworth, read a manuscript copy in 1811.

Best described as a mandarin journalist, De Quincey was a curiously hybrid writer. A prolific producer of essays on every subject under and including the sun, he wrote to deadline and for money. With very few exceptions, everything De Quincey penned was for London or Edinburgh magazines, which were then going through a golden age. But whatever topic he ostensibly pursued, De Quincey's theme was principally himself. His works, as Frederick W. Shilstone says, "can be read as one vast autobiography"²³; for V. A. de Luca, his writing constitutes an "epic of the inner self in all its desolations and sublimities."²⁴ Even De Quincey's biographical essays on Wordsworth and Coleridge, which appeared in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* between 1834 and 1839, are what De Quincey described as works of "grand confession," in which an innocent hero-worshipper learns, by experience, that the personalities of great men can be a disappointment. His early admiration of Wordsworth had become "a rising emotion of hostility – nay, something, I fear, too nearly akin to vindictive hatred."²⁵

De Quincey divided his autobiographical writings into two orders: on the higher level – distinguished by what he called their "impassioned prose" – were *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* and its sequel, the *Suspiria De Profundis*. On the lower level were his various "Autobiographic Sketches," produced over a number of years for the journals but gathered together as a whole in 1856 for his collected works, *Selections Grave and Gay*. His preoccupation as an autobiographer is with the experiences of his childhood and youth; the narrative terminates suddenly when he reaches his twenties and meets Wordsworth. Ending at the point where his life becomes most remarkable is typical of De Quincey's time keeping: his writing is a series of beginnings. Autobiographers, being alive, do not know how or when their stories will conclude and so what they write will always be incomplete, but were it not for the deadlines imposed by editors it is unlikely that De Quincey would have finished anything. Editors, he complained, "won't wait an hour for you ... they won't wait for truth; you may as well reason with the sea, or a railway train."²⁶ When his essays reach what must be their final word, instead of drawing to a graceful halt they simply stop, leaving De Quincey on a flight of stairs looking over an abyss. For this reason, De Quincey complained that his own writing could never grow in an organic fashion. "Truth of character," De Quincey believed, is not a "piece of furniture to be shifted; it is a seed which must be sown, and pass through several stages of growth."²⁷ The best writing, like the best conversation,

“GROWS a truth before your eyes, whilst in the act of delivering it, or moving towards it.”²⁸

The idea that writing might never stop growing – that composition can go on indefinitely – haunted De Quincey, and it is these several stages of growth that his writing impersonates. In another visual analogy, he compared his potentially endless prose to the family picture painted by an artist in *The Vicar of Wakefield*:

But stop! This will not do. I must alter the scale of this paper, or else – something will happen which would vex me. The artist who sketched the *Vicar of Wakefield*'s family group in his zeal for comprehensive fullness of details, enlarged his canvas until he forgot the narrow proportions of the good vicar's house; and the picture, when finished, was too big to enter the front-door of the vicarage.²⁹

When he prepared his collected works for publication in 1856, De Quincey revised and doubled the length of his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, which had originally been published anonymously in two parts in *London Magazine*. The result was a text swollen with digressions. It is the version written to deadline – and published as a book in 1822 – that has since been reprinted. De Quincey begins with an address “To the Reader” in which he explains that his principle interest lies in exploring his own mind; unlike Wordsworth, however, he is not concerned with observing its growth. His mind, De Quincey believes, is of infinite dimensions to begin with: “from my birth I was an intellectual creature: and intellectual in the highest sense my pursuits have been, even from my schooldays.”³⁰ His project lies in measuring his mind's current dimensions, the full scale of which can be seen in the architecture of his dreams, which he describes as – like the Piranesi prints – a place of “chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths.”³¹ The dreaming self, De Quincey suggests in “The English Mail-Coach,” is a “numerical double of his own consciousness ... housed within himself,” and he wonders what would happen “if not one alien nature, but two, but three, but four, but five, are introduced within what once he thought the inviolable sanctuary of himself?”³²

When he wrote his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, De Quincey was housed within the inviolable sanctuary of Wordsworth's own former home, Dove Cottage in Grasmere, where he was a tenant for thirty years. The book might be said to house within itself other “alien natures,” such as the endlessly growing *Prelude* and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), a self-biography masquerading as a sprawling work of literary criticism. In his notebooks, Coleridge described the idea behind the *Biographia* as “to write my metaphysical works, as *my Life*, & *in my Life* – intermixed with all

the other events/or history of the mind & fortunes of S T Coleridge.”³³ But in the book’s first paragraph he warns the reader, “it will be found that the least of what I have written concerns myself personally.”³⁴ The *Biographia* has been described by Arthur Symons as needing “to be pursued across stones, ditches and morasses ... it turns back, loses itself, fetches wide circuits, and comes to no visible end,”³⁵ which, for De Quincey, would serve as a model to emulate rather than deride. De Quincey, who imitated Coleridge in becoming a laudanum-addicted friend of Wordsworth, identified in the *Biographia*’s digressions the mind of the opium-eater, but in his essays on Samuel Taylor Coleridge, published in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* in the autumn of 1834, De Quincey famously accused the philosopher of plagiarism by revealing that sections of the *Biographia* were not the product of Coleridge’s own mind, but of Schelling’s. De Quincey, housing Coleridge within himself, accused Coleridge of secretly housing the mind of another.

De Quincey borrowed from Coleridge in the elaborate digressiveness of his style, but Wordsworth was the most dominant “double” of De Quincey’s “own consciousness.” It had always been Wordsworth’s intention that *The Prelude* should appear posthumously, and likewise De Quincey “hesitated” about “allowing” *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* to “come before the public eye, until after my death (when, for many reasons, the whole will be published).”³⁶ De Quincey’s account of running away from Manchester grammar school to wander in North Wales and Soho is essentially Wordsworthian. As a teenager, he had been so profoundly affected by the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) with their sympathetic tales of the marginalized and dispossessed, that he determined to introduce himself to the author. It was Wordsworth, home at Grasmere, who occupied his thoughts as he starved in the city:

oftentimes on moonlight nights, during my first mournful abode in London, my consolation was (if such it could be thought) to gaze from Oxford Street up every avenue in succession which pierces through the heart of Marylebone to the fields and the woods; for *that*, said I, travelling with my eyes up the long vistas which lay part in light and part in shade, *that* is the road to the North and therefore to –, and if I had the wings of a dove, *that* way would I fly to comfort.³⁷

By the time he met his idol, De Quincey’s transformation from middle-class schoolboy to Romantic outsider was complete.

De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* are an urban prose version of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*.³⁸ Like Wordsworth, the adult De Quincey recalls significant scenes of his childhood and youth, and reflects on the development of his sensibilities through a series of formative experiences. Time,

in *The Prelude* and *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, is measured according to emotional impact rather than sequential event: the “passages of life” described by Wordsworth as “spots of time” reappear in *Confessions* as what Annette Carafelli calls “those anecdotes which suddenly and unexpectedly throw human character into brilliant illumination.”³⁹ An example of such an anecdote is offered by De Quincey’s account of his first taste of opium: “Oh! Heavens! . . . Here was the secret happiness, about which philosophers had disputed for so many ages, at once discovered.”⁴⁰ Wordsworth’s dream of “an Arabian waste” in Book V of *The Prelude* is reworked in De Quincey’s laudanum dreams with their “silvery expanses of water”; Wordsworth’s childhood roaming the “solitary hills” becomes De Quincey’s lonely days on Oxford Street; the enigmatic figure in Wordsworth’s first “spot of time,” “who bore a pitcher on her head/And seemed with difficult steps to force her way/Against the blowing wind,” becomes Ann, the mysterious young prostitute who saves De Quincey’s life and then evaporates into the city. De Quincey’s description of waiting, as a child, for the carriage that will bring his sick father home to die, “listening for hours to the sounds from horses’ hoofs upon distant roads,” repeats Wordsworth’s description of waiting, ten days before the death of his own father, for “those two horses which should bear us home” from school.⁴¹ Wordsworth, “Feverish, and tired, and restless,” looks for the horses on the “highest summit,” while De Quincey, in the family house, looks from the window, his “morbid nervousness raised into abiding grandeur.”⁴²

But there is another of Wordsworth’s autobiographical poems housed within *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. In 1793, the poet returned from Revolutionary France, and in 1798 walked with his sister Dorothy in the hills above the river Wye. The poem honoring this walk, “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” measures the distance between “what then I was” and the man Wordsworth is now. The poet moves back and forth between the present, where he is sitting on the banks of the Wye with his “dear, dear Sister” next to him, and the past on which he is reflecting, divided by a vacancy of “five summers, with the length/Of five long winters.” De Quincey also recalls a younger self, a runaway who seemed, like Wordsworth, “more like a man flying from what he dreads, than one/Who sought the thing he loved,” and shifts throughout between the past and the present. “But these troubles are past . . . Meantime, I am again in London: and again I pace the terraces of Oxford-street by night.”⁴³ His rhythm and vocabulary recall Wordsworth’s “Once again/Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs . . . Once again I see/ These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows.” By De Quincey’s side as he writes this passage is Margaret, his wife and “dear companion of my later years”⁴⁴ – the woman whose mind shall be for him,

as Dorothy's is for William, "a mansion for all lovely forms," whose "memory a dwelling place."

Memory as a dwelling place is parodied by Harriette Wilson in her *Memoirs of Herself and Others* (1825), the purpose of which was to extort from her 250 former clients (Wilson had been one of the Regency period's most popular courtesans) enough money to retire in comfort. Published in a series of paper-covered installments, the back of each part contained a list of those men who would appear in the next part, unless they paid up. This way, Wilson gave each of her victims the opportunity to buy himself out of her story. Those who provided her with a hurried payment had their place in Wilson's unfolding memory erased, while those who refused – the Duke of Wellington apparently challenged her to "publish and be damned" – had their amorous advances exposed. King George IV, one of her victims, lay on his deathbed cursing "Harriette Wilson and her hellish gang."⁴⁵

Had the majority of the men she listed refused to buy her silence, Wilson's *Memoirs* would have grown to the size of the family portrait in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. As it was, when a payment was received and a name omitted, her narrative had to elastically reform itself around the subsequent ellipsis. By comparing the lists of names threatened with exposure against those men who subsequently appeared in each part, it was clear who had bought themselves out. Wilson's readers were thus presented with two concurrent versions of the truth: the published version and the version whose publication had been prevented. So on the one hand it was known that Harriette Wilson's *Memoirs* did not reveal the full contents of the author's memory and were therefore not the "real thing," while on the other hand, having watched their construction on a public stage in real time, readers knew that her *Memoirs* constituted a different – deeper – version of the truth that the "whore's story" was expected to expose.

The appeal of Wilson's *Memoirs* therefore lay not only in their revelations. It was clear to the public that this was a form of autobiography in which the author had no control over the direction her "memories" would take. Having severed "the deep, mysterious identity" – to repeat De Quincey's phrase – between the self who was writing and the self being written about, Wilson placed herself in a radically unstable position in relation to her own story and ridiculed the conventions of a genre whose premise was humility. Many accounts of the lives of courtesans claimed to be "Written by Herself" but were in fact penned by hacks cashing in on the popularity of the scandalous memoir and the predictability of the formula. Works such as *Confessions of Julia Johnstone, written by Herself in contradiction to the fables of Harriette Wilson* (1825) – produced "by" Julia Johnstone, Wilson's former friend and rival courtesan – tell the usual cautionary tale. An innocent girl from a good

family is seduced by a dastardly milord; her “deflowering” is staged as the defining moment of her narrative; she subsequently falls into vice and, after a period of suffering, performs a public act of penitence in the form of her present confession. “Let no man condemn me who has not been placed in a similar situation,” Julia Johnstone says before listing her misfortunes.⁴⁶ Johnstone’s *Confessions* – which appeared in parts at the same time as the *Memoirs* of Harriette Wilson, each installment contradicting what Wilson had most recently revealed – typically constitute both her vindication and her plea to be admitted back into society.

Consider, by contrast, the opening lines of Harriette Wilson’s *Memoirs*:

I shall not say how or why I became, at the age of fifteen, the mistress of the Earl of Craven. Whether it was love, or the severity of my father, the depravity of my own heart, or the winning arts of the noble lord, which induced me to leave my paternal roof and place myself under his protection, does not now much signify: or, if it does, I am not in the humor to gratify curiosity in this matter.⁴⁷

Beginning with a flirtatious refusal to explain her choice of career – “I shall not say” – Wilson mocks the existing plots of the apologetic or vindictory whore and challenges her readers’ expectations by implying that no “fall” has taken place in her own life. She may have been in love with Lord Craven, or she may have been depraved, or her father may have been particularly severe – either way it “does not now much signify.” Furthermore, the scene of Wilson’s deflowering is elided in her refusal to reveal whether Craven was in fact her first lover. Wilson, who presents herself as indifferent to the stranglehold of reputation, offers no defense of her conduct while her confidence and arch humor suggest that the narrative that follows will not trade on suffering and redemption. In a genre for which self-revelation is key, Wilson reveals nothing whatsoever. Posing as a successful courtesan rather than a penitent sinner, she keeps her “true self” under wraps and resists revelations of inner character. We are not invited to identify with, feel superior to, or pity the fallen woman, as Wilson appropriates a narrative voice that masquerades as readable but refuses to be read.

Toward the close of her *Memoirs*, Wilson describes attending Watier’s Masquerade, a ball organized by Byron and his friends in June 1814 to celebrate what was wrongly believed to be the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Wilson, who has exchanged her disguise as a cryptic courtesan for that of a simple country girl, finds herself in a “still quiet room” that is “deserted, save by one solitary individual.”

He was habited in a dark brown flowing robe, which was confined round the waist by a leathern belt, and fell in ample folds to the ground He

was unmasked, and his bright penetrating eye seemed earnestly fixed, I could not discover on what. "Surely he sees beyond this gay scene into some other world, which is hidden from the rest of mankind," thought I, being impressed, for the first time in my life, with an idea that I was in the presence of a supernatural being. His attitude was graceful in the extreme. His whole countenance so bright, severe, and beautiful, that I should have been afraid to have loved him . . . His age might be eight and twenty, or less; his complexion clear olive; his forehead high; his mouth, as I afterwards discovered, was beautifully formed, for at this moment the brightness of the eyes and their deep expression fixed the whole of my attention.⁴⁸

The two disguised party-goers (Byron's disguise is his lack of a mask) begin to converse and eventually guess one another's identity: "It has only this instant struck me, for the first time, that you must be Lord Byron," says Wilson, "whom I have never seen." "And you," replies Byron, "are Harriette Wilson."⁴⁹ The celebrated poet then confides in the celebrated courtesan; they discuss the character of his former mistress, Lady Caroline Lamb, and the authenticity of the letters from Byron included in Lamb's best-selling autobiographical novel *Glenarvon* (1816). No matter that *Glenarvon*, which is about Lamb's notorious affair with Byron in 1812, had not been written in 1814; for Harriette Wilson, as for Wordsworth and De Quincey, the passage of time is measured according to sensibility and not chronology. Or as Wilson puts it, "dates make ladies nervous and stories dry."⁵⁰

The appearance of Byron – one of the few men not known to Harriette Wilson – is one of the rare episodes in the *Memoirs* that does not involve blackmail. While others paid heavily to have the truth of their relations with Wilson excluded, she here freely includes an entirely fictitious encounter. Because Byron had died the year before the *Memoirs* appeared, he was unable to comment on the story of their exchange. His response would have been a weary one: the culture of copies generated around him – of Byron's poetry as well as his distinctive pose – meant that his identity had long been public property. Byron saw himself transformed into a figure of fiction, and in a nod to "Tintern Abbey" he looked back, in 1822, on the experiences attributed to him over the last five years:

All the things attributed to me within the last five years – Pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Deaths upon Pale Horses, Odes to the Land of the Gaul, Adieus to England, Songs to Madame La Valette, Odes to St Helena, Vampires, and what not – of which, God knows, I never composed nor read a syllable beyond their title in advertisements.⁵¹

Byron epitomized the Romantic preoccupation with self-representation, his fame and infamy being based on a peculiarly "Byronic masquerade" in which, as Jerome McGann puts it, "we have difficulty distinguishing

figure from ground because the presumptive ground, the 'real Lord Byron,' becomes a figural form in his poetry."⁵² The fascination of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), the first two cantos of which made him famous, lay in the perceived identification between the aristocratic and world-weary Harold who leaves his ancestral pile to wander in Europe and the Levant, and the aristocratic and world-weary poet who left his own ancestral pile, Newstead Hall, to wander in the same places before returning home to write the poem. According to Walter Scott, Byron had "Childe Harolded himself, and outlawed himself, into too great a resemblance with the figures of his imagination." Byron's denial of a resemblance between himself and his hero only fueled the flames: "I by no means intend to identify myself with *Harold* but to *deny* all connection with him ... I would not be such a fellow as I have made my hero for all the world."⁵³

The more striking resemblance, however, was not between Byron and Harold, but between Byron and Rousseau. John Wilson argued in the *Edinburgh Review* that both Byron and Rousseau "revealed to the world the secrets of his own being," each man seeming "to have something of the nature of private and confidential communications."⁵⁴ Wordsworth's style of self-revelation was also compared to Rousseau: "we see no other difference between them," wrote Hazlitt, "than that the one writes in prose and the other in poetry."⁵⁵ But for Byron, any relationship between his own and Rousseau's confessions was, inevitably, denied: "I can't see any point of resemblance," he said.⁵⁶

Harriette Wilson describes Byron as a copy not of other writers but of his own literary creations. Like Count Lara, the "supernatural" monk who confesses to Wilson is a Byronic hero whose "silence formed a theme for others' prate":

They guessed, they gazed, they fane would know his fate.
 What had he been? What was he, thus unknown,
 Who walked their world, his lineage only known?
 A hater of his kind? Yet some would say,
 With them he could seem gay amidst the gay.⁵⁷

Throughout her *Memoirs*, Wilson insists on the difference between copies and originals; at one point exclaiming to the reader, "I am very ignorant and can't spell, but there is this advantage in not reading: you are all of you copies and I am the thing itself," and at another point declaring of herself and Sir Walter Scott, "Now we are the two greatest people in Europe! Scott in his way, I am (in?) mine! Everything which comes after us will be but base copies."⁵⁸ In the Watier scene, Wilson masquerades not as courtesan or blackmailer or even a woman, but as a writer in conversation with another

writer. Nowhere else in the *Memoirs* does she present herself as a cerebral rather than a sexual being. Her talk with Byron revolves around authenticity and the instability of identity: neither party knows initially who the other is, and Wilson asks whether Byron's letters reproduced in *Glenarvon* are copies or "the thing itself": "Those letters in Her Ladyship's novel, *Glenarvon*, are much in your own style, and rather better than she could write. Have you any objection to tell me candidly whether they are really your originals?"⁵⁹ Byron confesses that the letters are real, and Wilson therefore places an exchange about the reproduction of authentic letters in one of the only entirely inauthentic scenes in the *Memoirs*, and stages a performance in which two figures famous for their public masquerades recognize the "true" identity of the other whilst wrapped in yet another disguise. In *Don Juan*, Byron described a lie as "the truth in masquerade"⁶⁰ and Wilson, whose *Memoirs* might be seen as fitting this precise description, presents herself not as Byron's equal, but his double. She masquerades in this scene as a Romantic autobiographer, and she sees the Romantic autobiographer as someone who masquerades.

Four years before the appearance of Harriette Wilson's *Memoirs*, Byron also returned, in his *Detached Thoughts*, to the night of Watier's Masquerade. He recalled performing in a pantomime copy of the original ball on the stage at Drury Lane theatre:

In the Pantomime of 1815-16 – there was a representation of the Masquerade of 1814 – given by "us Youth" of Watier's Club to Wellington and Co. – Douglas Kinnaird – & one or two others with myself – put on Masques – and went on the stage amongst the [hoi palloi] – to see the effect of the theatre from the Stage. It is very grand. – Douglas danced amongst the figuranti too – & they were puzzled to find out who we were – as being more than their number. – It was odd that D[ouglas] K[innaird] and I should have both been at the *real* Masquerade – & afterwards in the Mimic one of the same – on the stage of D[ury] L[ane] Theatre.⁶¹

Here, in a moment of Piranesi-like repetition, is a profane example of what De Quincey called the "endless self-multiplication" of the autobiographer. Byron, whom the public saw as being all performance, gives a "mimic" performance of being Byron at a "*real* masquerade," which was itself pure theater. Harriette Wilson's own representation of her encounter with Byron as that of two disguised sinners stripped and revealing their "real selves" adds yet another frame to the *mise en abyme* of Romantic autobiography. We recall De Quincey's comparison of the mummer's play in *Hamlet* – which reenacts the murder of Hamlet's father – with a room which contains a picture of a room, which contains a picture of a room, which contains a picture of a room: a "descent into a life below a life going on *ad infinitum*."⁶²

NOTES

- 1 Wordsworth to Sir George Beaumont, May 1, 1805. Quoted in *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Text, Context and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M H Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 534. All subsequent references to *The Prelude* are from this edition.
- 2 Preface to *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. 1 revised by the author (Edinburgh: A & C Black, 1878), xvii.
- 3 Quoted in Robert Folkenflik, ed., *The Culture of Autobiography* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 8.
- 4 Isaac D'Israeli, "Observations on Diaries, Self-biography, and Self-characters," in *Miscellanies; Or Literary Recreations*, (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1796), 256.
- 5 *Monthly Review*, NS xxiv, 375, quoted in James Treadwell, *Autobiographical Writing and British Literature 1783-1834* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 3.
- 6 See Lynda M Thompson, *The 'Scandalous Memoirists': Constantia Phillips, Laetitia Pilkington and the shame of 'publick fame'*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).
- 7 Richard Holmes, "Biography: Inventing the Truth," in *The Art of Literary Biography* ed. John Batchelor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 15.
- 8 *London Magazine*, NS viii, 221, quoted in Treadwell, *Autobiographical Writing*, 4.
- 9 Beaumont, *Prelude*, II, 32-33.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 11 Thomas De Quincey, "Suspiria De Profundis," in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed. Barry Milligan, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), 94.
- 12 Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford: World's Classics, 1991), 126.
- 13 See Frances Wilson, *The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 2008).
- 14 *Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, 2 vols., ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), vol. 1, 386.
- 15 David Wright, Introduction to *Recollection of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1970), 11.
- 16 Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of An English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed Milligan, 3.
- 17 De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, 4.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 19 It is generally thought that Coleridge and De Quincey are referring to the *Carceri*, Piranesi's drawings of underground prisons.
- 20 De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, 78.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Susan Levin, *The Romantic Art of Confession, De Quincey, Musset, Sand, Lamb, Hogg, Frémy, Soulié, Janin* (London: Camden House, 1998), 23.
- 23 Frederick W. Shilstone, "Autobiography as 'Involute': De Quincey on the Therapies of Memory," *South Atlantic Review*, 48, No. 1 (January 1983), 20-34.

- 24 V De Luca, *De Quincey: The Prose of Vision* (Toronto: Toronto University Press 1980), 2.
- 25 Thomas De Quincey, "William Wordsworth," in *Recollection of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, ed. David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 145.
- 26 Preface to *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, vi.
- 27 "Letters to A Young Man Whose Education has been Neglected," in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. 8, 92.
- 28 "Conversation," in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, 156–157.
- 29 "Sir William Hamilton," in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. 16, 146.
- 30 De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, 2.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 32 "The English Mail-Coach, or The Glory of Motion," in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, 210–211.
- 33 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Princeton University Press, 1957), vol. I, 1515.
- 34 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria, Or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions," in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*: vol 7, ed. James Englee and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 5.
- 35 Arthur Symonds, Introduction to *Biographia Literaria* (London: Everyman, 1906), x-xi. My emphasis.
- 36 De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, 3.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 38 Of the several critics who have pointed this out, Julian North writes "the book is a homage to Wordsworth – a prose *Prelude* – and also a gesture against Wordsworth's nature dominated aesthetic. De Quincey replaces the natural with the artificial and offers an image of himself as opium-eater which parodies the Wordsworthian poet." Julian North, "Opium and the Romantic Imagination" in *Beyond the Pleasure Dome: Writing and Addiction from the Romantics*, eds. Sue Vice, Matthew Campbell, and Tim Armstrong (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 113.
- 39 Annette Wheeler Carafelli, *Prose in the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 162.
- 40 De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, 44.
- 41 Beaumont, *Prelude*, Bk. XI, 349.
- 42 *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, vol. XIV, 35
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, 41.
- 45 Letter from George IV to Sir William Knighton, 24 October 1826, in *The Letters of George IV 1812–1830*, vol. 3, ed. A Aspinall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 178.
- 46 Julia Johnstone, *The Confessions of Julia Johnstone, in Contradiction to the Fables of Harriette Wilson* (London: Benbow, 1825), 13.
- 47 Harriette Wilson, *Memoirs of Herself and Others* (London: Peter Davies, 1929), 1.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 588–589.
- 49 *Ibid.* 589.

- 50 Ibid., 26.
- 51 Lord Byron "Reply to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*," in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie Marchand (London: John Murray, 1973), vol. IV, 474.
- 52 Jerome J McGann, "Byron and the Anonymous Lyric," *The Byron Journal* 20 (1992), 40.
- 53 Byron, *Letters and Journals*, vol. 2, 122.
- 54 John Wilson, *Edinburgh Review*, June 18, XXX, 87-120, cited in Rutherford, *Byron: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970), 185, 149.
- 55 William Hazlitt, "On the Character of Rousseau," in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, (London and Toronto: J M Dent, 1930), vol. 4, 92.
- 56 Byron, *Letters and Journals*, vol. 9: 11-12.
- 57 Byron, *Lara: A Tale, Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), vol. III, Canto 1, lines 289-302.
- 58 *Memoirs of Harriette Wilson*, 482, 588.
- 59 Ibid. 588.
- 60 Byron, *Don Juan*, in *Complete Poetical Works* ed. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), vol. 7, Canto XI, stanza 37 line 89.
- 61 Byron, "Detached Thoughts," in *Letters and Journals* vol 9: 36-37 1821-1822.
- 62 Thomas De Quincey, "Classical and Modern Drama," in *De Quincey's Literary Criticism*, edited with an introduction by Helen Gardiner (London: Henry Frowde, 1909), 173.

Further Reading

- Thomas De Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and The Lake Poets*, ed. David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).
- Frances Wilson, *The Courtesan's Revenge: Harriette Wilson, the Woman Who Blackmailed the King* (London: Faber, 2003).
- Eugene Stelzig, ed. *Romantic Autobiography in England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).
- Huntington Williams, *Rousseau and Romantic Autobiography* (Oxford: OUP, 1983).
- Julian North, *The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet* (Oxford: OUP, 2009).