

Lecture Note for Class 4

Romantic Autobiography

1. Duncan Wu, "Romantic life-writing" in *A history of English autobiography*

Rousseau's *Confessions*, a work of "indecent and immorality, the resort of shameless egoists." "anxieties about the propriety of autobiography as a form"

***the cult of sensibility:** "Towards the deep gulph that opens on my sight/ I hurry forward, passion's helpless slave"(Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*, 1786); William Cowper's *The Task*(1784)

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)

***Wordsworth:** "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."

***Byron "ventriloquising" his characters** such as Childe Harold and Manfred

***the problematic status of confession with a good marketability:** *Harriette Wilson's Memoirs of Herself and Others*(1825).

***William Hazlitt's 'My First Acquaintance with Poets'**(1823) and "*Liber Amoris*"(1823) which "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."

***Romantic vs Victorian on autobiography:** "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*, recounting a story of honourable struggle, an apology of which the virtues were modesty, discretion, and reticence. **Romantics 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.” “Autobiography was for them a means of exploring aspects of the self.”

2. Francis Wilson’s chapter on Romantic Autobiography in *Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*

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, “but Isaac D’Israeli, in his *Miscellanies: Or Literary Recreations* (1796), introduced the expression “self-biography.” 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.” 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.

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 “doppelgänger.” “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 doppelgängers 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.” 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”** — becomes a means of exploring doubleness.

3. Stelzig's introduction of *Romantic Autobiography in England*

What might be called **the autobiographization of literature** is a key component of the culture of Romanticism. It is a striking fact that the word (autobiography) was coined in the later eighteenth century in Germany (as a variant of *Selbstbiographie*=Self Biography), and that between the posthumous publication of Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782-1789) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1848)—the *Bildungsroman* whose author cannily exploits the popularity of the genre by subtitling her novel "An Autobiography"—there was **a veritable explosion of autobiographical writing**, both poetry and prose, in England and on the Continent...

The causes for the popularity and prevalence of autobiography during the Romantic period are probably overdetermined. As I have observed about its rapid rise in the eighteenth century, "in the philosophic and psychological sphere, it is **the function of a post-Cartesian, post-Lockian sense of the subject and of personal identity**; in the economic sphere, it is correlated with **the rise of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism**" ("The Romantic Subject" 223).

Indeed, the roots of modern autobiography reach well back before the time Rousseau gave a sensational impetus to it. As Michael Mascuch has argued, as a **"cultural practice" the "individualist self—the identity of the egocentric person who ... mythifying himself as his own object, regards himself as his own telos"** has its origins in the early modern period (8). It was, however, during the Romantic period that autobiography began to establish itself as a separate and distinct genre, and not simply a version or branch of biography ("self biography"), the prevailing view during the eighteenth century.

As an increasingly popular kind of writing it did not gain literary respectability...and **conservative reviewers attack it as an upstart genre reflective of the leveling tendencies of the age, so that "the commonest order of minds shall be upon a level with the highest"** (Treadwell 79). In a splenetic outburst in the *Quarterly Review* of January 1827, John Gibson Lockhart sneers at "the mania for this garbage of Confessions, and Recollections, and Reminiscences" as "indeed a vile symptom" because the ear of "the Reading Public ... had become as filthily prurient as that of an eaves-dropping lackey" (Treadwell 76)...But the reviewers' reservations about or repulsion by the surge of autobiography and confession in print are countered by their fascination as consumers of this kind of writing: **"Repeatedly, commentators' sense of transgressed literary decorum comfortably overlaps with their interest or pleasure in watching privacy enter into the arena of publication"** (83).

4. Stelzig's article "'Lives Without Narrative': Romantic Lyric as Autobiography"

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 poets' lived experience.

...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.