

Chapter 1
Introduction
Romantic Autobiography In England:
Exploring Its Range and Variety

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I

It is generally agreed that the foundational work of modern autobiography is a single volume from the late eighteenth century: Rousseau's posthumously published *Confessions*, which by dramatically bringing a secular and self-exhibiting self into the literary limelight, also helped to initiate the culture of celebrity that has become so pervasive in our personality and media driven world. It's a good thing the Genevan philosopher turned autobiographer was not a literary historian, because the famous opening sentence of his book is surely the most inaccurate statement about the genre on record: "I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator" (17). The most important predecessor, of course, was the author of the first *Confessions*, Saint Augustine, though his, nearly a millennium and a half earlier, were God, not self-centered. And as for imitators, there has been for more than two centuries a deluge of secular confessions appealing to the voyeuristic urges of a large reading public catered to by enterprising publishers—and more recently also of the audience of television talk shows that appeal to its prurient interest in other people's intimate and preferably shameful self-revelations.

Rousseau's provocative profession of the uniqueness not only of his project but of his self in the opening paragraph of his *Confessions* is the first major instance of a Romantic rhetoric of originality that by the twenty-first century sounds distinctly shopworn. But his claim that nothing like it has ever been written also betrays an amnesia with respect to predecessors that is enabling, because it seems to open up an uncharted literary and psychological field of self-writing where anything goes: the rules of the road have not yet been established or posted. This confessional amnesia frees the autobiographer from the burden of a literary or generic past: the world lies all before him or her, and the forms and modes of self-writing are there for the taking or the making. Thus a generation after Rousseau, the author of the most canonical of the English Romantic autobiographies, Wordsworth, writes on 1 May 1805, as he is nearing completion of "the Poem on my own life": "Two Books more will conclude it. It will not be much less than 9,000 lines ... an alarming length! And a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself" (Jonathan Wordsworth 534). Wordsworth repeats Rousseau's amnesic gesture even as he represses his famous predecessor. And though he

claims to have written at such length about himself in *The Prelude* out of “real humility,” this too can be seen as an enabling trope of Romantic autobiography, now in an English and attenuated incarnation.

The author of the only book-length study of the genre in England notes in his Preface, “It is a little surprising that there has been no general study of Romantic autobiography, under whatever name, until now” (viii). James Treadwell’s claim is true only with regard to Romantic autobiography in England (see my *Romantic Subject*), of which his book indeed does provide the first comprehensive examination as an important step toward the utopian goal of “a history of reading, writing, and publishing practices” during the period whose “primary [autobiographical] texts’ would occupy only a small part” (9) in the large body of Romantic era autobiographical writing in “the public literary sphere” (ix). The dates in Treadwell’s title (1783–1834) plausibly mark the temporal boundaries of Romantic autobiography in England with the first English translation of Rousseau’s *Confessions* at one end and Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* at the other. And although Treadwell insists at the outset that he carefully avoided titling his book Romantic Autobiography, “that faded and eroded sign” (vii, ix), by the time he is well under way, he has quietly succumbed to the Siren song of the generic label he initially sought to resist. There really is no need to avoid that label as a convenient umbrella term for a type of writing proliferating in a variety of forms and modes and that became increasingly prominent and popular in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century in the wake of the sensational success of Rousseau’s book. *Romantic Autobiography in England* embraces that term as a pragmatic designation as it examines the expanding spectrum and variety of autobiographical writing during the period. To try to rigorously define the meaning or delimit the range of reference and denotation of autobiography during the Romantic era would be futile, for it is everywhere—in the poetry and in the prose, in the male and the female writers, in the canonical and the noncanonical ones.

A flexible, highly adaptable, and even metamorphic genre, autobiography has consistently confounded critical attempts to define it; the practice has always been ahead of the theory; it has successfully eluded or slipped any theoretical constructs designed to firmly anchor its meaning and hold it in place. Nearly three decades ago, Paul de Man famously concluded that “attempts at generic definition seem to founder in questions that are both pointless and unanswerable” (68). And James Olney, the founding father of American autobiography criticism, asserted a generation ago that autobiographies are “the most elusive of literary documents,” insisting “that there is no way to bring autobiography to heel as a literary genre with its own proper form, terminology, and observances” (3–4). However, what Laura Marcus has epitomized more recently as “the fundamental problem of the instability or hybridity of autobiography as a genre” (7) should not stop us from using “Romantic autobiography” as a useful descriptive term for the proliferation of self-writing after the turn of the century—so long as we don’t try to boil it down to a semantic essence or endow it with a narrow prescriptive meaning. While de Man’s suggestion that we consider autobiography “not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading” (70) has heuristic value for studying Romantic era texts,

this exploratory volume is posited on the conception of autobiography as primarily a mode of writing. As I noted in *The Romantic Subject in Autobiography*, “if not all Romantic writing is autobiography, much of it is certainly confessional and autobiographical” (250). It is during the Romantic period that autobiography emerges from the shadows, and effectively rises above the sub or marginally literary—a utilitarian or practical prose form, as it were—to establish itself as a literary genre laying claim, in its foremost practitioners (Wordsworth, DeQuincey, Byron) to high aesthetic standing. Indeed, as Susan Wolfson has suggested, autobiography is the “quintessential nineteenth-century genre” (1432). And Linda Peterson in her hermeneutic view of the genre (as self-interpretation) during the Victorian period has also concluded that it reaches “full literary status” during that time (28).

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. What accounts for this outpouring is not easy to determine: there are many factors at work here, not the least of which is the changing situation of the literary marketplace as well as the commercial realities of the publication and consumption of books as these reflect growing rates of literacy and a rising middle class able to purchase these (as opposed to relying on the lending libraries mentioned by Rousseau when writing of his days as an improvident apprentice) and interested in personal narratives of all kinds. In the early nineteenth century the literary quarterlies and reviews also served as the initial venue for the publication of autobiographical writing by leading prose writers like De Quincey, Hazlitt, and Lamb. 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,

as indicated above, until the middle of the next century. And in England, no matter how prolific, it produced few masterpieces—chiefly *The Prelude* (which was only published after Wordsworth's death in 1850) and the *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*—and even these were not fully canonized until the early twentieth century. But its pervasiveness by the early nineteenth century was such that in 1834 Carlyle writes in *Sartor Resartus* of “these Autobiographical times of ours” (94) 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). The *Edinburgh Magazine's* 1822 article on “Auto-Biography” grounds the appeal of the genre in “the insatiable appetite of the public for every species of Private Memoirs and Correspondence” in the (anthropological) “curiosity with which we scrutinize all the varieties of human nature” (Treadwell 89)—a description that nearly two centuries later still defines the dynamic of the contemporary memoir craze capitalized on by enterprising publishers. As Treadwell suggests of this phenomenon in his review of the periodical literature, “it appears to turn the whole conversational environment where texts circulate into a gigantic whispering gallery of prying eaves-dropping” (80). 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).

As autobiography emerges from the vulgar and the sub—or at best marginal—literary at the turn of the century into a distinctly literary and respectable genre by midcentury, it is also, as Treadwell concludes, “above all a debatable practice,” one that is “unsystematic” with a “variety [that] resists pigeon-holing” (8, 155). Its foremost works and practitioners may not be representative in their sophisticated surplus of self-reflexivity and their literary artistry of the rising tide of the genre, and thus, in Treadwell's skeptical conclusion, also “do not anchor a tradition of Romantic autobiography” (177). At its best or most aspiring, however, Romantic autobiography is, in Spengemann's apt formulation, “the prime instrument of Romantic self-knowledge” (77)—a definition that indicates its upper or ideal limit, as opposed to its vulgar or populist base. The aim of this volume is to map the debatable, unsystematic, and hybrid practice of Romantic autobiography in England from a variety of perspectives and in a variety of genres and modes, and by a broad spectrum of practitioners, from the high and the semi to the non-canonical, from the famous to the little known and marginal. This collection is exploratory precisely because the field has not been adequately surveyed and delineated, and because there is still no scholarly consensus about its extent, or even where it begins and ends (either as a period or a genre). Nor is there any

critical consensus or established theoretical paradigm of exactly what Romantic autobiography is, or how it should be defined, construed, sorted out, delimited. This problematic yet influential genre is still up for interpretive grabs, ill-defined and contested, but omnipresent in the nineteenth century.

The subtitle of this Introduction—*Exploring Its Range*—suggests a nonprescriptive attitude of openness to the field it seeks to chart. Nor is this survey intended to be exhaustive or definitive, for there are more practitioners and modes of Romantic self-writing and its discursive and expressive possibilities than are discussed within its pages, or perhaps even dreamt of by its editor and contributors. The unorthodox, eclectic, and innovative spirit informing this exploratory project is in keeping with Anne Mellor's call, a decade and a half ago (in her discussion of Dorothy Wordsworth), to expand "the generic range of 'autobiography' to include all writing that inscribes subjectivity, to diaries, journals, memoirs and letters" (157). This volume does not discuss the full range of life writing invoked by Mellor—for instance, the greater (confessional and reflective) Romantic lyric practiced by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Percy Shelley, among others, or the incredible corpus of letters by many of the major poets of the period, especially Keats and Byron, or the colorful autobiographical narratives of Olaudah Equiano, Leigh Hunt, and Benjamin Robert Haydon. But its contributors cover a broad spectrum of Romantic self-writing in England by both men and women. If there has been an "explosion of interest in Romantic biography" in recent years, as the editors of the recent volume on that genre in this series indicate (Bradley and Rawes xi), such an explosion is even more true of Romantic autobiography. By the early nineteenth century the two genres are distinct if still related, but the latter depends like the former "on a set of assumptions about the self, creativity, time and society that originate in the Romantic period" (xii) and that are inherent in if not explicitly foregrounded in different ways and degrees in the practitioners of Romantic-era autobiography discussed in this collection.

II

In the wake of revisionary feminist readings of the canon of Western autobiography, it has become something of a truism that the female autobiographical self differs substantially from the male version. If the male autobiographer seeks to represent an autonomous self, as evident in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, "in which the poet has attempted to collect the past from its dismembered state into a remembered and transfigured pattern" (Jay 67) and whose sublime and solitary individualism enshrines in a paradigmatic fashion "the inward turn of the self away from the social" (Danahy 15), the female self is more fluid, diffuse, and relational. According to Mary Mason, "the egoistic secular archetype that Rousseau handed down to his Romantic brethren ... finds no echo in women's writings about their lives," because "the disclosure of the female self is linked to the identification of some 'other'" (210). Felicity Nussbaum, however, has suggested that already in eighteenth-century autobiography the normative "bourgeois gendered self" is destabilized

by “private writings in diaries and journals” that allow us to hear “oppositional voices” that “subvert an individuated self” that “partakes of the universal essence and transcends the distinctions based on class and gender” (55, 57). By the turn of the century, as evident in Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Journals*, we encounter a gendered female subject that is dispersed and fragmentary, as opposed to unitary and transcendent. In Kay Cook’s succinct summary, “parataxis describes the form; immersion, the structuring principle; and detail and fragmentation, the narrative strategies” (90). She contrasts William’s “egotistical sublime” self-absorption with Dorothy’s “self that is dispersed, multi-focused, fragmented” (95). The formulation of such gender distinctions with regard to Romantic autobiography is relevant and productive up to a point, so long as they are not narrowly applied or essentialized, in which case they become less than a convenient fiction. We must recognize, for instance, that some of the male writers display traits of a self stereotypically gendered female, as do Keats and Byron in their spirited letters, or (as I have argued in “A Cultural Tourist”) Henry Crabb Robinson does in his effusive journals.

Part 1 of this collection examines the variety of women’s self-writing without reducing it to any straightforward gender binary. Kari Lokke poses a fundamental question about Dorothy’s *Journals* when she asks, “What does one do with an autobiographical text rooted in an effacement of self?” She makes an unusual interpretive move by using a modernist autobiographer’s “meditations on aesthetics and subjectivity as an analytical framework for gaining understanding of Wordsworth’s elusive representation of self.” The points of comparison Lokke draws between Dorothy Wordsworth and Gertrude Stein as autobiographers are suggestive as she links these in many ways very different women writers from two different centuries and cultures “in their avoidance of self-revelation.” Lokke also invokes Schiller’s famous distinction between the naïve and the sentimental poet to focus Stein’s aesthetic-philosophical thinking and Wordsworth’s “conscious effort to remain naïve, to remain unconflicted, undivided against herself”—a choice that also explains her “intense focus on the object” in her *Journals* and her refusal of “the confessional, self-exploratory mode typical of eighteenth-century autobiographies” (by Rousseau, Goethe, William Wordsworth, Mary Wollstonecraft).

If Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Journals* were private documents of a domestic life lived within the “Wordsworth Circle”—in the service and under the shadow of her poet brother—the next two essays engage notorious figures whose lives were very much the focus of public attention. Sharon Setzer takes the dramatic opening of Mary Robinson’s *Memoirs* as the leitmotif of the author’s attempt “to identify a meaningful pattern in her life,” one that exemplifies a characteristically Romantic and Wordsworthian preoccupation with ideas of origin. Setzer’s analysis of “the structure of feeling that informs three distinct Bristol spots of time in [Robinson’s] *Memoirs*” demonstrates how in trying to “shape her own posthumous literary reputation” to counter the scandalous legend of her celebrity life, Robinson is also trying “to create a more traditionally ‘Romantic’ subjectivity,” one in which the gothic setting of her birthplace, “St Augustine’s Cathedral occupies much the

same place in her *Memoirs* as the River Derwent does in Wordsworth's *Prelude*." Female stardom and sexual scandal by way of the stage and a liaison with the Prince of Wales also figure prominently in Susan Levin's discussion of *Memoirs of Mrs Billington from her Birth*, but this time by way of a publisher's scandal-mongering attack on an operatic superstar of the Romantic era. James Ridgway's collation of biography and autobiography (a collection of letters framed by a slanderous life narrative) in order to vilify the famous soprano demonstrates as well the populist and voyeuristic appeal of autobiography in the period by way of a sexist intervention in "the general controversy surrounding the appearance of women on the operatic stage." In his defamatory and salacious commentary on the 15 letters written by Billington to her mother, Ridgway "himself becomes an autobiographical presence in the work" and in so doing "generates a pornographic, misogynistic, political tract that tests a range of autobiographical possibilities as it reveals the power structures of romantic theater."

The scandalous intersection of life and writing also defines the career of Mary Hays, as evident in the thinly veiled autobiographical fiction of *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. Miriam Wallace considers Hays's merger of biography and autobiography in her subsequent work, *Female Biography*—"a largely unexamined key text"—as an expression of her interest in a new kind of historical writing that "contributes to an examination of the Romantic 'invention' of life-writing" by deploying a "conception of the self as made rather than given" that "as a development of 'Romantic autobiography' allows us to identify late century changes to concepts of writing human life experience." These changes include "a developing late century or 'Romantic' emphasis on the powers of imagination and self-projection." Wallace's conceptual linking of the two main genres of life writing, biography and autobiography, also ties in nicely with contemporary autobiography critics' and theorists' exploration of the connections between these two closely related genres. Imaginative self-projection is also evident in Mary Shelley's fiction, but "through a glass darkly," in Diane Long Hoeveler's characterization of the "conflicted and ambiguous genre of fictionalized autobiography" practiced by Mary. Writing in a different key on what is now the most canonical of the female English Romantic writers, Hoeveler—by way of an updated version of Freud's concept of screen memories—makes a striking argument that Mary appropriated her husband's life story "as if it had actually been her own." What is at work in her intra-psychic confessional narratives, *Mathilda* and "The Mourner," is "Mary's attempts to merge their two lives into a redeemed ... new autobiographical self." Thus Mary is not only the keeper of her (deceased and idealized) husband's flame, but is as it were a secret sharer in it.

The variety of women's autobiography in the period is matched by the diverse register(s) of male self-fashioning, canonical as well as noncanonical, that is in different ways and modes the substance of Part II. The most famous, scandalous, and widely read of the Romantic autobiographers was Lord Byron, with his confessional alter ego, the Byronic hero (as we see him in *Childe Harold* and *Manfred*) a spectacular pan-European phenomenon. The memoirs he wrote in Italy

would have been the mother lode of Romantic autobiography as a best-selling genre, had the manuscript not been destroyed by his publisher and literary executors after his death. In collusion with his public, Byron created Byronism, diffusing his sensational confessional persona into the public sphere of print culture. The Romantic male self-fashioners discussed in Part II had nowhere near the meteoric appeal of the confessional Byron who mesmerized his contemporaries, though De Quincey, whose artistic merits were not fully recognized until the twentieth century, gained considerable notoriety in his confessional incarnation as the English Opium Eater.

Because it did not appear until after the poet's death in 1850, the most important of the Romantic autobiographies around which a scholarly industry formed by the middle of the twentieth century, *The Prelude*, did not figure on the literary horizon in the Romantic era, though it was certainly known and deeply admired by some major figures (especially Coleridge and De Quincey) close to Wordsworth. The poet's self-reflection (and self-questioning) through the now famous early "spots of time" takes us to the hermeneutic heart of English Romantic autobiography, and in his complexly contextualized post-de Manian analysis, Joshua Wilner examines a single "spot"—the robbing of the bird's nest—"as exemplifying *The Prelude's* narrative art." As "a literal cliff-hanger," the nest-robbing scene turns on an object that is "highly overdetermined, simultaneously embodying the literal object of the boy's quest, a totemic transfiguration of the maternal birth-place to which the child regressively returns, and the embedded core of a self-reflexive narrative structure."

The second most canonical of the male Romantic autobiographies, the *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, also involves a complex intermixture of life story and aesthetic shaping. In his magisterial overview of the widely scattered autobiographical writings of De Quincey, Frederick Burwick demonstrates how that visionary dream chronicler is "the first conscientious autobiographer of the interactions between conscious and subconscious experience," and one who scripted his life not only by way of his addiction to opium, but also his imaginative dependency on Wordsworth and Coleridge. These towering literary mentors and rivals appear in "De Quincey's ... biographical/autobiographical narrative to reposition himself in an intellectual community in which he found himself marginalized." Burwick highlights "dependency, lack of control, irretrievable loss" as the autobiographer's *leitmotif*, and locates his characteristic combination of pathos and farce in his imaginative evocation of the self as double—of "identity and alterity," and "*idem in alio*"—most complexly suggested in his appropriation and transformation of Coleridge's accounts of his ascent of the Brocken mountain and his visit to the Campo Santo in Pisa. With De Quincey we also touch the experimental limit of Romantic autobiography, as the digressive dream narrator "becomes lost in the labyrinths of space and time" and the "construction of self drifts into confusions of identity and alterity."

If for De Quincey his visionary and opium-induced dream sequences constitute a problematic self-fashioning, for Joseph Severn his status as the friend of Keats

who nursed him so devotedly during the dying poet's "posthumous existence" in Rome comes to serve as an autobiographical identity tag to be exploited. His epistolary account of Keats's death made him famous in his own lifetime, but he did not really register as an autobiographer until the recent edition (Ashgate, 2005) by Grant F. Scott of his letters and autobiographical writings. Sue Brown, who has recently completed a biography of Severn, demonstrates that while Severn's memoirs deal with his own artistic career in Rome and London, the painter rescripted himself and his memories in the last decade of his life to accord with the legend of Severn as "The Friend of Keats" in "an iterative process as others interpreted Severn's life for their own ends and Severn responded to their expectations." If the letters Severn wrote as he nursed his dying friend reveal "both Keats and himself in a far more rewarding light than in his later self-conscious re-imaginings," an interesting issue raised by Brown is the extent to which Severn's autobiographical self-refashioning is not just an act of opportunism but also a collaborative process in the formation of a literary legend—an issue (of joint authorship) we also see raised in Diane Hoeveler's essay.

The third and final section of this volume considers different modes of Romantic autobiography that also constitute distinct subgenres of the larger category. Autobiography is always a performance—though it may turn out to be a failed one, as in Rousseau's case, when at the end of Part II of his *Confessions* his narrative of his reading of them in Paris results in the ambiguous anticlimax of his audience's utter silence. By way of a probing and wide-ranging exploration of the performative function of autobiography, Stephen Behrendt focuses selectively on instances of "indirect" or "staged" autobiography in the Romantic period as evident in "those authorial comments, revelations, and self-fashionings that are ostensibly incidental to other literary activities." In looking at these quasi or crypto autobiographical instances of "staged presence" in a range of both famous and obscure Romantic writers, he seeks to raise questions that focus "less upon any single author than upon larger issues concerning genre and Romantic self-presentation that include self-mythologizing and self-historicizing—as well as self-concealment." Drawing on contemporary autobiography criticism and interdisciplinary in its wide-angle perspective (which includes the visual arts and the novel), Behrendt's essay demonstrates impressively "the pervasively performative nature of Romantic-era autobiography."

Unlike Behrendt's examination of such theatrical and highly artful if indirect self-presentations, Kevin Binfield in his innovative discussion of laboring-class autobiography by way of the legendary "pseudonym, later eponym, 'Ned Ludd,'" looks at a body of writing that can be read as a collective autobiography but whose narrative "concern for development, extension, crisis, and redemption" is "quite different from the teleological course of most English autobiography." Rooted as they are in a (social and political) material world as well as a literary one, these "dual residence" eponymous and collective writings "make difficult understanding laboring-class autobiography through the approaches of historians or literary scholars alone." Binfield seeks to overcome this difficulty by demonstrating how "the Luddite writers had unfolded a collective identity through their material,

literary, and emotional relationships to other persons, frequently suppressing individual identity beneath relational, collective identity.”

The middle-class and privileged young Wordsworth (with his Cambridge education and high literary sensibility and aspirations) would seem to be at a far remove from these working class writers. But as Jasper Cragwall points out in his eye-opening contribution, the “high romantic argument” of the spiritual autobiography in its Wordsworthian form was also the highly disreputable stock-in-trade of itinerant Methodist preachers, and the rhetoric of the poet as an inspired soul and chosen son made *The Prelude* unpublishable because “it was regally presumptuous in its egotistical sublimity” and constituted “an unforgivable embarrassment for a gentleman at the end of the eighteenth century.” For contemporary readers the egotistical sublimities of *The Prelude* and “Home at Grasmere” would associate Wordsworth with “the ragged legion” of Methodist enthusiasts, and the inspired language of the 1805 *Prelude* would align him with “the conceits of the déclassé and the vulgar.” By thus locating Wordsworth’s confessional poetry in the context of the religious controversies of the early nineteenth-century, Cragwall offers a plausible explanation for the poet’s mystifying choice to keep his autobiography “private, if not exactly secret” for half a century.

The final essay in Part III of this volume is another contextualized revisionary rereading—in this case of a characteristic and well-known Romantic genre, the familiar essay, which Christine Chaney grounds in Mary Wollstonecraft’s pioneering combination of “personal confession with ideological polemics” in her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. In the informal and impromptu journalistic essays of Hazlitt and Lamb, the intimate rhetorical stance pioneered by Wollstonecraft became the familiar essay that combined self-narration in the short prose form with a shared context of location and memory in a mode both ethical and rhetorical. In applying the classic (Aristotelian) concept of *ethos* as well as Michel Beajour’s paradigm of the literary self-portrait and Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “the dialogue between self and the other” to the “disparate passages of observation, commentary, and polemics held thematically together through the taxonomy of the self-disclosing essayist,” Chaney offers an illuminating perspective on a distinctive mode of Romantic self-writing.

The 13 essays gathered in this volume might be viewed as pieces of a mosaic that add up to a larger picture or portrait of the varied practice(s) of autobiography during the Romantic age in England. Far from exhaustive or definitive, this exploratory collection offers a wide-angle view of the hybrid genre during a particular period and a cultural moment when autobiography had emerged as a significant, separate, popular, and increasingly *literary* kind of writing. If *Romantic Autobiography in England* offers food for thought both for scholars of Romanticism and students of life writing and provides as well a stimulus for further reflection and exploration, then its purpose will have been more than fulfilled. In light of the foregrounding in these essays of the range and diversity of English Romantic autobiography from a variety of critical perspectives and scholarly approaches, future work in the field will have to be more critically informed about not only the prolific nature and pervasive presence of life writing during the early nineteenth century but also the

impressive spectrum of modes—journals, essays, letters, travelogues, confessions, prefaces, poems—in which it manifested itself. If it is still too early to seek a global explanation for the plethora and multiplicity of Romantic self writing, this volume can be seen as a necessary step toward getting a critical purchase on the rich recrudescence in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England of the *Moi seul* so sensationally announced at the outset of Rousseau's *Confessions*.

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