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"THE AESTHETIC OF LIVED LIFE"  
FROM WOLLSTONECRAFT TO MILL

by

Eve Christine Chaney

A dissertation submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

1998

Approved by *Harry Handman*  
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Program Authorized  
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## Doctoral Dissertation

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Abstract

“The Aesthetic of Lived Life” from  
Wollstonecraft to Mill

by Eve Christine Chaney

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The six canonical male poets of the Romantic period are usually given credit for the late-eighteenth-century turn toward a new interest in issues of the self in literature. However, I argue that an under-explored counter tradition of the self in literature was initiated by Mary Wollstonecraft four years before these poets and inherited and expanded by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and John Stuart Mill in the Victorian period through their “literary self-portraits.”

These texts have often evaded the scrutiny of scholars because they reject the hardened generic categories of traditional autobiography and embrace instead the “imaginative” literary traditions of poetry and the novel. However, I believe that rather than being problematic or “fragmented” works, they are in fact more accurate textual embodiments of actual life narration. Critic Mikhail Bakhtin uses term “the aesthetic of lived life” to describe the relationship between inner and outer discourse

which informs human life on a day-to-day basis. We live our lives, he writes, as a “possible story to be told by the other to still others.” The smooth and teleological form of the traditional autobiography is a seductive one (who would not want such a life of unity and integration). Yet, life itself is not so neat.

I argue, therefore, for a new understanding of self-narration in text, initiated by Wollstonecraft’s Letters in Sweden, which follows a textual form more akin to women’s writing in the period – diaries, journals, letters – and whose very fragmentation is a marker of their textual “authenticity” and “character.” Wollstonecraft used these grounds to authenticate an *ethos* form of argument in the Letters which is at once confessional and ideological – “polemics of self” which argue for right ways of seeing life, culture, and society, while simultaneously confessing the selfhood of their author.

I argue, as well, that both Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Aurora Leigh and John Stuart Mill in his Autobiography extended this literary self-portrait form in a way that addresses the issue of Victorian “sage” discourse as at once a more culturally prominent yet covert form of the same *ethos* polemics.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere appreciation to Professor Gary Handwerk for his generous assistance in the preparation of this manuscript as well as for his excellent guidance during the more difficult stages of the project's initial conception. In addition, special thanks to Professor Susan VanZanten Gallagher for stepping in as a committee member during the manuscript's final stages, as well as for her strong support and mentorship. Thanks also to Professors Marshall Brown and Kathleen Blake for their valuable input at the time of manuscript's completion. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, "If life-blood's fertilising, I wrung mine / On every leaf of this..." – an apt description, perhaps, of every dissertation but a particularly good one of mine. My deepest appreciation goes to those who shared in that "life-blood's fertilising," the friends and family who prayed, encouraged, and shared in all the triumphs and tribulations of this process – most particularly, my in-laws Carol and Russ Chaney, friends Shirley Palmer, Kay Broweleit, and Kerry Dearborn, and the three who lived this journey with me the closest of all, Steve, Kelly, and John Chaney. My love and thanks to you all.

## DEDICATION

The author wishes to dedicate this dissertation to Steve, Kelly, and John.

## Chapter 1/ Chaney

"There is not a more perplexing affair in life to me than to set about telling anyone who I am -- for there is scarce anybody I cannot give a better account of than myself."

Laurence Sterne, A Sentimental Journey

"Life, what art thou?  
Where goes this breath? this I, so much alive?...  
Surely something resides in this heart that is not perishable  
-- and life is more than a dream."

Mary Wollstonecraft, Letters in Sweden

### Overview

The study of autobiography or "texts of self" has enjoyed sustained critical interest in American literary studies for the past decade or so, particularly since the publication of James Olney's 1980 collection of essays entitled Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical. In that influential volume a number of the major recent critical positions regarding life writing were staked out, including discussions of the generic or literary status of autobiography, its relationship with older traditions such as confession and spiritual autobiography, its theoretical underpinnings with roots in philosophical, rhetorical and religious discourses, and the status of life texts written by culturally marginalized authors such as women and ethnic minorities. Together with major works from Phillipe Lejeune (which had been published in the late 1970s in France but which only saw English translation and publication in the early 1980s), the ideas forwarded in Olney's book framed something of a

consensus as to which questions ought rightfully to inform the critical debate surrounding life writing.

But notice the very variety and interchangeability of the names used to designate this long-standing textual tradition in the previous paragraph – “autobiography,” “life writing,” “texts of self,” etc. As in Olney’s text, the multiple and multiplying terms for this form of literary writing underscore its status as a tradition full of instabilities and tensions and as one with many heteroglot voices. This instability and multi-voicedness can be said to arise because autobiographical writing participates in so many other discourses, such as history, religion, politics, philosophy, and literature. Because of this multiplicity, the recent critical conversation has centered around whether or not autobiography is in itself a separate and unique genre, and if so, what are its generic parameters.

Many of the essays in Olney’s volume, along with those of numerous other critics, discuss the extent to which any working definition of life writing must include a consideration of on-going cultural, historical, epistemological, and ontological debates regarding the status of the knowing subject and the possibilities and problems inherent in any language-based construct. Most specifically, a central point of critical contention remains whether or not truth-telling in self-authored texts exists or is even possible. Not surprisingly, most contemporary critics argue that it is impossible for a self to be absolutely truthful and that most self-writing is in one form or another a kind of “fiction.” However, I have found it interesting that despite postmodern tendencies most critics take

truth-telling and truthfulness as a highly value-laden aspect of life writing. "Fictions in autobiography" (also the title of one of Paul John Eakin's books) are treated more often as a flaw that must be searched out and exposed than as a different but valuable form of life writing.

In addition, relatively little of the recent critical outpouring on autobiography spends much time at all on fictional or polemical texts. Instead, most critics' attention has remained focused on traditionally-defined autobiographies – that is, those texts which announce their autobiographicality primarily on their title pages (indeed that is one of Lejeune's defining characteristics of autobiography). Dramatically less attention has been paid to overtly fictional or philosophical/political texts as autobiographies. Even while emphasizing the elusive and fluid nature of self-writing, many critics have not looked extensively outside traditionally-accepted notions of what constitutes an autobiographical text, remaining focused on writings that are at least somewhat "factual" or historically verifiable and certainly those which represent a stable selfhood.

Yet a large number of works exist which encode a textual representation of the self of their authors but which do not use "factual" reference (the author really lived on such a street, with such a name, and went to such a school, etc.) as their markers of that selfhood. Instead, such texts often rely on a fictional or polemical encoding of "truths" about an author's selfhood. "Textual fact" and "textual truth" are two very different things, as I hope to explore. The works I discuss in my dissertation are no less truthful (and sometimes more so, if we accept the limitations of such

a vocabulary, at least for now) for being “fictional” or polemical than any of the more generically identifiable self-texts which rely on the “factual” alone. As Robert Folkenflik, editor of a recent volume called The Culture of Autobiography (1993) has said, “surely the fictional encoding of the factual is one of the great problematics of autobiography,” – one which “needs more theoretical examination.”

Pursuing the need for such an examination, I have found French critic Michel Beaujour’s definition of the “self-portrait” a particularly useful alternative model to the “autobiography” as it has been traditionally constructed. He agrees with my contention that we have been locked into a particular model of unitary, stable selfhood which the traditional autobiography fits generically but which represents only one, somewhat suspect, form of life writing. Rather, we need to re-frame our critical vision to include texts which may instead be a more accurate representation of “real life” because they aren’t stable, unitary, continuous, and retrospective. “There is plenty of debate about autobiography. . .[but] there has been no continuous theoretical reflection concerning the [literary] self-portrait, except in the texts themselves,” as Beaujour writes (3). This dissertation will discuss not only the way these works may be more accurate reflections of the fragmentary, recursive, and “patchwork” quality of selfhood in text but also the way in which they function as both life texts and “theoretical reflections” on just such texts, as Beaujour notes above. In addition, by existing as both a life narrative and that narrative’s own theorization, these literary self-portraits have proven to be the ideal form for promoting persuasively the ideological positions held by their

authors. They combine the personal confession of life narrative within a text which examines and analyzes its own purpose and boundaries. This concentrated interweaving of self-disclosure and theoretical reflection forms a kind of “long-lasting food,” as John Stuart Mill put it, to be carried with the reader to nourish along the way.

We will return in depth to the literary self-portrait and its particulars below. For now, though we should see that there is actually very little critical disagreement that the “truth” about an author’s selfhood (and without further exposition, I will use such a weighted word in quotation marks) might sometimes be found more readily in a fictional text of his or hers, rather than one that is self-announcedly an “autobiography” (Nabokov’s Speak, Memory is a frequently-cited example of this idea) particularly for those authors who wrote both kinds of works. Yet there has been very little exploration of why that might be true. It is usually mentioned as an interesting conundrum and the critic whose eye is attuned to autobiographical interests returns exclusively to the “autobiography” itself and its problems and limitations. On the other hand, literary critics have been quick to point out the identifiably autobiographical elements in novels and poems for many years.

But, with the large exception of psychoanalytic critics (whose interest in the autobiographical elements in literature serves other ideological purposes), such identifications have remained tangential to other claims the critics wish to foreground. Somehow even without an agreed-upon definition for what constitutes autobiography and in such skeptical times as ours, critical practice has erected a very thick divide

between the “fictional” and “factual,” “imagination” and “history,” when it comes to life writing. As both Paul John Eakin and Darrell Mansell have pointed out, even though there is very little textual evidence to support such a divide, no less an authority than a library catalogue reinforces the true/false binary by placing autobiography as a sub-division of biography, which is itself a division of history and the larger category of science. And on the other side of the true/false divide lies narrative and fiction – “non-truthful” forms of writing.

But even with such cataloging evidence to tell us that only autobiographies can be taken as the “real” story of a self, we as readers aren’t so rational. Over and over again, critics give examples of how readers don’t actually make distinctions between announced autobiography as the “true” story of the author’s life and fiction as the “non-truthful” form. Mansell claims that we as readers “can tell” whether a text is truthful or not about the life of its author, be it announced autobiography or not. We make judgments about what we are being told about selfhood based on criteria that escape logical or rational explanation. He claims that it is the human mind itself that is organized along epistemological and ontological categories that “resonate” with texts that echo or mirror the organization of human consciousness. In a similar way, Bakhtin says that we live our lives “as a possible story to be told” and so literally inwardly narrate our life story to ourselves in a way that mirrors narrative texts such as the novel. Still other critics have taken up this argument and pursued its basis from a scientific, psychological standpoint (as in Layton and Schapiro’s Narcissism and the

Text: Studies in Literature and Psychology of Self and Kearns' Metaphors of Mind in Fiction and Psychology) as well as from a literary one (particularly Galya Diment's The Autobiographical Novel of Co-Consciousness and Newey and Shaw's Mortal Pages, Literary Lives: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Autobiography).

In any case, the crucial mistake in older and more traditional ways of looking at life writing, besides its male-gendered bias toward unitary selfhood which will be discussed at some length below, appears to me to be its linking autobiography with biography. As Eakin has written, autobiography is actually very much unlike biography, where verifiable facts and the historical model serve as "the decisive criterion for authenticating its structure of reference." Eakin writes that "biography...offers a misleading analogue for the nature of reference in autobiography. [It is] the self-referential gesture itself [that is] the central and determining event in the transaction of autobiographical reference" (his emphasis)<sup>1</sup>. The literary self-portrait, with its many and multiplying self-referential gestures, is a far better text for this more accurate definition of autobiographical reference.

I have taken the title for this dissertation from Mikhail Bakhtin's early essay called "Art and Answerability." Bakhtin states that there is an "aesthetic of lived life," rejecting as well the model of history or science for life writing. We live our lives as "a possible story to be told by the other to still others." The word "aesthetic" can be problematic here but, as Wlad Godzich writes, "Bakhtin speaks of an aesthetic act as he has spoken earlier of an ethical act...the function of the aesthetic act extends the

boundaries of cognition for the understanding" (11). The aesthetic is the act that reconciles our "practical understanding" of the material world with our need to act ethically. In Bakhtin's words, "to create the concrete, intuitive unity of these two worlds, to place man in nature, understood as his aesthetic environment, to humanize nature, and to naturalize man" (11). We will return to these ideas in greater depth but, for now, I believe it is time to move beyond the traditional poetics of autobiography (which go back at least to Robert Southey and perhaps earlier) and designate a much broader category of self-texts, not as "fiction" or "non-fiction," but as a special kind of dialogic narrative with its own unique taxonomy and rhetoric. One word for such a text might be "the self-portrait."

### **The Self-Portrait**

Michel Beaujour, in his 1991 work Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait, takes up several points of disagreement with Phillipe Lejeune's influential definition of autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). Beaujour argues that there is, in fact, a separate genre distinct from autobiography which he calls the "self-portrait" for lack of a better term. These types of narrative, such as Rousseau's Reveries or Nietzsche's Ecce Homo, make no attempt to follow a teleological or chronological narrative and can be likened more to meditations than traditional autobiography, particularly in their organization around thematic or dialectical discourses. Beaujour

writes: "The absence of a continuous narrative in the self-portrait distinguishes it from autobiography. So does its subordination of narration to a logical deployment, a collation or patching together, of elements under a head that, for the time being, we will call the 'thematic'" (2). This "collation" of elements can take a surprising turn when Beaujour quotes a "paradoxical and startling definition of self-portrayal" from Michel Riffaterre's essay on Malraux's Anti-Memoirs: "Memoirs can follow the chronology, or the logic, of events; then they are narrative. The Anti-Memoirs rest on analogy (the superimposition method is identical with metaphor); therefore they are poetry" (*Essais de stylistique structurale* 296).

This development leads Beaujour to posit an opposition between "the narrative and the analogical," such as in autobiography, and "the metaphorical or the poetic," such as in the self-portrait:

This genre attempt(s) to create coherence through a system of cross-references, anaphoras, superimpositions, or correspondences among homologous and substitutable elements, in such a way as to give the appearance of discontinuity, of anachronistic juxtaposition, or montage, as opposed to the syntagmatic of a narration. . . .the totalization of the self-portrait is not *given* beforehand; new homologous elements can be added to the paradigm, whereas the temporal closure of autobiography is implicit in the initial choice of a curriculum vitae. (3)

Several important aspects of this definition will be central to the texts under consideration here and therefore it is useful to draw attention to them in this dissertation first in their theoretical articulation before examining the way they work in specific texts.

To begin with, the textual selfhood narrated in the self-portrait is coherent. Too frequently, a binary opposition has been critically erected which sees only two possibilities in life writing, either the traditional autobiography with its valuing of smooth, teleological, and seamless self-narration and the “fragmented” and therefore “incoherent” or “failed” autobiography. The seduction of a life of perfect integration is a strong one (don’t we all wish we could achieve such a life). However, seeing life writing as less than smooth and stable doesn’t make it “radically incoherent” either. Instead, it coheres along lines more akin to a patchwork quilt than to a seamlessly woven cloth. This text’s elements are “homologous” and “substitutable,” the self which writes them creates associations and linkages through “superimpositions” and “cross-references,” overlaying elements of life and text with each other and then returning to them later, replacing them as the “paradigm” of life and text changes and takes on new elements. This “poetic” form generates meaning both through the juxtaposition of elements, where the very connection between elements is telling, and through the changing forms of the elements themselves.

As Beaujour writes, the self-portrait generates meaning through metaphor and analogy, not through logic or chronology. The multiple and multiplying meanings which are generated by the “overlay” of words or images within these texts serve several different purposes. It is ideal for recording in text the singular and unique aspects of each different human being. Indeed, such a form is more truly “individualistic” than the tight generic norms which traditional autobiography imposes. Each self makes

its own “super-impositions,” “cross-references,” and “linkages.” In addition, the literary self-portrait invites a hermeneutics that can also shift and change with every new reader who also makes unique meaning out of the textual “analogies” located there. Such a textual form most definitely coheres.

The unique connections and linkages which create the coherence of the self-portrait are said by Beaujour to be the “taxonomy” of selfhood. The system of associations and juxtapositions which are generated in each life text are necessarily always unique to the individuality of that self. Life stories are not, then, finally a codified genre if we accept the notion that each life is in the final analysis unique and unrepeatable. Seeing life writing in this way helps uncover the ways in which the master plot of traditional autobiographies “murders to dissect” – entombing the living pieces of a patchwork life to make them fit an outwardly smooth form. True “memory-thinking,” according to Philip Davis, is marked in the gaps and discontinuities of life as it is lived.

This idea leads then to the second important aspect of Beaujour’s definition, the lack of temporal closure in the self-portrait. In literary texts of self which are non-linear or non-teleological, time’s formal markers are often the most obvious evidence of the dramatic difference between the “still living” self-portrait and the retrospective, “epitaph”-like quality of the autobiography (in which temporal closure is a generic given). The embodiment of time in the self-portrait tends to be synchronous rather than diachronous and is particularly found in passages of narrative, in both novels and texts of self, where memory and recollection are

foregrounded. In fact, Philip Davis makes the interesting claim that the section of A Christmas Carol in which Scrooge sees himself as a young boy and must simultaneously experience in the present what is remembered in the past is a far more “authentic” and compelling representation of the way the self actually feels and remembers than Sir Leslie Stephen’s dry and lifeless autobiographical narrative of the important moment when his wife agreed to marry him. As Davis writes:

Increasingly throughout the nineteenth century...[autobiography’s] key form was an unredeemed chronological successiveness, prosaically denying true memory-thinking. ...Victorian autobiographies too often fail to deploy those real workings of memory on which they presume to base themselves. Time does not live in them. ...Unlike a common autobiography, *A Christmas Carol* is ‘real remembering’, being not only about the past but for whole moments imaginatively in it...left in between these sentences and phrases...there is time itself: inner thinking and inner recollecting time, in the midst of external formulation, marked in the stutters and pauses Scrooge makes. ( 82-3)

Davis’ formulation of “real remembering” in text shows how and “uncommon” autobiography – much like a novel – more closely resembles “true memory-thinking” because it rejects an artificial linearity and teleology for the gaps, spaces, and images of time embodied in a text and a life lived and remembered within it.

In a related way, the relationship between self-portrait and the novel is an important one for my argument. Rather than seeing self-writing as a separate genre outside of the imaginative literary tradition and more akin to “scientific” modes of thought and writing (a line that Southey would have us follow), I see self-writing as participating in the discourse surrounding literary productions instead – both affected and

being affected by developments in the novel and poetry, particularly in the historical time period which frames this dissertation.

After discussing the non-linear and metaphorical aspects of the literary self-portrait, Beaujour's text goes on to address the issue of reference and representation. As he writes:

The self-portraitist does not 'describe himself' in the way the painter 'represents' the face or body he perceives in his mirror: he is forced into a detour that seemingly thwarts the intention of 'painting oneself,' should we assume that the self-portrait is ever born of such a naive 'project:' *X by himself*. That's improbable. The self-portrait is in the first place a *found object* to which the writer imparts the purpose of self-portrayal in the course of its elaboration. (4)

Sounding very much like Carlyle's "anti-self-consciousness" theory (which was influential for Mill as well), Beaujour argues that an author of a self-portrait loses the ability to write as soon as he or she become aware of the nature of their writing. It must be writing that begins with another purpose and becomes a "found object" of selfhood in the process of its very writing: "A kind of misprision or compromise, a shuttling back and forth between generality and particularity; the self-portraitist never has a clear notion of where he is going, of what he is doing" (5). However, the self-portraitist does have boundaries. The writer speaks to and situates his or her own writing within the culture that provides a framework of opposing discourses. The writer may have no idea where he or she is going "but [the] cultural tradition is aware of it for him: his culture provides him with the ready-made categories that enable him to classify the fragments of his discourse, his memories, his fantasies" (4-5). We will

return to the notion of the shape of cultural tradition and how it provides categories for “classification” of the self’s varied elements but for now it is important to note that these “fragments” of the self involve not only its history or “memories” and “discourse” but “fantasies” as well. All the aspects of a self’s inner and outer discourse, both historical and imaginative, are ready for location in the montage of the self-portrait, erasing in one step the whole fact/fiction, true/false divide.

Yet even despite the uniqueness of each self’s personal taxonomy there are fundamental generic resemblances between self-portraits, too. Beaujour writes that despite the assertions of self-portraitists going back to Rousseau that this kind of writing is the most unique, most free, and most completely self-referential instead the cultural discourses that surround the writer and this writing’s deep roots in the meditation tradition give it a generic shape that it cannot escape:

“[E]ven when it is metamorphosed into reverie and the subject’s quest for himself, its religious origins remain visible. A meditation can be atheistic, atheological, and anti-Christian, still the place of God and Christ is always there, as in the hollow of a mold. The man of meditation is never ‘free,’ as one understands freedom as a kind of ontological and cultural *tabula rasa*. Faithful or a renegade, no matter, he will always be a disciple of Augustine, Loyola, and the Christian tradition.” (63-4)

The Augustinian confession tradition will be examined further later but even within the “hollow of a mold” that comes from that tradition, self-portraits still contain the unique “content” of the individual self who authors them. The author reworks “these unprocessed givens” of life and “arranges them under headings only to connect them haphazardly

according to the imperatives of a personal taxonomy whose configuration and reasons often elude him" (5). Even though "he is as blind as Oedipus when he keeps on equating his writing with his freedom, his self, his unique utterance. . . the self-portraitist sees in those headings a referential virtuality bound up with the 'mimesis of the self' "(5). The self-portraitist constructs life in text without knowing why or how the life should be so structured -- the montage is joined together without the self's omniscient control or overt textual mastery (unlike traditional autobiography). The complete "configuration" of that self remains mysterious -- all the pieces which make up the patchwork are finally beyond totalization -- but the "headings" under which the self makes connections provide at least a point of reference for understanding that self's textual representation. We cannot know a self completely, least of all our own selves, as Sterne reminds us. But we can know where our selfhood makes its links and associations. We can sketch an outline of the shape of our interests, history, and concerns and in so doing capture in text what is authentic to our own self-representation, both for ourselves and for the listening and completing other who stands outside.

### **Reference and the Autobiographical Pact**

Of course no text, however designated, could ever wholly embody a life. One would have to write unceasingly from the moment of birth for such a real-time/real-life text to exist. Rather, all life writing must necessarily be selective and referential -- mimetic of its author's life, even

traditional autobiographies. Critic G. Thomas Couser, in discussing the issue of authority within these texts calls autobiographical writing “the world’s largest synecdoche” with the “part” of the author’s text standing for the “whole” of his or her lived life. In this way, the issue of reference and representation comes up in any discussion of life writing along with the referential relationship between textual embodiments of time past and present in autobiography. Eakin says that it was understanding this kind of reference that was such an important critical breakthrough for Philippe Lejeune. Eakin writes that Lejeune, by drawing on Jakobson and Benveniste's distinction between utterance and enunciation has created a link “between the past as re-created in autobiography and the re-creation of that past in the present unfolding of the autobiographical act.” Eakin’s Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography further develops Lejeune’s distinctions, primarily in terms of American literature, as does Paul deMan’s influential essay “Autobiography as De-Facement.”

But before I go further into this newer idea of the literary self-portrait let us spend some time outlining some of the major critical points of discussion as they presently exist regarding life writing. Phillippe Lejeune’s famous formulation of the “autobiographical pact” has come to be the *de facto* definition of “autobiographicality,” to use Walter Landow’s expression. According to Lejeune, *le pacte autobiographique* is a kind of implicit agreement between author and reader. In simple terms it can be described like this: an author promises to deliver the “truth” about themselves as well as it is possible for them to tell it by the very fact that they say their text is an autobiography on its title page. The reader agrees

to understand and read the text as “truthful” because they accept the ‘pact’ offered to them by the author’s announced intention of writing an “autobiography.”

But as is well known, many a novel has also promised on its title page to be an “autobiography” (Jane Eyre, for example). Eakin explains how Lejeune worked through this special difficulty: “Given [Lejeune’s] insistence that autobiography is necessarily in its deepest sense a special kind of fiction [anyway], its self and its truth as much created as (re)discovered realities, and given his lively awareness that the novel has often imitated the posture of self-referential intention in all sorts of pseudo, mock, or otherwise fictive autobiographies, Lejeune concedes...that the presence of an autobiographical pact in a text, while necessary, is [still] not enough to establish it definitively as autobiography.” Eakin writes approvingly that Lejeune focused more distinctly on the specific discourse of the title page and found the crucial missing link: “Taking the title page – previously overlooked – as an integral part of the text, Lejeune could now identify a *textual* criterion by which to distinguish between autobiography and fiction, namely the identity of the proper name *shared by author, narrator, and protagonist*.” This is “the sign of [authorial] intention in the text... a brilliant insight into the nature of reference in autobiography.”

However, I believe Eakin and Lejeune err when they propose that the “self-referential intention” is only “mocked” in various “fictive autobiographies.” Instead, Eakin has reified the dubious fact/fiction dichotomy in autobiography with his insistence that the self-referential act

in a text can only take place in writing that the author announces as containing it, giving a shocking amount of credence to as suspect a notion as authorial intention. In addition, the idea of an implied agreement between an author and his or her reader and a shifting power relationship within that exchange are not ideas unique to autobiography, as Michel Foucault discusses at length in his History of Sexuality. Indeed, Northrop Frye called confession one of the four forms of fiction and James Phelan has written extensively on narrative, imaginative and otherwise, as its own kind of rhetoric, with many of the same qualities Lejeune claims solely for autobiography. Without a doubt, autobiography or life writing is deeply dependent on its implicit and explicit relationship with its readers. In fact it has been said that the history of autobiographical writing might fruitfully be called the history of its mode of reading. However I argue that announced authorial intention is not what defines authentic life writing, however neatly it solves Lejeune's self-reference problem. Reference and representation do lie at the heart of any understanding of how life can and is "embodied" in a text and, as such, deserve careful examination.

### **Incarnation**

The issue of reference cannot help but be central to any critical discussion of life writing, texts which must always be partial, fragmentary, and representational, "referent" of their author's lives. However, standing behind the issue of reference in these texts are even more

fundamental questions regarding the relationship between thought and language as they are worked out through the mediation of a literal human body, perhaps the original question of reference and representation. Life writing isn't the only narrative form which engages these issues but its special generic position on the boundaries of the true/false, fact/fiction divide helps highlight that which is more implicit in other narratives – specifically, how does language function as a medium for thought, particularly thought about ourselves? Paul de Man takes up this and other points in his well-known essay “Autobiography as De-Facement” by considering Wordsworth’s famous third “Essay Upon Epitaphs” and its meaning for the relationship between the self and language. Recall Wordsworth’s main point:

If words be not (recurring to a metaphor before used) an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious time, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, to dissolve.<sup>2</sup>

In essence, Wordsworth argues that language should be an “incarnation” of thought and not merely “a clothing for it” lest it be loosed onto the world as a “spirit” which deranges and “dissolves” meaning.

Taking this passage as his prompt, de Man speculates about the nature of thought and language and argues that Wordsworth’s distinctions between incarnation and counter-spirit finally do not hold.

De Man explores “the conflict between the desire for an incarnational language and the tendency of language to become, as Wordsworth put it, ‘counter-spirit’” (1). De Man find that “deranging,” “subverting,” and “laying waste” is exactly what language does – not its evil “counter-spirit.” This is certainly a strong thread of Wordsworth’s essay but deconstructive critics like de Man emphasize its linguistic elements at the expense of other issues that Wordsworth raises by primarily seeing incarnational language as a “desire” rather than a possibility. What if Wordsworth really meant that language is incarnate thought, as surely we must suspect he did?

In contrast to de Man and many other critics of Romanticism, David P. Haney makes an interesting and, I think, compelling claim that Wordsworth’s invocation of the idea of incarnation “goes far beyond the questions of linguistic representation to which discussions of it are usually restricted” (2). Using the philosophical writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Emmanuel Levinas and René Girard in addition to texts by Wordsworth and Coleridge, Haney argues that this idea of “incarnational poetics” is a “hermeneutics of meaning” that is developed and contested particularly within the life writings of both Wordsworth and Coleridge – that is, in The Prelude and Biographia Literaria – and is not a fleeting and unfulfilled “desire” of Wordsworth’s, present in only this late essay. “[I]ncarnational poetics does not simply secularize a Christian concept in the service of a theory of representation, but rather pursues a critical, nonrepresentational, historically engaged, concrete hermeneutic of both thought and language” (2). Haney is aware that his premise can appear to

come close to a “naive logocentrism” and therefore he takes pains to elucidate the grounds for his assertions in a critique of post-Saussurean questions of representational adequacy. I won’t rehearse Haney’s in-depth argument here, but in essence he rejects Saussure’s signifier and signified grammarology as inadequate and misleading to those of us in the twentieth century who have inherited it. Rather, Haney says:

The threat and the modernity of the incarnational link between word and thing lie in the recognition that this link is not an ahistorical idealization of language, but rather a concretization of thought, as thought is incarnate into the events of language. According to Gadamer, the Incarnation was not the denial of history, but rather its founding. The Augustinian and Thomist idea of meaning as incarnation presents words as events in the world, rather than signs of ideality. (19)

Haney argues, with Thomas De Quincey, that the incarnational model offers not just a counter to Enlightenment views of language as thought’s “clothing” but rather “a different kind of relationship” altogether which has mistakenly fallen out of favor as a theoretical and philosophical position since the nineteenth century. Influential critics of Romanticism such as de Man have made Wordsworth into a “philosopher of consciousness for the twentieth century,” rather than a “moral philosopher” from the nineteenth, argues Haney. We will return to many of these notions particularly as we examine Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, the author and text most closely related to this idea of incarnational poetics (and also interestingly, not mentioned at all by Lawrence Poston as one of the important emerging poets of the 1830s

who were influenced by Wordsworth's incarnational poetics). For now, though, let us agree to hold on to this premise of Thomas De Quincey's:

If language were merely a dress, then you could separate the two; you could lay the thoughts on the left hand, the language on the right. But, generally speaking, you can no more deal thus with poetic thought than you can with soul and body. The union is too subtle, the intertexture too ineffable – each coexisting not merely with each other, but each in and through the other. An image, for instance, a single word, often enters into a thought as a constituent part. In short, the two elements are not united as a body with a separable dress, but as a mysterious incarnation.<sup>3</sup>

It is not hard to see how this position is rooted in the philosophical and literary movements of the late-eighteenth to middle-nineteenth centuries, particularly as they reacted to and were influenced by Kant and his successors. However, as such, it is also useful and interesting to me not just as a new way of seeing the relationship between thought, language, and the self but also since it is historically located in the same time period as the texts under consideration here. Indeed, the literary, philosophical, and political threads which anchor my argument about the literary self-portrait also have many intersections which resonate with the idea of an incarnational poetics as well. In fact, it might be said that Samuel Taylor Coleridge – who was the theoretical impetus behind much of Wordsworth's essay-writing – is himself a kind of nexus for the three authors who form the basis of this dissertation. He was a contemporary and admirer of Mary Wollstonecraft's and his writings were deeply influential for both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and John Stuart Mill.

Haney is not the only contemporary critic who investigates the idea of incarnation in this period. Lawrence Poston also shows how important

Coleridge and the idea of incarnational poetics are in his essay "Poetry as Pure Act: A Coleridgean Ideal in Early Victorian England." Poston argues that Coleridge was a touchstone not just for the "emerging generation of poets on the landscape of the 1830s" (162) but throughout the nineteenth century. Coleridge's famous formulation in Biographia Literaria that poetry should be "the coincidence of the thought with the thing" provided an incarnational model for the right relationship between language and idea for many of the most influential poets and thinkers of the period, Poston argues. Coleridge's "theories of the imagination which stressed unity of thought and feeling in poetry...became the groundwork for an ideal of lyric compression in poetry [and] proved to be hospitable to a post-Romantic poetry which sought to incorporate new ways of articulating experience" (162). In addition, through the writings of W.J. Fox and John Stuart Mill, Coleridge's incarnational ideas spread to other nineteenth-century readers more attuned to utilitarianism, while F. D. Maurice and the Hare brothers did much to spread the Coleridgean ideal through the Apostles at Cambridge and in many of the writings in The Atheneum. As Poston says, Aids to Reflection and The Statesman's Manual, two texts of Coleridge's which do not draw much attention now, were vastly influential in the nineteenth century. And, it is important to remember that:

[i]t is not only pointless but dangerously misleading to attempt to disentangle Coleridgean theology from Coleridgean poetics; they are part of the same fabric, threads of a common design. *Aids to Reflection* says much on language which is as apropos to the study of poetry as to the study of the Gospels. ...Language focuses meaning, language that is not merely figurative but analogous,

reducing to a bare minimum any residue of conscious ratiocination. ...Symbols, Coleridge remarks in *The Statesman's Manual* are 'consubstantial with the truths, of which they are conductors,' always participating in the Reality which they render intelligible. The symbolic language of poetry is thus by its nature sacramental, for it connects finite and infinite consubstantially, whereas in metaphor and allegory we are aware of those interspaces into which rhetoric intrudes itself. (164)

This "sacramental" nature of language, joining "finite and infinite consubstantially" can now be seen to be closely related to the way the literary self-portrait operates, as well. Beaujour had said that the textual elements of life, thought, and the self in these narratives were held together by "montage," "juxtaposition," and "anaphora," which is a term of sacrifice and gift-offering used to describe the eucharistic elements of a divine service. It is the term most closely associated with the transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine with Christ's resurrected body in a service of communion. Seeing language as "not merely figurative but analogous" to thought is almost literally a description of what, in Christian terms, would be "the Word made flesh." By becoming "embodied thought," then, the word both manifests the inner realm and also enters the world.

This idea of the word as both event in the world and as an embodiment of inner discourse is a central concern of this dissertation, particularly in its manifestation within the literary self-portrait. But first, it is important to see that the "concretization" of thought which defines incarnational poetics also has a relationship to the idea of "inner" and "outer" dialogue as it exists in the discourse of the self, as well. As

Gadamer puts it: "Because our understanding does not comprehend what it knows in one single inclusive glance, it must always draw what it thinks out of itself, and present it to itself as if in inner dialogue with itself."<sup>4</sup>

This notion of the incarnated and therefore dialogic nature of selfhood is important for several reasons. First, it helps underscore the nature of authentic textual selfhood as radically opposed to notions of closure, self-containment, or unity – no single, retrospective glance can ever encompass all we know about ourselves. Secondly, it helps us gain the language necessary for examining the way that these texts have a rhetorical and ideological function that closely relates their dialogic nature with the powerful discourse of confession. Specifically, that is, we all come to conclusions about what to "comprehend" about ourselves through a model of self-questioning and self-revelation or self-interlocution and confession. Seeing thought and language as incarnative and selfhood as dialogic may then help explain why the literary self-portrait has often seemed more authentic than an autobiography written on the biography model – it is persuasive by its "authenticity" and its likeness to the way we actually comprehend ourselves. In addition, as we will see below, these texts' rhetorical power is deeply rooted in a model of persuasive speech which requires the establishment of an "authentic" character for its speaker and which this discourse of self provides. And, finally, this dialogic, self-questioning model of selfhood gives us "a flexible critical language," as critic Couser writes, in order to better understand the way self, text, and life intersect – the nexus of "inner" and "outer" discourse in the literary self-portrait.

This brings us back to Mikhail Bakhtin's "aesthetic of lived life" – that life itself can be constructed in aesthetic terms. Much as Gadamer described our coming to comprehend things through self-questioning and self-answering, Bakhtin's "aesthetic of lived life" describes much the same process by paying much closer attention to the way both life and text are "authored" by our self-interlocutive other. Bakhtin says that in "lived life" one is "possessed" by this "possible other" who narrates the story of our own lives to ourselves. We live our lives as the "heroes" of our own stories with this inner narrator as its "author:"

The author of [our inner, self-making narration] is that possible other by whom we are most likely to be possessed in lived life; the possible other who is with us when we look at ourselves in the mirror, when we dream of glory, when we make plans for our life; the possible other who has permeated our consciousness and who often guides our acts, our value judgments, and our vision of ourselves side by side with our own *I-for-myself*; ...In our ordinary recollections about our past, it is often this other who is active, and it is in his value-tones that we remember ourselves... "5

But this storytelling other "does not constitute a kind of fantasy or wish-fulfillment on the part of the self" – we don't invent the existence of our inner narrator because we'd like one to exist, Bakhtin says. Instead, "what renders the other an authoritative and inwardly intelligible author of my life is the fact that this other is not fabricated by me for self-serving purposes, but represents an axiological force which I confirm in reality and which actually determines my life...This other is not I myself as produced through the agency of the other, but the valued other himself in me." Like Gadamer and many others, particularly within the Judaic philosophical tradition (such as Martin Buber), Bakhtin insists on the

shared inner construction of the mind – the “valued other himself in me” – which is an “axiological force which I confirm in reality” and which “authors” both life lived and life in text.

### **Inner and Outer Discourse**

This consubstantial relationship between “inner” and “outer” dialogue is an important one for the study of life narrative since the textual relationship between inner thoughts, memories, dreams, and ideas about oneself and their outer manifestation in speech, act, and text is foundational in these texts. We have seen how Haney, through Coleridge and Gadamer, has called such a study the search for an “incarnational poetics” – a “hermeneutics of meaning” with a strong moral and ethical component going back to the early nineteenth century.

As is well known, Bakhtin spends much time in several of his most important writings talking about the link between self and other -- the necessary and dialogic relationship that makes all selves and all consciousnesses the product of shared and multiple voices. The dialogue between self and other and the “answerability” that comes with the ability to participate in such a conversation are central to Bakhtin’s thinking. “The word,” he writes, “is half someone else’s” and as such retains the intentionality and ideology of that someone while it also becomes incorporated into the self-making voice of the other. The seeming gulf or separation between inner and outer, self and other, is the space which is overcome by the language of dialogue. Foundationally, “[w]hat is

realized... is the process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own belief system in someone else's system. There takes place...an ideological translation of another's language, and an overcoming of its otherness – an otherness that is only contingent, external, illusory.” By overcoming otherness, the self “comes to know” not only the other's discourse, but its own language, beliefs, and ideology.

Indeed, Bakhtin's novel-based theories are very similar to the definition of any life-writing project – coming to know oneself, one's language, one's beliefs, and ideology by overcoming and partaking of the discourse of the other and so also show how much closer the literary self-portrait is to imaginative literature such as the novel rather than biography written on the scientific model. The novel, which frames Bakhtin's entire aesthetics, is defined by him in terms that call to mind an incarnational poetics, as well: “the fundamental condition,...that which is responsible for its stylistic uniqueness is the speaking person and his discourse”<sup>6</sup> What makes a novel a novel is the existence of this “person” who gives sound to language and who connects the word in the novel with culture and history. The multiplicity of life itself enters the novel through the speaking person and all prose “brushes up against thousands of living dialogic threads” because it is enacted by the “consciousness” which surrounds it. “Heteroglossia...enters the novel in person (so to speak) and assumes material form within it in the images of speaking persons.” For Bakhtin, the “image of language” itself is human in

character – it is the speaking person – and as such comes full circle back to Wordsworth and incarnation.

As we have seen, our real inner narration is a narrative very like the shape of the novel – and perception is much like authoring. The act of living and the act of writing are related and mutually-constitutive processes. It is important to see that Bakhtin is not just a convenient theorist for this argument. In fact, he too sought a theoretical correction to Kant's philosophy, as much as Wordsworth and Coleridge did. In fact, it can be said that just as Coleridge and Wordsworth sought an incarnative poetics as a corrective to Enlightenment theories of language, in the same way we can say that Bakhtin seeks to return to and remake Kant's theories of ontology and epistemology in regard to the self, language, and knowability, particularly in his earliest writings.<sup>7</sup> A complete discussion of that relationship is outside the purview of this work but for now let us retain the essence of this position – that an "aesthetic of lived life" is an ethical formulation related to the unknowability of our own nature combined with our need to act in the material world. Living is an act of "authoring" which requires our "aesthetic judgment."

We can see that Bakhtin's notion of the speaking person is a helpful one for understanding the way that the literary self-portrait also has a strong rhetorical and ideological function. It explores the relationship between a discourse of life narration, its ideological impetus, and the "living" context into which it enters and from which it arises. This link is made concrete (or "incarnated," if you will) because the speaking person occupies a particular and unique place in space and time, therefore his or

her discourse will be ideologically informed from that vantage point. It cannot help but be so because, for Bakhtin, “the activity of [every] character...is always ideologically demarcated: he lives and acts in an ideological world of his own..., he has his own perceptions of the world that is incarnated in his action and in his discourse.” In this way, by being located in the reality of life and culture, it is not hard to see how the belief systems incarnated in “actual lives” can be said to inform the discourse of the many types of narrative which contain them.

Bakhtin calls this relationship between inner and outer discourse another word for “answerability: – that which points beyond its own bounds – and implies both “responsibility” in the ethical sense and “the ability to respond,” to literally speak. For Mary Wollstonecraft's plaintive question – “Life, what art thou? Where goes this breath? this *I*, so much alive?” – is addressed not just to her ostensible reader Gilbert Imlay (and, by extension, to us) but to her own self-making, narrative voice. By understanding the nature of “embodied thought” in language this way, by understanding the nature of the “speaking person” who incarnates inner discourse and ideology in all texts, we can bring together all the related threads of the preceding pages – that is, that there is at work in these “literary self-portraits” an ethical and persuasive discourse which both embodies the self/other paradigm in text and which invites the responding discourse of an active and acting other, its reader.

### **Mary Wollstonecraft and the Rhetoric of Ethos**

“Answerability,” as we have seen, is an important aspect of way the literary self-portrait functions rhetorically. But there are other, more classic, rhetorical premises at work in these texts, as well, often closely related to this notion of answerability. When Mary Wollstonecraft wrote a popular travel memoir in 1797, which she called Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, she could not have known that this short text would become a foundational document in re-making our understanding of the rhetoric of selfhood. Her text, which grounds much of my argument in this dissertation, signaled a profound contemporaneous shift in the newly-central (and on-going) project of embodying a life in writing. But this task was accomplished, as Beaujour would have us know, not because she overtly attempted such a task but because she didn't. The “found object” of her writings about a solitary and lonely journey to Scandinavia became an authentic register of who she was because it recorded, unbidden, the dialogic nature of her selfhood. The Letters in Sweden incarnates, as it were, Wollstonecraft's inner self-making dialogue as it shows her gaining knowledge and insight (as well as frustration and anguish) through a process of self-interlocution and confession, all in the midst of a patchwork of prosaic travel details, including everything from sea-captains to strange food to sublime waterfalls.

A reader may pick up the Letters to find out more about Scandinavia but will leave knowing more about Mary Wollstonecraft, to her great credit. The historical record shows us that readers from her time to ours have had remarkably similar reactions to the Letters in Sweden. We feel that we “know” Wollstonecraft, at least in some partial way, through the process of reading her text and we come to admire her courage and warm heart. Per Nyström, the amateur historian and former mayor in Norway who did much research on Wollstonecraft’s travels, has said of her: “Little did I imagine then that my researches would lead...to a meeting with one of the boldest and warmest personalities of the time.”<sup>8</sup> William Godwin even claimed that “if ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book” (249). Since he did love and marry Wollstonecraft, we can assume the retrospective calculation was correct. However, it was no “calculation” on her part which prompts this reaction in readers, indeed quite the opposite. Wollstonecraft’s “un-arranged” writing records her thoughts and feelings in the middle of experiencing them and later resists her editorial attempts to “shape” them, as she tells her readers in the “Advertisement” to the text. We literally “see” her in the midst of her Scandinavian journey, noting her courage, strength of mind, and generosity to those she encounters. By exhibiting her worthy “character” in the midst of the difficulties of her journey, she gains rhetorical authority for herself – we as readers come to trust and admire this remarkable woman. Through this process, Wollstonecraft gains the textual authority to persuade her readers to follow her even beyond her literal journey in Sweden, Norway,

and Denmark, and into the ideological realms of those societal and political positions which she advocates in the Letters, as well.

“Ethos,” or the “ethical argument,” is one of the classic forms of rhetoric first outlined by Aristotle. However, unlike the logical argument based on reason and deduction, this form of persuasion relies solely on the character of the speaker to warrant its claims. Edward Corbett provides an even fuller description of the way the ethos speaker gains authority in his classic text on rhetoric: “The ethical appeal is exerted, according to Aristotle, when the speech itself impresses the audience that the speaker is a man of sound sense (*phronesis*), high moral character (*arete*), and benevolence (*eunoia*). Notice that it is *the speech itself* which must create this impression. Thus a man wholly unknown to his audience...could by his words alone inspire this kind of confidence...In the last analysis...it is the discourse itself which must establish or maintain the ethical appeal... (93-4, his emphasis). In particular, it is though that this style of argument is best used for decision-making and dialogue, when “we deal with matters about which absolute certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. ... [Quintilian writes:] ‘For he who would have all men trust his judgment as to what is expedient and honorable, should possess and be regarded as possessing genuine wisdom and excellence of character’” (Corbett 93). Cicero is another classical writer who strongly emphasized the effectiveness and importance of what he calls “the good man speaking” (99).

Wollstonecraft’s text re-makes the rhetoric of ethos in this case because she re-defines what constitutes authorizing “character.” Rather

than the disingenuousness of Edmund Burke's famous use of the ethos style in his "Reflections on the Revolution in France" -- an argument that must be called as much emotional as ethical<sup>9</sup> -- Wollstonecraft instead chooses to ground her speaking authority on an authentic discourse of selfhood, with all its "stutters and gaps," as Philip Davis writes. She argues in the Letters in Sweden for the rights of women, equality within families and nations, and an authentic understanding of love by embedding her arguments within a real dialogue of her own life's journey, full of self-questioning and confessing. Instead of Burke's smooth and patriarchal "rational man," Wollstonecraft offers us her "real self" to ground her claims and grant her authority. She tells us from the very outset that all she has to relate about Sweden, Norway, and Denmark will be intimately bound up with her own selfhood. And as she says, "my readers alone can judge -- and I give them leave to shut the book, if they do not wish to become better acquainted with me" (62). As we ourselves become "better acquainted" with this text, as we shall later do, we can also see how two Victorian inheritors of this discourse of selfhood extended and re-fashioned it.

### **Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Literary Double**

Galya Diment draws on recent research into brain function in her 1994 text The Autobiographical Novel of Co-Consciousness in order to investigate further the way in which certain self-disclosing texts are understood to be "truthful" by both their authors and readers yet are often

written and read without any overt understanding of how that comes about. One way to describe how this effect of “authenticity” works is the one discussed above, that such texts incorporate a selfhood which is by its nature dialogic and self-interrogative. Diment comes to a similar conclusion by another path. She concludes that texts which incorporate the discourse of inner and outer are indeed accurate reflections of normal human brain activity and in fact often embody that fact through a “doubling” of subjectivity.

Diment examines past and current brain research as well as three specific texts by Goncharov, Woolf, and Joyce and concludes that literature of the self (that which is written with the selfhood of the author incorporated into the text in any way) very often includes either a figure who is a “double” of the author or “double” (or even multiple) split selves which include partial embodiments of the author’s consciousness. This traditional literary figure – the “double” or *döppelgänger* – is so common throughout literature, argues Diment, because it is a sound textual reflection of normal human consciousness. She believes that “co-consciousness” is the best way to describe the varying and multiple “selves” within a text because they mirror the consciousnesses that speak to each person in life, attending to varying situations and discourses.

It has been common for critics over the years to call attention not just to doubling figures in literature but also to the “double-voiced” quality of various kinds of autobiographical writing. But rather than seeing this phenomenon as normal, the influence of Freud in the twentieth century has led to a strong and perhaps mistaken tendency to

see that the existence of multiple consciousnesses in narrative is solely a manifestation of abnormal psychology – that only a Mr. Hyde is possible if the selfhood of Dr. Jekyll is split or multiplied in a text. Diment argues instead that the split self, alter-ego or double “often functions not only as an expression of a writer’s inner conflicts but also as a very powerful and conscious artistic tool.” She believes that the literary double serves an aesthetic purpose that is bound up with its role in the psychology of its author – its “narration” serves both textual and epistemological purposes. In particular, Diment writes, the “use of fictional alter egos appears, in fact, to have been crucial in securing a stronger buffer of detachment between the writers and the immediacy of the autobiographical materials they chose to incorporate into their novels” (9). Where Diment sees “detachment,” though, is where I see “answerability” – something more akin to the space needed for self-defining dialogue to occur – and the necessary distance both in text and life, for the multiple narratives of consciousness to answer each other.

Of the three texts under examination here, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh is the one which most clearly involves the use of a literary “double” or “alter ego” – the renowned but reclusive female poet “Aurora Leigh” most surely doubling the renowned but reclusive female poet Elizabeth Barrett. Yet why would Barrett Browning choose such a form for the text which most closely embodies her own life and beliefs? Why the “fictionalization” of a verse-novel form for a text of self? As we have already seen, such texts are by no means discounted as literary self-portraits, incorporating as they do both “fantasy” as well as “memory.”

Indeed, such texts offer an idealizing aspect which life writing that stays closer to the prosaic does not – as the visionary and utopian ending of Aurora Leigh shows us in great detail.

But it must also be seen that this “doubling” or “fictionalizing” aspect of Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh also serves an important “self-narrating” purpose, as well. The confessing self in the text does seek to tell “who I am” – but in a way more authentically true and persuasive because not the “autobiography” of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. While this notion might be counter-intuitive we need only return to the idea of the literary self-portrait to see how this could be true. Especially because Barrett Browning’s real-life biography had, to a certain extent, become an embodied story already – a fairy tale romance of rescue by the knight-in-shining-armor figure of Robert Browning<sup>10</sup> – it can be seen that writing an “autobiography” of the accepted kind would have been a project dead on arrival. Her story was already inscribed in the pre-written, over-determined way that such master plots often are.

Rather than fitting her individual voice into such a hollow yet rigid shell, then, Barrett Browning instead used the “double” of Aurora Leigh to find a way to write her living selfhood, if not her fact-by-fact biography, into a story that hadn’t already been pre-written, using a form that retained the “thousands of living dialogic threads”<sup>11</sup> that verify the existence of life. By writing a verse-novel that reflected some partial and fragmentary instantiation of her selfhood, she chose arguably the best possible form for such an enterprise, as we shall see in more detail below.

In addition, by not particularizing Aurora Leigh as “The Autobiography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning” she is able to be more overtly polemical and ideological about the political and social issues of her time than she might have been by testifying with only her own unusual life. By writing Aurora Leigh she is able to employ other rhetorical forms within the patchwork form of the literary self-portrait to effect both implicit and explicit ideological goals related to the condition of women, the role of the artist and poet in society, the unnecessary opposition of love and work, the legitimacy of women’s voice and work, and the importance of faith in life. She can write an exemplary women’s life story while not having to claim that she herself is exemplary, a claim that Barrett Browning would surely have felt uncomfortable making. In such a way, she too speaks back to Richardson’s pervasive influence as the definer of proper female behavior and creator of “female exemplars.”

In a related way, we must not lose sight of the way Aurora Leigh relates to Wollstonecraft’s example of women’s self-writing in the Letters. Barrett Browning was a writer deeply concerned with and knowledgeable of the short tradition of women’s writing up to her lifetime. She makes very plain by the content and discourse of Aurora Leigh that an argument for the role of the woman artist in society was central not only to an understanding of her own life but the by-then-forbidden example of Mary Wollstonecraft. However, Aurora Leigh is also very distinctly a product of its mid-Victorian production and so will prompt a close examination of the unique hybrid form of the verse-novel within the context of its nineteenth century “golden age” and in the midst of on-going cultural

debates about the role of “art” in life. Since poetry had been traditionally considered both the “masculine” and classical genre (and one that Bakhtin says is “dead”), we will see how this novel-in-verse gains “life” in the Bakhtinian sense by embodying Barrett Browning’s authentic discourse of selfhood.

### **Confession and the example of John Stuart Mill**

Another critic who addresses the issue of doubling in texts of self is the South African novelist and critic J.M. Coetzee who links it more directly with the discourse of confession. Using Dostoevsky, Rousseau, and Tolstoy as his examples, Coetzee claims that whenever a self seeks to write itself such overt self-consciousness always bring about “double thoughts” or an endlessly-recursive “doubling back of consciousness.” Coetzee links the “doubleness” of the self in text directly with the similarly common presence of confession. He argues that the dialogue of selfhood becomes self-interrogation as soon as a self overtly desires to write its life. The self, then, constantly inwardly questioned, becomes constantly self-justifying through a discourse of confession.

There is no doubt that confession is an important textual element of any kind of life-writing. From Augustine to Rousseau, confession has become the discourse perhaps most closely associated with autobiographical writing, a textual marker which signals expectations of self-disclosure. Yet confession is also a complicated discourse for which questions of address and “answerability” figure prominently, especially

when we consider that confession has two distinct aspects – both to “admit sin” publicly in order to receive absolution and also to declare positively that something is so, particularly an article of faith, belief, or ideology. Both forms of confession are present in the literary self-portrait and both require the presence of the other in order to occur – either as a confessant who can give absolution or as an audience to hear and be moved. In both cases this “addressee” is a necessary pre-existing condition for confession. However, if it might be argued (as Bakhtin does) that all narrative has an addressee of one form or another, then does it follow that all narrative is confession? Certainly Frye’s inclusion of confession as one of the four fundamental forms of fiction would lend credence to that idea. It may be, then, that the authentic and truthful discourse of a self is also the central and necessary component of all narrative. In any case, confession is one form which this discourse often takes in texts of self.

Mikhail Bakhtin is helpful in defining new ways of seeing confession by using entirely different terms and criteria than is traditional for classifying self-authored texts. He calls them either “confession” or “biography” and doesn’t distinguish at all between differing genres. The two are identified by who it is that “hears” or receives these discourses – the “addressee.” Confession, Bakhtin writes, is an address to “the completely outside oneself figure of God” and is distinguished by “a teleological striving for the future,” a state of “penitence” and a “desire for forgiveness.” In short, it is writing primarily concerned with “the ethical sphere” and “that other which comes near and is heard when the self is most isolated and alone.”<sup>12</sup>

But despite the religious-sounding language, Bakhtin is not interested solely in texts which include an address to God nor does he make claims for the necessity of a belief in God for the act of confession to exist in literature, much as Beaujour posits for the literary self-portrait. Bakhtin gives another name to texts which might have traditionally been called secular confessions, such as Rousseau's autobiography. The second kind of life writing for Bakhtin is "biography" or any discourse with "biographical values" which "do not seek God but rather objectifies the self as an end in itself" for the value that emerges from that address. Both the confessional and biographical have value to a self, Bakhtin writes, they are just different. In such a way, Bakhtin helpfully shifts the ground of how self-authored texts can be understood by once again foregrounding the presence of dialogue in life writing – the necessary existence of both the "teller" and the "hearer" in self-narration.

We have already seen how the literary self-portrait is a form which embodies the multiple voices of self-making discourse, giving textual form to the confession and self-questioning which make up our identities. We have also seen how this form functions rhetorically by its grounding of a speaker's authority ethically as a person of "character." Now, we will see how these two aspects come together in the life text of a man whose literary self-portrait takes Wollstonecraft's model and advances it into the heart of Victorian cultural discourse.

In letters to each other, John Stuart Mill and his wife Harriet Taylor Mill repeatedly referred to the work they called "the Head" of all John's political and philosophical works – the text we know as the

Autobiography. From the evidence of the letters it is clear that for them there was no better evidence than the textual narrative of John's life of the efficacy of the theories they shared on politics, the right formation of society (including liberty and democracy), the role of the arts in life, and women's status. Although the Autobiography wasn't published until the year of Mill's death, 1873, it was written primarily in the 1850's with some additions in the late 1860's after Harriet died. In other words, it was written alongside of and at the same time as his other political and philosophical texts (and, interestingly, at the same time as Aurora Leigh).

It is clear that the style and movement of the Autobiography is meant to echo the brilliantly rational precision of John's other writings, with its straightforward, linear and "factual" form -- a form so seemingly mechanical that Carlyle actually called it the "autobiography of a steam engine." This very "factuality," however, belies its nature as a text of profound personal confession. Mill's Autobiography, which announces itself as a traditional text of self, in fact does not follow that genre's outline at all, never even mentioning the existence of his mother or siblings, for example, nor retrospectively summing up the worth and value of his life. Rather, the text takes up Wollstonecraft's model of the literary self-portrait and confesses certain singular and fragmented aspects of his life, thematically related, and offers them in a polemical context of argument for societal change in education, the value of the "life of feeling," and in increased rights for women.

Mill wrote to his wife Harriet that he wished his "Life" to serve as a kind of "mental pemican" or "concentrated food" for readers and

contemporaries to gain nourishment and insight from. As such it is actually much closer in content to Mill's ideological essays such as On Liberty, On Bentham and Coleridge and The Subjection of Women which have polemical and rhetorical aims and which use various life stories as "case studies" and illustrations of the points being made. When Jonathan Loesberg described Mill's text as "the fiction of a philosophy" he meant much the same thing. Mill advances his firm beliefs through the hard-won knowledge he himself gained in life.

Mill is a compelling witness to the changes he advocates but a remarkably distant and abstract one – for the most part. The exceptions lie in the striking instances of textual fissures in Mill's rationalistic facade, most famously in the description of his "mental crisis." That single-paragraph description of Mill's breakdown and almost two-year-long (and recurring) struggle with severe depression is testimony to the presence of a discourse of "buried confession" within this ostensibly confessional form – the voice of the "inner narrating other" in the middle of a seemingly straightforwardly, "factual" recounting of events. In different ways, critics Avrom Fleishman, Linda Peterson, and Jerome Buckley (along with many others) have remained fascinated with the numerous ways that Mill's Autobiography is a narrative whose absences and silences are as eloquent as its mostly-polemical words. At the same time, it is a text which echoes and re-configures several different traditional and fictional story-telling forms. Like an older narrative tradition of picaresque "boys life" stories, the tale of Mill's growing-up has some remarkably similar

elements to the story of another famous contemporary boy – David Copperfield.

Mill begins the Autobiography by essentially asking the same question that David does in the beginning of David Copperfield – whether or not he will turn out to be the hero of his own life “or whether that station will be held by anyone else.” Mill opens with:

“It seems proper that I should prefix to the following biographical sketch, some mention of the reasons which have made me think it desirable that I should leave behind me such a memorial of so uneventful a life as mine. I do not for a moment imagine that any part of what I have to relate, can be interesting to the public as a narrative, or as being connected with myself. . . But a motive which weighs more with me than [any]. . . is a desire to make acknowledgment of the debts which my intellectual and moral development owe to other persons; some of them of recognized eminence, others less known than they deserve to be, and the one to whom most of all is due...” (25)

It must surely be rare in the history of traditional autobiography that an author’s first paragraph includes the line “I do not for a moment imagine that any part of what I have to relate, can be interesting to the public as a narrative, or as being connected with myself.” Mill claims that he will be confessing, in the affirmative sense, only to the greatness of others (certainly not himself) and to the insights he can add to “an age in which education, and its improvement, are the subject of more, if not profounder study...” (25) Most of Mill’s story involves hero-making of his wife and father with an almost desperate need to erase any elements of the heroic in himself (although they greatly exist). Dickens story moves in the opposite direction. It is apparent that Mill, by *announcing* his text as the story of his life, feels compelled to show that he isn’t its hero. Dickens is

his story's hero from the moment he is born, in the novel's second sentence, perhaps more easily because he does not claim it overtly as his life's tale.

Paul Valéry has written that "there is not a theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography." We can see how the polemical and rhetorical aims of the literary self-portrait provide an ideal textual location for such a discourse. Yet we must also see the idealizing and universalizing effects of this discourse, as well. "Any man's life" can provide that "mirror of existence to all men" because "to weave fact with fiction unskillfully would be only to make truth less true," as John Forster wrote of Dickens literary self-portrait David Copperfield. In seeing how both the "theoretical" and the "imaginative" are embodied in the discourse of self as recorded in the literary self-portrait we can finally come to an appreciation of the profound yet neglected importance of these works. Rather than traditional autobiography's dry and unitary lists of accomplishments, I argue that the literary self-portrait as evidenced by Mill, Barrett Browning, and Wollstonecraft finally were just what they attempted to be -- compelling, convincing, and ideologically persuasive documents which narrated the selfhood of their authors by the use of fragmented, associative, thematically-related confessions in order to influence and change the politics and culture of their period. As such, then, they were also three of the most important early examples of a little-understood genre which continues to exist today and which may be so

rhetorically compelling because they come closest to mirroring our actual process of self-understanding and self-discovery.

## Notes to Chapter One

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- <sup>1</sup> in the foreward to Lejeune, On Autobiography, p. x. See also Eakin's Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography.
- <sup>2</sup> The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, volume 2, pps. 84-85, quoted in Haney.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas De Quincey, Collected Writings, pp. 229-30.
- <sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 422.
- <sup>5</sup> Art and Answerability, pp. 152-3
- <sup>6</sup> The Dialogic Imagination, p. 365
- <sup>7</sup> See also Wlad Godzich's essay "Correcting Kant: Bakhtin and Intercultural Interactions" which discusses in depth the way in which Bakhtin remakes Kantian formulations while still staying within their rhetorical ground.
- <sup>8</sup> in the preface to Mary Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian Journey, 1980.
- <sup>9</sup> Indeed Corbett uses Burke's French Revolution text as his exact model of an argument based on an appeal to the emotions.
- <sup>10</sup> And there are many scholars who agree that both Elizabeth and Robert Browning are, to a certain extent, guilty of encouraging the "reading" of their biography in just such a way.
- <sup>11</sup> Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 276.
- <sup>12</sup> Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" in Art and Answerability.

## Chapter 2/ Chaney

# **“I Stretched Out My Hand to Eternity:”**

## Wollstonecraft’s Letters Written in Sweden and the Search for An Authentic Discourse of Selfhood

“How long will it be before we shall have read to better purpose the eloquent lessons and **the yet more eloquent history** of that gifted and glorious being, Mary Wollstonecraft?”

William J. Fox in Westminster Review, 1831

Mary Wollstonecraft first set foot on the shore of a deserted area outside Gothenburg, Sweden during the summer of 1795 after traveling for “eleven days of weariness on board a vessel not intended for the accommodation of passengers.” (63) Stepping out on that rocky coast, alone with her maid and infant daughter, she could not have known that her planned travel memoir of this unusual journey would come to exemplify quintessential elements of the self in text, as I will argue here it did – elements not only characteristic of her early romantic age but of an authentic discourse of selfhood in general, with close textual affinities to both poetry and the novel.

Wollstonecraft’s Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark is a text whose literary categorization over the years – when it was noticed at all – has largely been that of an

interesting and unusual travel book and not much more than that. Written at a time when travel and travel books were well in demand, Wollstonecraft had shrewdly judged that taking along a journal to record her impressions while taking a trip out of the common way would likely yield a publication that could help her allay her always-pressing debts. She was quite right. Her text was the most popular and successful book she ever wrote, quickly going to a second edition and being translated into German, Dutch, Swedish, and Portuguese (36).

And while such literary success was not at all unusual, it is striking to notice the kind of unusual reaction it elicited from many of its contemporary readers. As editor Richard Holmes notes, “admiring references [to it] appear in the journals, poems, or correspondence of Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth and Hazlitt” (36). Even Robert Louis Stevenson “had a copy of the first edition when he went to Samoa in 1890” (36). This text seemed to make people care very deeply, with real “affection,” – one of Wollstonecraft’s own terms – about the woman Mary Wollstonecraft. Coleridge was prompted to write to her personally and offer religious solace for her sufferings after reading the Letters. The novelist Mary Hays felt she came to know Wollstonecraft “as a woman” by reading it. But even further, the language often used in communications about the Letters in Sweden<sup>1</sup> is that of actual love. Robert Southey, as Holmes notes, “wrote excitedly to his publisher friend Joseph Cottle: “Have you met with Mary Wollstonecraft’s [travel book]? She has made me in love with a cold climate, with frost and snow, with a northern moonlight.” (17) Since Wollstonecraft’s journey took place entirely in the

warm summer months, one can surmise that Southey supplied the cold northern frosts out of his own imagination and may have in fact been more in love with the author than with the “northern moonlight.” Her future husband William Godwin was even more direct:

“The narrative of this [Scandinavian] voyage is before the world, and perhaps a book of travels that so irresistibly seizes on the heart, never, in any other instance, found its way from the press. . . .If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book. She speaks of her sorrows, in a way that fills us with melancholy, and dissolves us in tenderness, at the same time that she displays a genius which commands all our admiration.” (249)

Many other writers, even other women, had written popular and widely-read travel books yet Wollstonecraft’s Letters in Sweden is a striking example of a travel text which prompted a Werther-like personal reaction from its readers.

This intense and personal reaction is so, I will argue here, because the text embodies and instantiates the several ideological and philosophical threads which inform the literary self-portrait. Specifically, this short narrative weaves a complex interrelationship between a confessional discourse of selfhood, a heightened and affective discourse of the sublime in nature, and an ideological rhetoric of political and cultural change. By offering readers a view into the inner voice of her own self-dialogue and combining a recurring motif of personal confession with a factual and straightforward narrative of places and natural sights, Wollstonecraft links ideology and rhetorical authority in the site of her literal body in a way that, as we shall see below, entirely remakes the

tradition of writing the self. Wollstonecraft gains authority for her writing by inviting readers to an “intimacy” with her that simultaneously prompts the personal and affectionate responses noted above while also grounding her rhetorical authority in the trustworthy and admirable characteristics she exhibits along the way. And the confessional self-disclosure which gains her so much love and “affection” from outside readers is not rhetorical power gained for the closed circle of self-justification, as with Rousseau or Wordsworth. Rather, it is affection and rhetorical authority gained in the cause of promoting what she sees as right ways of judging society and women’s roles within it and by way of seeing selfhood as a communal, confessional project.

We can see an example of the Letters’ multi-layered discourse in one of the text’s most famous passages, from which I take the title of this chapter. In this well-known episode, Wollstonecraft overlays the experience of seeing “noble forests” and the sublime waterfall at Frederikstad with her own search for meaning in life. As she writes:

Reaching the cascade, or rather cataract, the roaring of which had a long time announced its vicinity, my soul was hurried by the falls into a new train of reflections. The impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cavities which mocked the exploring eye, produced a equal activity in my mind: my thoughts darted from earth to heaven, and I asked myself why I was chained to life and its misery? Still the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited, were pleasurable; and, viewing it, my soul rose, with renewed dignity, above its cares – grasping at immortality – it seemed as impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me – I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come. (152-3)

Within the three sentences of that grammatically complex passage, heightened by its dashes and subordinate clauses, we can see the recurrent shape of the Wollstonecraftian discourse of self. She binds the rhetorical authority we grant her through her descriptions of concrete physical places and attaches it to the related flights of her interior vision which are less easy to represent visually, yet equally compelling. In this way, Wollstonecraft takes great strides in developing the language of portraying states of mind in literature. She combines, several years before Wordsworth or Coleridge, a confessional disclosure of her thoughts and feelings along with the external sight or physical object which prompted them, thereby joining the natural world and internal consciousness in text.

This is writing that bears a much stronger resemblance to poetry than to linear narrative with its use of fragmentary sentences, imagistic description, and the heightened language of intense feeling. And it is a linguistic pattern repeated throughout the Letters -- a joining-together, through the taxonomy of her own subjectivity, of disparate passages of observation, comment, and polemics alongside intense confession, passion and sorrow. As we have seen, both Michel Beaujour and Philippe Lejeune have called this associative and non-linear practice the defining characteristic of the literary self-portrait, (as different from the traditional autobiography), with far more kinship to poetry than to history or anthropology. Perhaps that is why Wollstonecraft's influence was most immediately and profoundly effected on the poets of her time. In any case, it is in this way that she sets the stage for the commingling of

the ideological and autobiographical texts of the next several decades, as we shall see below.

### **Wollstonecraft and the Emerging Discourse of Selfhood**

It is deceptively simple question to ask what constitutes success or failure in writing the self? Do we mean by authentic representation of life something like the complete, accurate recuperation or reconstruction of the human mind as it grapples with reality and the self's own place in it, on an hourly, daily, or yearly basis? Or rather, is success in writing a life in text based instead on formal markers, certain accepted generic codes that signal a polished and unitary narrative of self, one that sees a theme and overarching structure to the life as it has unfolded? If the latter is true, then it would seem that any success in textual self-representation can come only as a subject's life nears its end and final results of that life can be known and assessed.

In that case, then, one can say that the end constructs the beginning in any definition of life-writing that valorizes textual unity, structural coherence, and thematic resolution. Phillippe Lejeune offers just such a definition when he calls autobiography "a retrospective" literary project. But we must call to mind the actual process we undergo when recalling any memory or thought from the past – we don't retrospectively review the memory, spinning backwards, if you will, from the present remembering to the time recalled. Rather, for epistemological reasons we can only speculate about, we remember forward from the time recalled, leaping back over intervening time and imaginatively locating ourselves

in the remembered past (recall Davis' discussion of Scrooge and "true memory-thinking" in chapter one). Even as far back as 1865, the Victorian philosopher John Foster spent some time pondering the question "why do we remember forwards and not backwards?" – a perplexing and distressing question in "the golden age of autobiography" where self-made individualism was the dominant ideology and unitary, retrospective texts the valued generic paradigm. Rather, our question here seems to be why, if the end must necessarily construct the beginning in a coherent and unitary autobiographical narrative, do we not replay our lives spinning backwards from the moment pen is put to paper? And how does that question of the linearity or non-linearity (or teleology and non-teleology) of time in narrative bear on what we value as authentic self-writing?

Mary Wollstonecraft's Letters in Sweden answers many of these questions as a pivotal text of the period of shifting historical ground underneath understood notions of the self in both life and writing. Holmes calls the Letters a "transitional" text, negotiating with and re-making some of the more traditional aspects of late eighteenth-century genres such as the travel memoir and prose polemic while at the same time helping to define the newly emerging discourse of Romanticism. It is a "forgotten classic" (9) of the early Romantic period with "intriguing" ripples "into the mainstream of nineteenth-century poetry" – indeed, one that "may be said to have entered into the literary mythology of Romanticism within a single generation." (41) And since that Romantic literary mythology is largely responsible for defining the terms and characteristics of writing about the self in the decades that followed, it isn't

saying too much to claim that Mary Wollstonecraft's Letters in Sweden has been at least as important as such well-known and canonical texts as Wordsworth's The Prelude in marking out the boundaries of what it means to write the self from her time to ours.

But before moving on to the specifics of her text, it is important to clarify several points about Wollstonecraft's writing. A careful look at the overall pattern of Wollstonecraft's writing life – from the early conduct literature she wrote as a governess and teacher, to her anonymous reviews for Joseph Johnson's Analytical, to her most famous political and polemical writings – show not only an increasing knowledge and competence as a writer but also a remarkable affinity between the authorial voices of each of her diverse texts.<sup>2</sup> Because this discourse also bears a strong similarity to that of Wollstonecraft's surviving personal letters we can conclude that the persona who speaks in Wollstonecraft's texts, is to a marked degree, framed by the author's own subjectivity. Such an assertion might hardly be worth making – certainly many other authors have shared a similarly consistent voice in their work – if not for the currently wide critical assertion of Wollstonecraft's divided subjectivity and conflicted discourse throughout her writing life. It is interesting to note that the two most prolific critics writing on Wollstonecraft, Mitzi Myers and Gary Kelly, see well the unmistakably autobiographical aspects of Wollstonecraft's fiction but call the fragmentary nature of the Letters something of either a noble failure caused by the oppressive patriarchy of her male-dominated society (Myers), or as a sign of personal weakness and mental fatigue, a “falling-

back" into a resemblance with her earlier, less confident ways of writing (Kelly).<sup>3</sup>

Feminist critics such as Myers, Kelly, Meena Alexander, and Mary Poovey often bewail the "divided," "oppressed," or "conflicted" self-writings of many female authors during this period -- with Wollstonecraft as a prominent example -- without examining the fact that the hierarchies of value and categories of successful or authentic self-writing that they often use in their interpretation of female texts are the very ones which were largely initiated by patriarchal male critics since the eighteenth century, beginning with Robert Southey, who was, ironically, a great admirer of Mary Wollstonecraft's. "Success" in authentic self-representation has come to be defined by the stereotypical generic markers mentioned above -- textual unity, structural coherence and a hard-earned self-knowledge, seen retrospectively.

However, just as anatomy diagrams used to be drawn so that all human beings were depicted as universally male, these older, yet widely-accepted notions of what it means to write the authentic self must be seen now as gendered male. They are not "universally human" in their insistence on a unified, teleological and publicly polished self-representations. Those texts which render the self in an oblique, fragmented, or private way are still often called "failures" or "divided" discourses of self by critics even when those qualities are acknowledged and valued as much more typically female than male. Indeed, it is interesting to note that even nineteenth-century critics used veiled accusations of "femaleness" when evaluating self-writing that seemed

overly oblique, multi-layered, or confessional to them. Rousseau was the first, not surprisingly, to receive such critical “censure” but even John Henry Newman and John Ruskin (whom G.K. Chesterton called a “governess”) did not escape being called overly “female” in their autobiographical writings. What these nineteenth- and early-twentieth century critics seem to have discovered, but strongly disparaged, is the fact that the self-writings of these (and other) male authors of the period did not adequately uphold the mid-Victorian ideology of self-made masculine self-representation. As Beaujour writes, “the self-portrait is opposed to the autobiographical remembrance, which is always, to some degree, founded on a belief in the permanence of an individual self whose interiority is anteriority” (160).

Instead, we must re-capture here the idea that these critical values are Victorian in their ideological underpinnings and as such deserve to be re-configured for our time. Martin Danahay has argued this point well in his book A Community of One: Masculine Autobiography and Autonomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain by saying that the great boom in Victorian autobiography-writing that followed Wollstonecraft’s generation moved away from valuing multivalent and “poetic” self-writings to ones with an ideological emphasis on the male individual as a self-made “community of one.” This “cult of individualism,” which has remained strong into the twentieth century, is largely the reason that the generic boundaries of autobiography have seemed fixed until recent decades. There has been much at stake, both politically and ideologically, in defining the characteristics of self-writing as identical to those valued by

the traditional patriarchy – a unified, individualized, successful self recounting with wise reflection a linear and teleological narrative of that self's life.

Mitzi Myers put it well when she wrote that “real” autobiography, particularly as seen by older male critics, still “typically favor criteria such as achieved integration of being, finality of insight, and formal completeness.” But Myers argues that such a definition automatically eliminates much of women's self-writing, particularly in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries – and as such is an immediately suspect definition. As she writes, “women's discoveries of self take a more circuitous route; their self-representations wear camouflage.” (182) However, I would go farther than Myers does by saying that it isn't just older male critics who consciously or unconsciously favor polished and unitary texts of self and it is not just women whose discourses of self “wear camouflage.” Rather, I will argue that the fragmentary, “desultory,” unpolished, and thematically diffuse Letters in Sweden is emblematic of “authentic autobiography” by the very fact that it doesn't valorize the polished, finished, unified, and self-satisfied in any narrative of life – life itself is simply not so neat.

· We will examine in more detail later this fragmentary, “self-portrait” style of life-writing. But for now we should see that Wollstonecraft's text is distinguished, first of all, by its status as a rhetorical return to the discourse of *ethos*, the persuasive speech of an authoritative speaker – but this time with a shift in the nature and definition of what the *ethos* speaker can and would do, re-making the

textual form of self-writing by collapsing and conflating the public and private spheres.

### **Re-Making the Rhetoric of *Ethos***

One thing readers have loved about both Mary Wollstonecraft and the Letters in Sweden from the time of its first publication is the impression that we really are seeing into her thoughts as they happen during her travels in Scandinavia. This heartfelt, “to the minute” style of writing serves many rhetorical ends, not the least of which is the impression it gives that her testimony is not shaped by any planning or foreknowledge of its effects, no manipulative desire to coerce her readers emotionally -- and is therefore more to be relied on as truthful. As Holmes writes, Wollstonecraft’s text is “urgen[t] in its testament, swiftly composed at [a] time of grief, when many of the barriers of reticence were down” (16). These are seen to be her “real” feelings and impressions as she moves about the northern landscapes of Scandinavia. Wollstonecraft sets up this expectation from the very first when she states in the Advertisement to the text that she “could not avoid being continually the first person -- ‘the little hero of each tale’” who “could not give a just description of what I saw, but by relating the effect different objects had produced on my mind and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh” (62). She tells her readers that she attempted to give more polish and shape to her original travel journal or “letters” but discovered that “in proportion as I arranged my thoughts, my letter[s]. . . became stiff and

affected: I, therefore, determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained..." (62).

These claims are important to keep in mind as we consider the question of "sincerity" in autobiographical narratives. At some point, all such narratives must take up this question, even if only to reject it as utterly impossible (Barthes' and Sartre's self-writings are an example of this position, as is Michel Leiris' Anti-Memoirs). They "must" take up the issue of sincerity because of the genre's inherent reliance on personal testimony, especially when the truthfulness of such claims is also a central interpretive concern. Indeed, the very question of "sincerity" or truth-telling itself has moved to the foreground of many twentieth-century autobiographies. However, for writers in earlier decades, less prone to question the possibility of stable subjectivity, "sincerity" and "truthfulness" are highly valued terms. Wollstonecraft makes a strong mini-argument in the Advertisement for her readers to take assurance that her writing has not been shaped or "arranged" and that her claims are as sincere and authentic as she herself felt them at the time of her travels. She not only tells why such assurance can be taken (even when she tried to edit or arrange her writing, it was not successful) but apologizes for the attendant "fault" of so much "un-arranged" writing which cannot separate the scenery from the self which perceives it (the "little hero of each tale").

Since autobiographical writing is, in some ways, a version of the personal testimony, the speaker's claims for her reliability and authenticity are given as grounds to warrant the further claims and conclusions she will draw. A judgment is required of the reader, since

nothing besides her own identity and the claims she makes for herself can be offered as the basis for all that is found within the argument. In this case, such a premise is even more striking because Wollstonecraft has claimed from the very outset that all she has to relate about Sweden, Norway, and Denmark will be intimately bound up with her own selfhood, what she herself was thinking and feeling as she traveled. As she says, "my readers alone can judge -- and I give them leave to shut the book, if they do not wish to become better acquainted with me" (62).

However, where Wollstonecraft has only made implicit claims for her authority as speaker based on her truthfulness and her status as an "authority" on what she alone has seen and experienced, she makes only one explicit argument for winning authority as a convincing speaker here and that is whether or not she can acquire the reader's "affection:"

A person has a right, I have sometimes thought, when amused by a witty or interesting egotist, to talk of himself when he can win on our attention by acquiring our affection. (62)

Wollstonecraft's rhetorical enterprise now moves beyond rationalism alone, with its reliance on the logic of warranted claims and factual proofs, and joins with the concurrent eighteenth-century thread of sentimentalism as well as the even more deeply-rooted tradition of Aristotelian rhetoric. Wollstonecraft insists that we as readers incorporate our "feelings" or "sentiments" as an equally important marker of the worth of her character and grant her the ability to speak out of our "affection" for her as readers, the way we would either a friend or a "witty or interesting egotist." The very success of her enterprise in creating such

affection is part of the historical record. The Letters still has the power to make even twentieth-century readers admire its courageous author. As Holmes writes, Wollstonecraft's text demonstrates "the extraordinary skill with which she transformed a prosaic business venture into a poetic revelation of her character and philosophy" (26). But we must not lose sight of the fact that her authority as speaker will be rooted, she says, as much in her character being worthy of our "affection" as in its status as a person of "probity," which is one of the terms Aristotle used to define the *ethos* speaker.

It is worthwhile here to spend some time exploring the way that Wollstonecraft appropriated and re-made the position of *ethos* speaker since it is central to several major points I hope to make in this dissertation. The Letters in Sweden is not the first time that Wollstonecraft effectively deployed a rhetorical style rooted in her personal authority as speaker. In the famous polemic "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," written in reply to Edmund Burke, she convincingly grappled with one of the major male writers of her time by using this same style of argument, the one that Burke himself is often given credit for using to great effect in his public denunciation of the French Revolution<sup>4</sup>. Recall that in this ethical argument style, it is the speaker alone who lends compelling and convincing weight to the argument in question, not the deft use of logic or pathos. As Aristotle put it, "the character [*ethos*] of the speaker is a cause of persuasion when the speech is so uttered as to make him worthy of belief; for as a rule we trust men of probity more, and more quickly, about things in general, while on

points outside the realm of exact knowledge, where opinion is divided, we trust them absolutely” (Aristotle 8). In particular as she writes on the specifics of politics and the position of women in society, we can say that Wollstonecraft earns “absolute trust” when she speaks on these topics, unlike contemporary male authors such as Burke and Paine for whom womanhood would surely be “outside the realm of exact knowledge.”

Edward Corbett provides an even fuller description of the way the *ethos* speaker gains authority in his classic text on rhetoric:

The ethical appeal is exerted, according to Aristotle, when the speech itself impresses the audience that the speaker is a man of sound sense (*phronesis*), high moral character (*arete*), and benevolence (*eunoia*). Notice that it is *the speech itself* which must create this impression. Thus a man wholly unknown to his audience...could by his words alone inspire this kind of confidence...In the last analysis...it is the discourse itself which must establish or maintain the ethical appeal... (93-4, his emphasis)

This definition comes very close to describing exactly the way in which Wollstonecraft gains authority and persuasiveness in the Letters in Sweden. She is a writer only somewhat “known” to some readers and wholly unknown to others whose “sound sense,” “high moral character,” and “benevolence” are the dominant characteristics she displays in her text. She shows her “sound sense” in the wise and fair evaluations she makes of the people, landscapes, and experiences she encounters in her travels. Her “high moral character” is seen in her deep concern for her daughter, her ethical dealings with the people she meets, and her profound belief in promoting the greater good of society. Her

“benevolence” is seen in the countless instances of warm encounters with everyone from sea captains to coach drivers , in her deep love of her child, and even in her struggle to allay her grief at Gilbert Imlay’s rejection of her love.

An even further confirmation of Wollstonecraft’s effectiveness at employing an ethical appeal for rhetorical authority comes when we examine Aristotle’s own discussion of the use of ethos. As Corbett tells us, Aristotle talked about “the nature of various forms of government and the character of different periods of life (youth, middle age, old age) and of different conditions of life (wealth, poverty, education, illiteracy, health, sickness)” (94). All of these are important considerations for the rhetoric of *ethos* because the speaker must take into account the varying feelings and positions of people at various stages of life, says Corbett of Aristotle. Taking into account “the nature of various forms of government...and different periods..and conditions of life” are also apt descriptions of Wollstonecraft’s meditations on life and the future of society in the Letters and in her passionate arguments for change and progress within her text.

Corbett also explains that the *ethos* argument, based on the character of the speaker, must also be maintained throughout the whole discourse. Any slip in the definitions of “good character” discussed above will tear down all the speaker’s authority. We can see that Wollstonecraft maintains just such a character in her Letters, even when grief and frustration overwhelm her. The “authenticity” of her character lies in its consistency throughout the ups and downs of her feelings and experiences. We never see her act immorally or with any other “touch of

malevolence, flash of bad taste, or sudden display of inaccuracy or illogic" (95) which Corbett says would doom the ethical argument. And, in addition, while the character of the speaker is the primary warrant for the persuasiveness of an *ethos* argument, the introduction and conclusion are also places where overt appeals to the reader are appropriate and compelling. We have already seen how Wollstonecraft employs the Advertisement in just such a way.

Wollstonecraft had developed her fluency and effectiveness using this rhetorical position as early as her two Vindications – A Vindication of the Rights of Men (1790 and 1791) and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792). In those texts as well as the Letters in Sweden (1796), she shows that women are best served when society treats them as "rational creatures" whose interests are as equally human as men's, thereby joining women's voices, and by extension her own, to the greater discussion of the issues affecting all of society. She shows what grounds she has to speak to the common concerns of all society. She effectively eliminates gender distinction as a tool for disparaging women in the public forum of discourse while simultaneously reinforcing its importance as a rhetorical ground for herself.

This is a complicated rhetorical position. As Gary Kelly has carefully elucidated in Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft, she had to completely invent new forms of discourse almost every time she took up the pen, re-framing and re-appropriating the traditional along with the new. Kelly argues that Wollstonecraft was truly "revolutionary" in this way, realizing that the

new spirit of her age called for new forms of discourse, as well – those that she inherited being inadequate to the new rhetorical enterprises she was attempting. Because Wollstonecraft's writing style is something so unique and influential, we need to take time to carefully examine the specifics of how it works.

Wollstonecraft pioneered new ways of combining personal confession with ideological polemics so that her testimony of self becomes both the warrant and the grounds of her arguments about self, society, and futurity. Specifically, the rhetoric of the Letters in Sweden takes the premise of the ethical argument to its logical conclusion. Rather than simply arguing from the position of a knowledgeable and persuasive speaker alone, as she did in the two Vindications, or as a fictional alter ego called "Mary" or "Maria," as she did in her novels, in the Letters she herself emerges as the autobiographical "I" of a narrative that is profoundly confessional in its framework. She speaks here as the self who stands behind all those other partial incarnations of her subjectivity and offers her own "real" life as the ultimate proof of her theories about the importance of education, genius, and independence for women. She models the "rational creature" of her polemical texts from the moment she hits the beach at Gothenburg and combines the powerful discourse of her self-narration with the ideological persuasiveness of an ethical appeal. This important and influential rhetorical stance continued to grow and develop in the generation immediately following Wollstonecraft's, in the discourse of the well-known male Romantics as well as in the writings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and John Stuart Mill which we will see when

we examine the life-texts of both in later chapters. For now though it is important to capture that Wollstonecraft was one of the first to combine self-disclosure and rhetoric in just this particular way.

### **Gender, Ideology, and Romantic Selfhood**

It is important to keep in mind as we consider the public aspect of Wollstonecraft's kind of intimate life writing that the Letters in Sweden was always intended for publication. This wasn't just a private diary or journal for her own purposes but a travel journal used as a source for a text with an intended life in the public arena. Wollstonecraft meant for her book to argue something in the discourse of her society. Her radical and innovative decision to make that public text not one of the types of works considered acceptable as "public literature," such as those which Pope, Johnson, and Dryden made so central to the eighteenth century, but instead to offer a personal, confessional and intimate narration may explain why this unique voice, this understanding of life-writing, which is largely gendered female, is so little understood even today. The rhetorical daring required to argue in the marketplace of ideas with only the authority of selfhood can be said to be what made Edmund Burke's whole career -- but it was something that very few women would openly dare at that time. What Wollstonecraft did to make that daring successful was to offer an authentic self, not "the public man," to render her authoritative. She took the greatest risk of all such writers in by really

joining the self with the discourse of society. But as Bakhtin writes, this is very purpose of such life texts:

[I]t is only an intimate, organic axiological participation in the world of others that renders the biographical self-objectification of a life authoritative and productive;...that is, makes firm the position in which I am situated outside myself, the position that finds its support in the loved world of others...<sup>5</sup>

The gendering of this “productive and authoritative” voice is obviously female in Wollstonecraft’s case but for reasons which go beyond the reality of her sex. Mitzi Myers has explored the way in which Wollstonecraft’s voice is essentially instructive and didactic, the woman teacher’s voice that Wollstonecraft first fashioned in her earliest professional days as a schoolmistress and educational writer. I agree that Wollstonecraft’s voice throughout the Letters is instructive, constantly looking for lessons to impart from her encounters in Scandinavia, but it might also be seen as a mother’s teaching voice, as well, closer to the concerns of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. The argument of A Vindication centers largely around what is most important for women in their roles as rational wives and mothers, as is well known. In the Letters, Wollstonecraft seems most often to see ways in which women are behaving toward family and children as the basis for her instructive musings, noticing the issues and details of women’s work and choosing to frame her narrative unapologetically through an essentially female lens.

But there are also other issues to bring to light regarding how gender frames the Letters in Sweden. To a much larger extent than today,

gender categories would have provided “givens” to Wollstonecraft’s contemporary readers that fill in the missing details and specifics of her life that her text itself does not provide. Many aspects of her background, what her education would likely have been like, what life choices were likely available to her, and what future choices or lack of choices would exist for her, would have been relatively well understood in her time. They were few and limited. In contrast, it might be argued that a man’s life discourse would be much more likely to be specific about what brought him to this place, much more likely to own experience that would be individual to his own life. We need only look to the parallel examples of Rousseau and Sterne to see the difference with Wollstonecraft’s text. The didactic or teaching voice of a man in such an instance is much more likely to take the individual experience as the basis for a universalizing impulse, implying that the lessons he particularly learned in his life would be of interest in the public sphere of male discussion because of the shared quality men had of choosing their life’s course. In other words, my experience might be helpful to you, young man, as you start out in life because this is what my decision to live with Mme. Warens, for example, led to. For women readers, what is instructive in a life text is not the lesson of how to choose well – likely there will be little choice available -- rather it is how to live within the straitened circumstances and circumscribed life limits that women inevitably had, how to be woman within that boundaried category of humanity. No wonder Wollstonecraft’s text was so popular. She presents the message that women are “rational creatures” who can think and live and feel and have

opinions about the world, good ones and true ones, just as well as men and that the boundaries that restrict women still don't have to include ones on her mind. As Jane Austen would prove with Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy only a few years later, a woman can be both a good and respectable wife and mother, worthy to be loved by the best of men simply for "her lively mind."

Mitzi Myers has usefully traced the path of Wollstonecraft's self-awareness as a woman writer first and foremost, from her earliest writings.<sup>6</sup> Myers notes that Wollstonecraft signed her essays in The Female Reader, an early educational text, "O," self-consciously aware of Rousseau's sexist comment about female writing being unnatural. Rousseau had said that a girl is so uncomfortable with writing that she catches herself in the act of it, endlessly writing the letter "O." (I will leave others to explore the sexual and psychological implications of that comment, as well.) For our purpose here, it is important to highlight that Mary signed herself "O" in her very first published works – which were textbooks for young girl students, keep in mind – re-appropriating the image of the girl learning to write. Myers argues that this is an example of how Wollstonecraft too was a "learner" in how to be a professional writer in the adult sense of the word. However, I also see such a gesture as Wollstonecraft's re-interpretation of the very notion of gender, the self, and writing. Not only is such writing "natural," she seems to say, but it also belongs in the larger public arena as much as a man's does, witness its publication.

Anne K. Mellor is perhaps the best-known and most influential critic writing today on romanticism and gender. In her recent text of the same name, she makes a compelling argument for re-seeing the way that romanticism has been traditionally understood and argues instead for a broader definition which takes into account the female tradition of writing in this time period, largely initiated by Mary Wollstonecraft. I agree with Mellor's wish to "contest the seamless account of the triumph of a hegemonic domestic ideology in England between 1750 and 1850" as is advanced in Mary Poovey's The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer and Nancy Armstrong's Desire and Domestic Fiction. By basing their arguments largely on the ideological discourse of conduct books and religious literature, Poovey and Armstrong have missed "an equally powerful Romantic female literary tradition that openly contested and corrected this domestic ideology in significant ways" (83). While Poovey and Armstrong are not wrong about existence of an ideology of containment within the domestic sphere, it was not all-powerful nor all-triumphant. In fact, it may be that only in twentieth century literary studies of Romanticism has this tradition truly been "silenced."

It is worthwhile to spend some time here elucidating the aspects of feminine Romanticism as Mellor describes them since they will prove important not only in discussing Wollstonecraft but in the chapters to come, as well. Mellor employs Rita Felski's terminology in Beyond Feminist Aesthetics to describe both the textual components of this discourse and also its ideological and polemical premises. She describes

feminine Romanticism as constituting an “alternative ‘counter-public sphere’” (84) which:

...explicitly or implicitly advocated ‘family politics’ as a political program that would radically transform the public sphere. [These writers] proclaimed the value of rational love, an ethic of care, and gender equality as a challenge both to a domestic ideology that would confine women within the home and to a capitalist laissez-faire system that would set the rights of the individual, free-will or rational choice, and an ethic of justice above the needs of the community as a whole. (84)

This feminine Romantic agenda was widely known and popular, as well, being incorporated in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, Susan Ferrier, Mary Shelley, Helen Maria Williams, and others. As such, it “should be recognized as a viable alternative political ideology” (84). I will argue here that its “viable political ideology” is one of the main aspects of feminine Romanticism that both Barrett Browning and Mill advance in the next generation of writers.

But it is Wollstonecraft who remains the central figure for our revision of the literary and political ideology of Romanticism. Mellor argues that the “cornerstones of Wollstonecraft’s feminism” are “committed to a model of equality rather than difference” between men and women (38). “The rational woman, rational love, egalitarian marriage, the preservation of the domestic affections, responsibility for the mental, moral and physical well-being and growth of all members of the family” are not only the main points advocated by Wollstonecraft in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman but “they are also the grounding tenets of the feminine Romantic ideology.” She made the revolutionary

shift of aligning the central political concerns of her period not with hierarchical, patriarchal tradition – but rather with the family – once again, taking over current cultural discourse and re-making it into something completely unique. As Mellor writes, “Wollstonecraft’s moral vision diverges profoundly from the ideology both of the British Enlightenment and of the Girondist leaders of the French Revolution in its insistence on the rationality and equality of the female and on the primary importance of the domestic affections and the family. By selecting the image of the egalitarian family as the prototype of a genuine democracy,...Wollstonecraft introduced a truly revolutionary political program, one in which gender and class differences could be erased” (38).

There are four distinct aspects to “revolutionary feminine Romanticism,” as Mellor has called them, all based on Wollstonecraft’s feminist ideology, which remained “lastingly influential...despite the scandal surrounding Wollstonecraft’s death and the publication of Godwin’s Memoirs” (39). These aspects are “the education of the rational woman, rational love and the politics of domestic responsibility, woman’s relation to nature, and the feminine construction of subjectivity” (39).

We will return to the importance of these defining aspects of feminine Romanticism but I wish to register here my primary disagreement with Mellor and that is her insistence on basing Wollstonecraft’s lasting influence entirely on A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Once again, the Letters in Sweden has been overlooked by a twentieth-century critic as both the complement and popularizer of the theories advanced in the Vindication. It is important that we see them

together and the way in which each enhanced the understanding and influence of the other in contemporary readers. Even Mellor seems blind to the fact that one of her own points reinforces this idea. She argues that many women Romantic writers did not adopt the typical domestic story plot of the day in which “a blameless wife and mother, morally superior to her scapegrace husband,...finally distances herself...in order to devote total, loving attention to her child, usually a daughter...[t]he husband, moved to repentance by her example, returns to a domestic life ordered under her direction” (82). Rather, female Romantic writers “in their fiction and poetry” wrote stories in which “abandoned wives and mothers make their way alone, or with the help of friends, relatives, and second husbands” (82) – which is, of course, almost an exact description of the Letters in Sweden and Wollstonecraft’s own life – the abandoned “wife” and mother Mary makes her way alone through Scandinavia in search of the man who stole Gilbert Imlay’s treasure with the help of friends along the way. In addition, it is also the plot of Wollstonecraft’s real life, as most readers of the time would have known from Godwin’s Memoirs (he himself was the beloved “second husband” in the narrative), and it was also very similar to the life stories of Charlotte Smith and Felicia Hemans, as well. These women wrote this counter-plot of female self-sufficiency not just as a counter to masculinist ideology but also because its influential example – in the life and text of Mary Wollstonecraft and the Letters in Sweden (along with the Vindication) gave such a powerful model for doing so.

### **Confession and the Literary Self-Portrait**

A “feminine construction of subjectivity” and its “relation to nature” as well as the “rational woman” and “rational love” within a family are the recurring themes of female Romanticism as Wollstonecraft first articulated it. As we look specifically at the way the Letters in Sweden operates we will see that a discourse of confession within the framework of the literary self-portrait is the specific textual mechanism within which these ideas are evidenced and articulated. Confession, in particular, is the way in which Wollstonecraft gains “affection” and the rhetorical authority which attends it in order to model, by an authentic discourse of her selfhood and its deeply-held beliefs, the political and ideological changes she wishes to advance. Indeed, only three of the twenty-five letters in this text are arguably without some form of direct authorial confession. Because so much of her self-revelation is bound up with her more straightforward and factual statements about Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, she convinces her readers to follow her not just into the Swedish landscape but also into the interior of her own consciousness as it intertwines with that physical experience. She shows herself to be the knowledgeable speaker who has actually seen and understood the places and things she describes – this is what the waterfall at Frederickstad actually looked like, with its tumbling rocks and thundering cascades – but this is also what I felt and thought while I was entranced by that sight.

As Michel Beaujour has written, “[t]he absence of a continuous narrative in the self-portrait distinguishes it from autobiography. So does

its subordination of narration to a logical deployment, a collation or patching together, of elements under a head that, for the time being, we will call the "thematic" (2). In fact, as we have seen, this type of self-writing is much closer to poetry than to prose and ought to be seen in that light. As Beaujour says, it is full of "cross-references, anaphoras, superimpositions, or correspondences among homologous and substitutable elements" (3). The self-portrait is "metaphorical or poetic" and not linear or teleological. Wollstonecraft herself seems to be also calling our attention to the mixed and discontinuous nature of her writing herself when, in Letter Nineteen, she follows up one of her most intensely confessional passages, a multi-layered and passionate discourse on the sexual oppression of women in general and her faithless lover Gilbert Imlay in particular, with an abrupt paragraph change and a shift in tone announcing a "return to the straight road of observation" (171). The superimposition of the "winding road" of Wollstonecraft's intense interiority with other simple and straightforward descriptions of things operate as the "cross-references" and "correspondences" of Beaujour's definition. These jointures are held together under the common head of Wollstonecraft's overarching and recurrent "thematic" interests -- the nature of being, the status of women, the future of society.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that there is much in the Letters that is purely "the straight road of observation" without any attendant interiority -- that is largely why Wollstonecraft's narrative held its own as a travel guide for so many decades and has even prompted admiring comments from Scandinavians today as to its power and

accuracy as a description of their lands. It must be remembered that Scandinavia was something of a *terra incognita* to late-eighteenth-century readers and Wollstonecraft spends a great deal more than half of her writing in telling straightforward specifics of the cities, people, and natural wonders she encountered on her journey -- the way children are overly dressed, the terrible and strange food, the over-reliance on drink, the hospitality of her hosts, the beauties of the landscape, even the wooden skis, to name only a few of them -- all are bits of knowledge and information gained by reading the *Letters*. And Wollstonecraft planned this. As she wrote in the Advertisement:

My plan was simply to endeavour to give a just view of the present state of countries I have passed through, as far as I could obtain information during so short a residence; avoiding those details which, without being very useful to travellers who follow in the same route, appear very insipid to those who only accompany you in their chair. (62)

The times when Wollstonecraft makes a connection between the interior world of her consciousness and the external world come in unique and unpredictable ways throughout the text. Early in the narrative, it is sublime or awesome sights such as the two waterfalls at Frederickstad and Tröllhattan or the preserved bodies in a church which are most likely to prompt her intensely confessional writings. But as the text moves forward and Wollstonecraft's sorrow and hopelessness increase, many more things, from the sight of a father returning home to his family or even the sight of excessively dirty city streets, prompt outpourings from her heart. The tangled web of Wollstonecraft's own

subjectivity is what will determine where and how the interior and exterior are linked. In one sense, that is why we can call this text a literary self-portrait in the truest sense, because it is the inward and unique connections and associations of her own being which provide the linkages.

An overview of the twenty-five letters which make up the work, (along with an appendix and two supplementary author's notes), show that Wollstonecraft combines the discourse of confession in various ways and to various degrees with virtually every one of these short essays but reaches a kind of climax or crescendo in two places. Letter Fifteen, with its famous episode of the visit to the waterfall at Frederikstad, and Letter Twenty-Two, perhaps the darkest and most specific of her increasingly melancholy letters, form the peaks of the distinctive rhythm of confession, descriptive narrative, and lyric passages that make up the work as a whole.

The confessional rhythm of Wollstonecraft's text often follows a kind of loose pattern. It usually begins with a steadily increasing mention of a some specific aspect of life that is to come or some troubling concern in her thoughts or memory, perhaps the statement that she must leave Fanny behind for the first time in her life (as in Letter Five). That thought next prompts a passage, in the letter following, on Wollstonecraft's concern for Fanny's future life as a woman in a world that doesn't value them. Later, in that same letter, Wollstonecraft takes up the idea of how love and loss, passion and sexuality seem to be ever-intertwined, especially for an intensely feeling person such as herself. In a powerful

passage she combines thoughts of departed friends such as Fanny Blood with her own dear daughter, Fanny:

When a warm heart has received strong impressions, they are not to be effaced. Emotions become sentiments; and the imagination renders even transient sensations permanent, by fondly retracing them. I cannot, without a thrill of delight, recollect views I have seen, which are not to be forgotten, – nor looks I have felt in every nerve which I shall never more meet. The grave has closed over a dear friend, the friend of my youth; still she is present with me, and I hear her soft voice warbling as I stray over the heath....And, smile not, if I add, that the rosy tint of morning reminds me of a suffusion, which will never more charm my sense, unless it reappears on the cheeks of my child. Her sweet blushes I may yet hide in my bosom, and she is still too young to ask why starts the tear, so near akin to pleasure and pain?  
(99-100)

Next, in this pattern of increasing confession, she is prompted by a consideration of the love between a man and woman and the nearness and permanence of death to be reminded of her love for Imlay, in Letter Seven. This thought, then, is taken further in Letter Eight by a passionate defense of her affectionate nature that Imlay seems to be rejecting. The rhythm reaches a crescendo when Wollstonecraft writes one of her powerfully intense interior dialogues wondering what constitutes life itself and what will be the ultimate fate of her own identity or “spirit.” As she describes the enjoyment she finds in rowing out on the sea, she is moved by a contemplation of the forgetfulness such an exercise induces as a false hope for peace that might actually bring a more lasting “annihilation,” death:

...my train of thinking kept time, as it were, with the oars, or I suffered the boat to be carried along by the current, indulging a

pleasing forgetfulness, or fallacious hopes. – How fallacious! yet, without hope, what is to sustain life, but the fear of annihilation – the only thing of which I have ever felt a dread – I cannot bear to think of being no more – of losing myself – though existence is often but a painful consciousness of misery; nay, it appears to me impossible that I should cease to exist, or that this active, restless spirit, equally alive to joy and sorrow, should only be organized dust – ready to fly abroad the moment the spring snaps, or the spark goes out, which kept it together. Surely something resides in this heart that is not perishable – and life is more than a dream.  
(112)

After the climax of that emotional and intensely self-revelatory passage, the confessional pattern achieves a kind of catharsis by the following letter. Letter Nine concludes with an exclamation of “[w]hat a long time it requires to know ourselves” and how her own growth as an individual has gained much from “having turned over in this solitude a new page in the history of my own heart.” (122) This cycle of confession ends on a hopeful and positive note. Such is not always the case, however.

Confession serves an interesting and complex purpose in this narrative as a form of dialogic interaction that invites the answering and completing discourse of its reader – Wollstonecraft seeking that “affection” from readers. Regenia Gagnier, Anne Mellor and others have explored the way in which confession, particularly in texts by women and people who are marginalized in a culture, is an inherently communal act, taking as it does the premise that the self cannot exist without its relation to the “other” within a societal context. Unlike the writings of Wordsworth and Rousseau whose male model of the self is essentially inward, solitary, self-sufficient and solipsistic (and which has dominated

canonical understandings of romantic autobiography until recently), Wollstonecraft's text offers a new way to see the dialogue inherent in self-writing through its unique form of confessional discourse.

Other critics have explored aspects of this divergent understanding of self-writing. Martin Danahay has usefully examined the cost of the triumph of Wordsworth's model over Wollstonecraft's in the Victorian period by showing that the male model of selfhood was particularly damaging to the works of Ruskin and Arnold. He argues that these male autobiographers of the nineteenth century who inherited the Wordsworthian dichotomy of seeing the self in terms of an inner/outer dualism, with its attendant rejection of dialogue and the self in community, were unable to finally successfully achieve a satisfactory discourse of self. On the other hand, Anne Mellor's work in both Romanticism & Gender and other texts has shown the more subversive and hidden discourse of later female romantics who rejected the Wordsworthian model of selfhood but had to deal with the danger of openly embracing Wollstonecraft's counter-model. Mellor says that these writers, Jane Austen in particular, found that the novel was a more congenial place to advance the cause of writing the self with a voice that Wollstonecraft had shown to be authentic.

### **"Significance in the World of Others:" The Exemplary Life**

The recurring elements of confession which exist in Wollstonecraft's text serve several purposes, one of which is the of

negotiation between an “authentic history” of herself in a particular temporal landscape and her hard-wrought identity as a “public self” – a respected and influential author in the political and social world of her time. The negotiation between public and private selfhood is one that all humans must address but in this case Wollstonecraft’s self-presentation is ideologically charged because she employs the compelling rhetorical strategy of “witnessing ” with the story of her own life as to the persuasiveness of the ideology she wishes to advance – her character or “ethos” as the warrant for her claims.

In this way, too, Wollstonecraft’s text offers her life as “exemplary” in one sense. She gives the example of herself as a “text,” if you will, that can be read as instructive – herself as the “proof” of her political and feminist theories about what women are capable of – much like the conduct literature that was so prevalent in western culture at this time. As Gary Kelly has shown, “conduct literature is the context for Revolutionary feminism, defining woman as domestic yet insisting on her human dignity and her importance to both private life and the fate of the nation” (29).

Samuel Richardson must also be seen as a key figure that Wollstonecraft responds to in the self-presentation of the Letters in Sweden because of his central position as leading arbiter of female didacticism in the 18th century. His spectacular success in crossing over from overtly didactic literature to novels which featured female exemplars modeled the shift in the eighteenth century of genres to the “rise” of the novel, particularly as the feminine genre, and the shifting textual

embodiments of subjectivity. Richardson didn't invent the female exemplar *per se* (certainly the lives of the saints, the Virgin Mary, and so forth had existed for many centuries already) but he is largely responsible for the ideology lying behind it in the period after 1750. The omnipresent influence of the Pamela/Clarissa figure sets the dominating example of what a woman should ideally be – a young virginal girl, who is passive and reactive, who defers to fathers, brothers, uncles, who is more moral and upright, who can, by her goodness “reform” men/rakes and control male sexuality, after first suffering from male sexual aggression. She is herself an asexual “angel” whose inevitable martyrdom teaches both the rake and the reader a lesson. In Clarissa's case, death is the ultimate didacticism. The counter-model of “rational woman” and “rational love” that Wollstonecraft offered was a powerful antidote to Richardsonian patriarchy.

One way to judge whether or not a well-known life was exemplary or not is to calculate its effects on those it was meant to influence, as distinguished from lives that were merely imitated for purposes of fashion or faddishness, such as Byron's and Goethe's. I would argue, as does Peter Swaab, that this may be the hidden agenda behind the great number of feminist critics such as Barlowe, Poovey, Tomalin, and Alexander who were deeply critical of Wollstonecraft's life, taking Mary to task for her “messy” behaviors and reading her writings as “failures” because she did not reflect well the status of their own position as university-trained female scholars. Mary was and is a hero to feminists. We may find ourselves wanting her life to remain exemplary even today.

Putting aside our own contemporary reaction to Wollstonecraft's passionate and emotional life narrative, we must also look to the decades which followed the Romantic generation and her immediate literary inheritors, both men and women, to understand further her status as an "exemplar." What might explain the dramatic generic shift away from Romantic autobiography, with its intense self-explorations, later in the nineteenth century? There was a similar earnest belief in the perfectibility of society and the improvement of mankind but where such a belief had been radical and political in the Romantic period -- "revolutionary" -- ideology moved instead to a more domestic, capitalistic and bourgeois ideal during the Victorian period. Indeed, it has been argued that the sociological and literary movements of the late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth centuries did not "disappear" as some have said but instead shifted "underground" in the later nineteenth century. The Victorian period might be one called more suspicious of the dangers inherent in revolutionary Romanticism having lived through its reactionary political aftermath and were more wary (and yet more cagey) in their inheritance of its rhetorical power. That both Thomas Carlyle and Oscar Wilde can be seen as two very different literary heirs of Romantic rhetoric illustrates that point well. So does the title of F.M.L. Thompson's important study of the period -- The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900. The Victorians benefited greatly from the advances attained by their predecessors in the discourse of self and society but found they had to use its rhetoric in different ways and within different genres. Later authors shifted the way this rhetorical power works, making only

implicit the connections between self and subject which had previously been explicit – where Mary wrote and argued as Mary in the Letters in Sweden, Elizabeth Barrett Browning becomes “Aurora Leigh.”

There is an important current critical debate which centers on issues very much related to the ones which Wollstonecraft, arguably the first modern feminist, first raised in her conflation of the confessional self with public advocacy. Currently, the role of personal confession in the critical writing of contemporary feminists is a much-debated topic. And while this debate has largely grown out of concerns about the prevalence of abstract critical practices in current literary theory – seen to some feminists as at the expense of the contestatory and political – is a discussion with important ramifications for my discussion of Wollstonecraft’s rhetorical and ideological strategies in writing her own life in the Letters in Sweden.

Feminist critics – from Hélele Cixous to Jane Tompkins to Lauren Berlant and others – disagree as to the purpose and practice of personal confession within the ideology of feminist writing, as Susan David Bernstein discusses in her article “Confessing Feminist Theory: What’s ‘I’ Got to Do With It?” This isn’t the place for an in-depth discussion of that topic but it is important to emphasize one thing. Whatever their ideological differences almost all of these critics agree that is the centrality of female subjectivity in the practice of feminist discourse, framed by or written through the literal female body, that remains important for literary studies. This discursive practice is seen as essentially contestatory by many of these critics and profoundly political – Sidonie Smith calls such writing “the autobiographical manifesto.” In many ways, we can say

that Mary Wollstonecraft's confessional, lyrical, and polemical text was the original feminist manifesto – declaring the ideology she passionately believed in through the rhetorical practice of her autobiographical “I.”

Such a mixture of the public political and philosophical arguments with a literary narrative joins the long eighteenth-century tradition of “philosophical” or “political” poetry, combining self and nation which this “Augustan” age saw as their shared inheritance with the societies of classical antiquity. Indeed, the major canonical literary works of the period, such as those of Pope, Dryden, and Johnson, take these concerns as their proper sphere for discussion. On the surface, this parallel between Wollstonecraft's travel memoir and major canonical poetry of the eighteenth-century may seem somewhat tenuous but it is less ephemeral than may appear on the surface.

Peter Swaab has recently identified the poetic fragment which Wollstonecraft includes in Letter Ten (*“Like the lone shrub at random cast,/That sighs and trembles at each blast!”*), which both Richard Holmes and Carol Poston could not identify, as a slight mis-quotation of Goldsmith's “The Traveller, or a Prospect of Society.” Goldsmith's poem has many affinities with Wollstonecraft's prose narrative (not the least of which is its status, at least partially, as a reply to a poem of Samuel Johnson's which includes an excursion to Sweden). “The Traveller” has an overall concern with the condition of society, and a melancholy traveler who is “unfriended” in the very first line, who values “the smooth current of domestic joy” and who finds his journey *“Vain, very vain, my weary search to find/ That bliss which only centers in the mind ”*

(lines 423-24). As Marshall Brown writes of Goldsmith's poem, "Everything...in the poem points precisely to the discovery of the individual consciousness as the solution to the problems of the commonalty..." (Brown 115-17). Wollstonecraft was very aware of the tradition of public literature in her time but seems to be drawn to both the transitional "preromantic" writing of someone like Goldsmith, and the timelessness of Shakespeare's explorations of the self in the world, as her frequent references to Shakespeare in the Letters attest. Wollstonecraft was always aware of her public self as a writer and rhetor. In the Letters in Sweden she strove to make that public self "real."

### **"Dreaming About One's Own Life:" The Private Sphere**

If the tradition of public literature and "the good man speaking" forms one aspect of Wollstonecraft's writing enterprise, there is also another important tradition which co-exists with it and which forms the other half of the shared inner/outer discourse. As we have said, the discourse of the literary self-portrait offers a way for a self to employ "true memory-thinking," the imaginative living within the time of both memory and a present inner musing about that memory. This type of meditative writing might fruitfully be called the same thing as "reverie." This fragmentary and dream-like state invokes both remembrance and reflection, as the Oxford English Dictionary attests. As early as 1653, the word was used in concert with dreaminess: "I indeed desire Men to look

upon [this] rather as a Dream or Resvery than a rational Proposition.” (OED, def. 3, 1687, Petty, Pol. Arith. (1690), 65) Or, as John Locke put it in the Essay on Human Understanding (1690 II, xix, 1695) “When Ideas float in our mind, without any Reflection or regard of the Understanding, it is that which the French call Resvery; our Language has scarce a name for it.” (OED) The emphasis put by both these writers on the undirected or un- “regarded” quality of this writing puts stress on its association with dreams – these are thoughts said to come unbidden and undirected, much like Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” In addition, reverie is associated with memory, or as the OED puts it “to contemplate or recall” (recollected in tranquillity?) This association of both undirected thinking and pleasurable remembrance is very close to the type of memory-thought that occurs in self-writing such as Wollstonecraft’s.

Bakhtin calls such a state “dreaming about one’s own life.” In his words, this state is ontologically related to being itself, it is the fragmentary discourse of the “real” inner person, her “being” or “soul.” (Bakhtin calls this inner being the “I-for-myself” as opposed to the “I-for-another.”) This inner self organizes that subject’s self-understanding without having the ability to narrate that life in any kind of unified way – the “valued other” who lives within oneself and who shares self-making provides the completed self-narration. The discourse of this “I-for-myself” or inner self-making voice remains stuttering and fragmentary, full of gaps, juxtapositions, and silences – just as is recorded in the form of the literary self-portrait. As Bakhtin puts it:

The *fragments* of my life as I experienced them from within myself ("fragments" from the standpoint of the biographical whole) are, after all, capable of gaining only the inner unity of my *I-for-myself*....For only the yet-to-be-achieved unity of the *I-for-myself* is immanent to the life that is lived and experienced from within. The inner principle of unity is not suited to biographical narration: my *I-for-myself* is incapable of *narrating* anything.<sup>7</sup>

The moment the "I-for-myself" is able to achieve unity is the moment when life is no longer "immanent", or, in other words, when there is no more life yet to be achieved. Perhaps that is why retrospective, canonical life narratives which propose to be able to narrate a "unity" of a subject's are, in both a literal and figurative sense, dead.

Not surprisingly, then, there is very little biographical retrospection in Wollstonecraft's Letters in Sweden other than several early and melancholy allusions to what she witnessed during the Terror in France and a reference to her lost friend Fanny Blood. The book does virtually no recounting of what specifically has made her the way she is or even any general narration of the barest facts of her life – even daughter Fanny and maid Marguerite are almost incidentally mentioned in the text. The Letters is a good example of the type of life-narration that utterly rejects an ability to provide unity or teleology and instead stays as close as possible to the inner voice of contemplation and recollection.

Indeed, in exact contrast to a backward-looking and retrospective orientation, Wollstonecraft's confessions and personal disclosures have most to do with her states of mind as they thematically cluster around the idea of "futurity," (to use her own word), for herself, Fanny, and society in general. Wollstonecraft repeatedly asks, what is the trend or drift for my

life and the world if things are this way now? What can be hoped for or predicted based on what I see and feel now? However, since so much of this type of contemplation is both inward and unknown or unknowable (like the future), it is the concrete physicality of nature within her confessional reveries which provides both an external prompt for her internal questionings as well as an outward symbol for all that is beautiful, grand, mysterious, and also finally unknowable. And much like the definition of the sublime itself, many of the external and natural prompts for her reveries are either fear- and awe-inspiring reminders of mortality and the evanescence of life – such as the sepulchres in a church or the powerful waterfalls – or things that can bring her either hope or forgetfulness, such as Fanny’s innocent play or the dull beating of oars on the sea.

Bakhtin has given some helpful categories for life writing of this kind. Of the several general kinds of “biographical” texts which Bakhtin identifies, Wollstonecraft’s Letters can be said to fall into an “adventurous-heroic” style. This kind of life writing carries three overall thematic threads, to “have significance in the world of others,” “to be loved,” and to live “to the full” life’s many ‘fabular’ possibilities. As Bakhtin puts it:

Adventurous-heroic biograph[y]. . . is grounded in the will or drive to be a hero – to have significance in the world of others; in the will to be loved; in the will to live life’s “fabular” possibilities, the manifoldness of inner and outer life, to the full. . . still not cut off from the world of others, still participating in the being of otherness – needing this otherness and sustaining its strength through the authoritativeness of this otherness. (156)

Bakhtin writes that "this form comes closest to dreaming about one's own life" (159). Wollstonecraft's Letters in Sweden can be called just such a thing – "a dream of her own life" – in much the way Bakhtin describes. Her "drive" to be significant in the world of others is the essence of her life's career and writings; her "will to be loved" in her ongoing and unanswered appeals to Imlay; and of her will to "live to the full life's 'fabular' possibilities" we need go no farther than her adventurous journey to Scandinavia in the first place. By "participating in the being of otherness," Wollstonecraft's solitary and individualistic search for meaning and identity in this text never becomes solipsistic or "cut off from the world of others." She models the way self and other share identity formation by modulating between a reverie-like narration of her inner states with outward appeals to nature, her lover, and "futuraity," – and, by extension, to the answering discourse of her future readers, as well. In this way, she sketches out the type of shared yet solitary, inward yet outward-seeing, life writing that becomes the norm for Romantic autobiography and which is essentially feminist in its valuing of shared or communal forms of identity. As Eleanor L. Nicholes has written of Wollstonecraft:

Her mode, her style, is intensely personal. There was the belief, upon which her practice was founded, that truth was to be discovered, or validated, by searching into one's own experiences and thought upon the meaning of those experiences. In this she anticipated much of the attitude and tone of the Romantic period, to which Shelley and her daughter belonged. Because this personal mode was so firmly established by the following generation we tend to overlook the innovations in Mary Wollstonecraft's work. . . She is aware from the beginning of speaking as a woman... (45)

“Speaking as a woman” and “dreaming about one’s own life” finally then can be said to link the identity-forming discourse of internal reverie with the outward will to “be a hero,” to have love and purpose in the world of others.

### **Romanticism’s Eye**

In order to show whether or not her life text had “significance in the world of others” we will gather together here a brief overview of some of the influences that critics have traced directly to Mary Wollstonecraft in the important and influential literary period that followed her (and not even to mention those effects, which surely exist, which lie beyond the literary, at least for now). As we recall, Wollstonecraft’s reputation suffered greatly from the truthful admissions about her life that were written in her husband William Godwin’s memoirs. However, there remained some interesting and telling instances of public approval and interest in her life, which ironically did come from her life narration but not in the value of its discourse of self or the content of its ideas. (There were, of course, many sympathetic private writings, but that is separate issue.) The primary open approval for Wollstonecraft that remained after her death focused on Mary solely as a doomed and suffering woman, perhaps the first, “pre-Byronic” version of the newly emerging fascination with the tragic hero, and certainly a version of the wailing woman as jilted lover. Richard Holmes points out that in 1816 the Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University (a Dr. Thomas Brown)

"published a poem entitled *The Wanderer in Norway . . .*" (42) which very much echoes the specific of Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian journey. Brown saw Mary as an exemplary woman – but as a noble romantic failure, the heroine of tragedy, and the bereft woman crying for her faithless lover in the moonlight.

More direct literary examples of influence also exist. The first major study of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's life and work, written in 1927 by John Livingston Lowes and called *The Road to Xanadu*, documented Wollstonecraft's many obvious influences on Coleridge. Richard Holmes, who is also a major biographer of Coleridge's, echoes Lowes' findings by saying:

Wollstonecraft's description of the falls and cataracts at Frederikstad in Letter 15, and those at Trollhättan in Letter 17, show close similarities to Coleridge's hypnotic description of the sacred river in Xanadu... Coleridge was deeply touched by this picture of the solitary woman lamenting her lost lover in such a wild and distant place... This must surely lead us to speculate whether the "deep romantic chasm" of Kubla Khan was not imaginatively located, at least in part, in that far north country of Scandinavia; and whether Coleridge did not – at some level of poetic correspondence – have Mary Wollstonecraft in mind when he wrote those inspired and thrilling lines:

*A savage place! and holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover! (40-1)*

There are also many other critical discussions of Coleridge's debt (or plagiarism) to others, including Wollstonecraft. However, Jamie Barlowe in 1995 takes a new tack on this issue, discussing Coleridge's much-reported penchant for plagiarism with respect to Wollstonecraft in new

terms. Barlowe calls his use of Wollstonecraft's images a kind of invited sharing of subjectivity -- "plagiarism with a difference" in her terms.

Another aspect of Wollstonecraft's influence first arose with Henry H. Wasser's 1945 study entitled "Notes on the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* by William Blake." In this study Wasser traced Wollstonecraft's influence "as writer and personal acquaintance" on Blake. Michael Ackland in 1976 echoes Wasser's findings in an article entitled, "The Embattled Sexes: Blake's debt to Wollstonecraft in *The Four Zoas*. This article "establishes the pervasiveness of Wollstonecraft's influence" on Blake (127).

Holmes also discusses the kinship between Wollstonecraft's use of landscape and that of Wordsworth and Coleridge. While Holmes sympathizes with some critics who become impatient with Mary's endless landscape descriptions, yet he says "if we compare them with the kind of verse landscape description soon to be written by Wordsworth and, especially, Coleridge, one can appreciate the kind of impact they had. A masterly poem like "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," composed by Coleridge at Stowey in 1797, seems to show an almost direct influence in places. . .[and there] is evidence to suggest that Wordsworth's narrative poem "Ruth", written in Germany in 1799, drew on the story of Imlay and Wollstonecraft" (39).

Next, Godwin's passage in the memoir of Mary's life in which he describes her as shedding her depression and unhappiness like shedding her skin as "a serpent on a rock" is seen by several critics as closely linked with a passage from Shelley's *Hellas* "which carries forward Mary

Wollstonecraft's hopes for happiness in a better world, like a flame passed from hand to hand" (52) and which uses the same "serpent shedding its skin" imagery.

And finally more than one critic has called Mary's writing "Keatsian" in its description of mental states in nature. As Wollstonecraft wrote in a letter to her sister Everina in 1787, "I am going to be the first of a new genus." She was more right than she could ever have imagined.

### **Letters and the Development of the Novel**

The epistolary novel is a literary form which works in much the same way as Wollstonecraft's Letters in Sweden by relying on the seeming sincerity of its "unshaped" and "to the minute" narrative style. And while that novel form came into being largely with the novel's "rise" in the eighteenth century and was used effectively by a number of authors, both male and female, it can be argued that no one had greater success with the form than Samuel Richardson. His highly successful and influential epistolary novels of the mid-1700s, Pamela and Clarissa (and, to a lesser extent, Sir Charles Grandison), use the form to incorporate a sense of time within their narratives as a compressed version of the present tense alone, with no authorial or narratorial perspective providing context, an omniscient perspective, or, it is implied, any guiding or shaping of events and feelings as they occur. Much like "real-life" writing such as Wollstonecraft's travel memoir, this narrative stance disrupts the implied teleology of more traditional narrative forms since

endpoints other than heaven alone cannot be known in advance (although heaven, of course, was endpoint enough for many). Instead, this style of writing puts readers radically in the present knowing of the characters alone, apt to “learn” what the characters do through the progress of its episodic events and radically not in the god-like knowing of the creator-author. This novel form, then, gives such authors great, though disguised, power to shape and control the “messages” learned by characters and, by extension, to readers. For an overtly didactic novelist like Richardson with intentions to “teach” moral lessons to a largely female readership such a form could hardly have been better suited. And while it is true that all novelists share the power of shaping their own narratives, it is not surprising that its heyday as a literary form coincided with the dominance of the sentimental movement in the second half of the eighteenth century, with its attendant emphasis on didacticism and moralistic literature. The rise of realism that marks the nineteenth-century novel is, in some ways, a reaction against these very impulses.

Wollstonecraft’s radical re-orienting of the testimony of self to effect both domestic and political change make her text a central influence on various aspects of literary development in the decades which followed her (not to mention the political movements she influenced as well). But now we can also see that a relatively overlooked aspect of her literary influence goes beyond Romantic poetry alone and also impacts the development of the novel. The contemporaneous shift toward the novel as the major literary genre in the western society was a shift largely fueled by the women novelists of the period from Jane Austen to George

Eliot/Mary Ann (or Marian) Evans and the Brontë sisters, in the generation following Wollstonecraft. Letters in Sweden influenced this emerging genre for many reasons, not the least of which was its revolutionary female construction of selfhood which offered a powerful “counter-public sphere” in which to contest notions of both female lives and political ideology. And the Letters is likely to have served as at least one model of a literary and narrative text which contained both an authentic and rhetorically persuasive discourse of self. It was Virginia Woolf who first began the project of examining whether or not female writers looked particularly to the example of earlier women writers – “foremothers” – as literary guides and mentors. Other critics such as Gilbert, Gubar, and Showalter have furthered such a study. “Foremothers” such as Wollstonecraft help explain and illuminate the sudden emergence of powerful, canonical woman writers in the nineteenth century.

As the new century dawned after Wollstonecraft’s early death, the language of self, moral efficacy, and public rhetoric shifts. In the later decades of the Victorian period, this language and these self-portrait texts become simultaneously more heavy in their overt moralizing and more veiled in their relationship to the authorial selves which stand behind them. There is a more full retreat to the fictional narrative form, a retreat from intense self-disclosure as bourgeois ideology triumphs altogether. But we must not forget Mary Wollstonecraft’s central role in making that ideology of self-presentation central and rhetorically compelling. We see her hand “stretched out” to us even today.

## Notes to Chapter Two

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<sup>1</sup> No one can quite agree as to the best way of shortening Wollstonecraft's long title -- several different critics use several different abbreviations. I find "Letters in Sweden" and "Letters" most satisfactory for my purposes here.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Kelly does an excellent job of carefully elucidating the relationship between Wollstonecraft's authorial voice and her growing skill as a professional writer.

<sup>3</sup> Both Myers and Kelly do a generally thorough explication of Wollstonecraft's work, as far as they go, but both don't push their analysis of the Letters hard enough to see beneath its received critical place. Myers, influenced by Poovey and Armstrong, looks for oppression and finds it. Kelly gets overly caught up in a biographical chronology -- Mary was miserable both before and after this trip, therefore she must be "tired" in her attempt to write this text. Its difference, by this reasoning, must be attributed to negative causes rather than other, more positive, possibilities.

<sup>4</sup> However, I would disagree with such a designation for Burke's argument. It is far more of an "emotional appeal" than an "ethical appeal" in its style of argument. Indeed, Corbett includes a section of Burke's "French Revolution" polemic as an example of the classical emotional appeal. Wollstonecraft is a far more fitting example of an ethos speaker in this particular text.

<sup>5</sup> Art and Answerability, 155

<sup>6</sup> Myers, "Mary Wollstonecraft's 'Letters Written...in Sweden:' Toward Romantic Autobiography."

<sup>7</sup> Art and Answerability, 154-5

**“Inward evermore/To outward--  
so in life, and so in art”:**

Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh

The six canonical male poets of the Romantic period are usually given credit for the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century turn toward a new interest in issues of the self in literature, with help from their continental cousins Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. As we have seen, though, Mary Wollstonecraft's Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark is a no less foundational text than those of her male contemporaries for this very large change in understood notions of the ontological status of the self in relation to society, nature, and the cosmos.

But beyond simply recuperating Wollstonecraft's place in this dialogue, however, we must also see that the example of Wollstonecraft's text initiated the first mainstream, sustained female tradition in literature. Specifically, Wollstonecraft's work authorized and inspired a counter-dialogue of the discourse of selfhood that ran underground alongside the one best known to the main English tradition, the one dominated by the six male canonical Romantic poets, until the prominent emergence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the early Victorian period.

Joining the discourse of the male Romantic poets was their friend and critic, Robert Southey (or “Bob” as Byron calls him in Don Juan), who, during this same time period, began to critically codify the emerging genre of autobiography (indeed he popularized if not entirely invented the term).<sup>1</sup> We shouldn’t be surprised, then, to find that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have inherited a dominant notion of modern selfhood which has been framed by the impressive combined discourse of Rousseau, Goethe, Blake, Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and Byron, and is gendered male in its insistence on solitary individuality and the self-made, self-recursive mind, (to name only a few of its distinctive qualities). Autobiography, which had scarcely existed before then, quickly became an extremely popular genre for prominent men to retrospectively recite their life’s history and accomplishments<sup>2</sup> – indeed, the whole of the nineteenth century is said to be autobiography’s “golden age.” The shape of narrative autobiography that emerged from this historical confluence of male literary and critical discourse has remained the model for what is taken to be the “acceptable” form for the self in text.

But there is evidence that women readers and writers of even the Romantics’ own time period could only find a partial reflection of their selfhood in the model offered by these influential writers. The counter-dialogue of a more feminized version of the self had a voice that existed, albeit much more quietly, in the immediate decades following Wollstonecraft’s death and vilification and is only now being explored. Anne Mellor’s important and influential book Romanticism & Gender is perhaps the most important of these recent critical explorations. Mellor’s

characterization of “feminine Romanticism” is not only a welcome corrective to the dominant masculinist paradigm in Romantic studies but an apt and useful definition of a large current of literary and philosophical thought in the period, previously neglected. By rightly placing Wollstonecraft as the initiator of this female form of discourse, Mellor has helped anchor a new critical conversation regarding issues of the self, nature, and ideology in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite its marginalized nature, both within English studies and in the time period itself, there is no doubting that this female model of selfhood surfaced triumphantly into the English literary mainstream nearly fifty years after Wollstonecraft’s death in the form of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh.

Aurora Leigh, published in 1856, was its author’s masterpiece and, like Wollstonecraft’s Letters, an immediate publishing success (if not its author’s most popular work – The Sonnets from the Portuguese stubbornly retain that title for Barrett Browning). Written at the height of Barrett Browning’s maturity as a poet and a woman, it is nothing less than an “exuberant” (Mermin), “gender-solvent, genre-absorbing” (Tucker) and loquacious telling of the story of the life of a woman poet named Aurora Leigh who seeks to find a place in the world – both as a artist with what she feels is a God-ordained vocation to write poetry and as a human being who also longs for love. “[A] work of overwhelming fluency” and the “fitting masterpiece” of the Victorian period’s most famous poet, Aurora Leigh is “by turns irresistible and interminable” (Tucker 62). The narrative of the tale follows Aurora from her tragically

short yet golden Italian childhood through a cold English upbringing as an orphan in her aunt's home. Aurora grows to adulthood alongside her Christian socialist cousin Romney with whom she struggles ideologically over the proper sphere for social action – good deeds or art. After rejecting Romney's offer of marriage because he is wrong about both poetry and the worth of a woman's life and work, Aurora goes out to make her way alone in the world, succeeding in gaining fame as a poet yet finding that vocation alone, no matter how noble, does not suffice her great need to give love as well. Eventually, she returns to Italy and, realizing her mistakes, is rewarded with a model marriage with the by now blinded and chastened Romney. In addition, Aurora Leigh contains a tale-within-a-tale of the sentimental and melodramatic life story of a lower-class woman named Marian Erle whom both Romney and Aurora try to help and befriend, with mixed results. The final section of the text is long discussion of the right relationship between love, vocation, art, and God and a near dream-vision of the "New Jerusalem" that will result when the world, taking their example, will be bettered: "The world waits/For help. Beloved, let us love so well,/ Our work shall still be sweeter for our love,/ And still our love be sweeter for our work,/ And both commended, for the sake of each,/ By all true workers and true lovers born." (IX.923-8)

Such a short synopsis, though, hardly does justice to this verse-novel which seeks nothing less than to be a nation- and self-making epic whose narrative mythos will initiate an entirely new feminist tradition and whose author-poet takes her place with Homer, Virgil, and Dante.<sup>4</sup> Barrett Browning did not suffer from the sense of being "too late," as her

male contemporary poets did,<sup>5</sup> coming after the great romantic poets and as inheritors of the long, male literary tradition – rather, she felt she would and could be “a little taller than Homer,” even as a young girl, because the mainstream of English literature so completely missed including the female experience. This “alternatively epic, Victorian-feminist program for achieving the modern ends of writing,”<sup>6</sup> Aurora Leigh is also the brilliant grand-daughter of Wollstonecraft’s Letters Written in Sweden, a narrative vision of female selfhood that both re-tells and epicizes its author’s own life as the ground for promoting social and ideological change.

### **Wollstonecraft and Barrett Browning**

There has been a recent critical re-evaluation of Barrett Browning’s life and work in the past decade as even feminist critics are beginning to realize that they have mis-read and overlooked many of the radical and revolutionary aspects of her mature work. Marjorie Stone, Margaret Reynolds, Herbert F. Tucker, and Dorothy Mermin have all advanced this project and nearly all have taken earlier critics to task for making the mistake of seeing Barrett Browning too often through Victorian stereotypes, mistakenly re-inscribing traditionally patriarchal attitudes about her “passivity.”

There is no doubt that Barrett Browning has one of the most well-known biographies of any major author of the nineteenth century, in part due to the emerging discourse of celebrity in the period – and no doubt

much of it does read like a bad melodrama; the long seclusion, the imprisoning, dictatorial father, the theatrical escape with her artist-lover, the heavenly home in sunny Italy, the birth of the beloved son (after age 40), and the tragic, early death in the arms of her beloved. But her long illness is now believed to have been quite real (most likely tuberculosis of the spine) and not "psychological" as had been implied by many critics who seem to find that Barrett Browning is just too unfashionably "conventional" to be much embraced. She appears to have really achieved a "marriage of true minds" with Robert Browning, with whom she lived together happily and fulfillingly for many years. Indeed, they wrote most of their best poetry when together and Barrett Browning never renounced her strong Christian faith. The recent feminist critics who have taken Barrett Browning to task for these qualities imply that because of them she must be "conservative" and "bourgeois," impervious to the plight of the poor, to quote one critic.<sup>7</sup> However, any careful reading of the text's in-depth and outraged sympathy with the plight of the suffering, especially women, is its own evidence against such charges, as is indeed the rest of Barrett Browning's body of political verse, most particularly "The Cry of the Children" and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point."

But there are deeper connections than merely a shared sense of political justice and feminism which imply that one of her most important early influences was Mary Wollstonecraft herself. Marjorie Stone, the most recent of Barrett Browning's critical re-evaluators, repeatedly calls attention not only to the strongly radical and feminist elements of Aurora Leigh but to the fact that her links with Wollstonecraft

are plain yet “the connections between Wollstonecraft’s writings and Barrett Browning’s mature work remain unexplored.” (41) In other words, we can infer that Barrett Browning knew and embraced her “grand-daughterhood.”

In a startlingly direct evocation of one of the most famous passages in Wollstonecraft’s Letters, Barrett Browning describes the lost paradise of her Italian home using several of the same images that Wollstonecraft uses to describe the sublime and tumultuous waterfall at Frederickstad and her own soul’s longing for a kind of transcendence and fusion.

Barrett Browning writes:

Not a grand nature. Not my chestnut-woods  
Of Vallombrosa, cleaving by the spurs  
To the precipices. Not my headlong leaps  
Of waters, that cry out for joy or fear  
In leaping through the palpitating pines,  
Like a while soul tossed out to eternity  
With thrills of time upon it.

(1.615-621)

This passage recalls, with much poetic compression, the crucial scene in Letter Fifteen of Wollstonecraft’s Letters in Sweden in which a majestic waterfall within a beautiful pine forest prompts Wollstonecraft to reflect on eternity and her soul’s place within it. As she wrote:

I have often mentioned the grandeur, but I feel myself unequal to the task of conveying an idea of the beauty and elegance of the scene when the spiral tops of the pines are loaded with ripening seed, and the sun gives a glow to their light green tinge...Reaching the cascade, or rather cataract, the roaring of which had a long time announced its vicinity, my soul was hurried into a new train of reflections. The impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cavities which mocked the exploring eye, produced an equal activity in my mind: my thoughts darted from earth to

heaven...viewing it, my soul rose, with renewed dignity, above its cares – grasping at immortality...-- I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come. (152-3)

The “chestnut-woods,” the “spurs” cleaving to “precipices,” the “headlong leaps/Of waters,” the “pines,” and most especially the “soul tossed out to eternity” evoke the specific images of the crucial moment in Wollstonecraft’s work where she most climactically binds her rhetorical authority with the intimacy of her deepest feelings as a “soul” who longs for eternity and who hopes for some solace, some answer, from the sublime in nature.

But there is also an even more overt relationship that Barrett Browning had with Wollstonecraft’s writings and ideas. The record of her vast correspondence makes numerous references to Wollstonecraft. She was very influenced by reading Wollstonecraft as a girl of 12 or 13 and composed in 1822, as a teenager, her own text called “Fragment of an ‘Essay on Women.’” She wrote to her friend Nancy Russell Mitford that she loved reading Mary Wollstonecraft’s writings and “was a great admirer at thirteen of the Rights of woman. I know too certain letters published under her name: but Godwin’s Life of her I never saw & shd. like much to do so.”<sup>8</sup> The “certain letters” can only mean the text we know now as Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, a text that carries many echoes throughout Aurora Leigh, beyond even Barrett Browning’s overt admiration of its author, which we shall see in depth as this chapter continues.

In a later letter, she also talks about how deeply impressed she was by Wollstonecraft’s “courage” in the face of the personal attacks she had to

endure in order to gain a public voice for what Barrett Browning calls “the truth.” And as with Wollstonecraft’s contemporary readers, it is not just her “doctrine” but her “eloquence,” her rhetorical power, that make her “dear” to Barrett Browning:

Mary Wolstonecraft! (sic) – yes. I used to read Mary Wolstonecraft, – ....and “quite agree with her.” Her eloquence and her doctrine were equally dear to me....[However] it wd. be very painful to me to...be submitted to the vile insults & insinuations,...such as we know her to have suffered from. But then I admire her all the more!! I mean, all the more for being brave beyond my capacity...when all is done, I admire her courage in speaking the truth as she conceives of it, at her personal cost, – I admire *that*, in the abstract precisely as I admire Godiva’s sacrifice for the redemption of her fellow citizens. Certainly there are social restraints which are necessary, – & I do not decry them. But the tendency to exalt the form above the substance, the figment above the essence, I see everywhere & with indignation & fear. Is reputation to be dearer than virtue?<sup>9</sup>

It should not be lost that it is in a postscript to this same letter that Barrett Browning, perhaps not coincidentally, first writes of her intention of composing “a sort of novel-poem,” the text that became Aurora Leigh.

Another link to Wollstonecraft is found in a long letter written to Robert Browning very shortly before their epistolary romance reached its climactic elopement. As their intimacy with each other grew, Barrett Browning wrote to him at some length about her formative years and how Mary Wollstonecraft formed an influential part of her self-education in her father’s library:

Papa used to say. . . “Dont read Gibbon’s history – not a proper book – Dont read ‘Tom Jones’ – & none of the books on this side, mind” – So I was very obedient & never touched the books on *that* side, & only read instead, Tom Paine’s Age of Reason, & Voltaire’s Philosophical Dictionary, & Hume’s Essays, & Werther & Rousseau,

& Mary Woolstoncraft. . . books, which I never suspected of looking towards, & which were not "on *that side*" certainly, but which did as well.<sup>10</sup>

The very earliest reference to Mary Wollstonecraft in the large record of Barrett Browning's correspondence actually comes in a letter she received from her mother, who teases her, at the age of 16, about her "& Mrs. Wolstonecrafts (sic) system" when discussing the wedding of a relative. Mary Moulton-Barrett writes that she hopes the bride "has no visionary hopes of finding [marriage] upon yours & Mrs Wolstonecrafts system; if so, it may *at best* be anticipated that she will *oftener* find herself wrong than *right*: however it may do very well for an *old maids singleness of will* &c. I would not put you out of conceit with it, as long as it is yr. intention to belong to the sisterhood."<sup>11</sup> It is perhaps telling that Barrett Browning's mother, who led a conventional existence as a wife and mother, bearing 12 children before dying at an early age, warns her that Wollstonecraft's way of viewing the relationship between men and women is doomed to failure without the special circumstances of "sisterhood" only. Real marriage tells strong-minded women they are "oftener wrong than right," according to Mrs. Moulton-Barrett.

Margaret Reynolds says that the "juxtaposition of Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft" are the "formative influences" (16) of Aurora Leigh. But Reynolds overly essentializes Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft as emblematic only of gender-based poetics by saying merely that they reflect Barrett Browning's "ambivalent relation to the traditions of poetry." Rather, both can be seen as important precursors<sup>12</sup> of Barrett Browning's but Wollstonecraft's influence extends beyond Aurora's overt feminism to

the very nature of textual self-construction. While Wordsworth's The Prelude clearly was a model for one way of framing "the growth of a poet's mind," it must be remembered that Barrett Browning contemplated her "verse-novel" as early as 1844. The Prelude wasn't published until 1850, making it a useful and innovative example but not a formative influence at the deepest level of her self-construction, as Wollstonecraft's writing surely was. We need to see that Wollstonecraft is too often taken as the purveyor of revolutionary feminism only to the women writers who followed and admired her -- the "Rights of woman" are much easier to trace in their echoes. But we must read deeper to see that the "certain letters published under her name" held an equally powerful yet more subtle sway in the period and in the lives of many writers, both men and women. In a passage that strikingly mirrors the way Letters in Sweden operates, Reynolds describes Aurora Leigh's textual self-representation as multi-layered, but, she writes, as the narrative of her past and present begin to converge in Book 5, her "lyrical reveries are not longer presented as commentary on past events but take on a new, more urgently self-analytical character. Each aside or discursive passage is dedicated to testing and questioning, to exercises in self-recognition and self-definition; and it is the very act of writing up her journal entries which becomes the instrument of that process." (34) Such a description could be used, almost exactly, to describe the Letters in Sweden, as well.

Beside these examples, the most overtly Wollstonecraftian passages in Aurora Leigh occur in Book 1 as Aurora gives the outlines of her mother and father's lives and her childhood in Italy and England. She

describes her coldly conventional aunt as living “A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,/ Accounting that to leap from perch to perch/ Was act and joy enough for any bird” (1.305-6) using language similar to Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Aurora’s acidly ironic description of the conventional female education also echoes Wollstonecraft:

I read a score of books on womanhood  
To prove, if women do not think at all,  
They may teach thinking. . .  
. . . – books that boldly assert  
Their right of comprehending husband’s talk  
When not too deep, and even of answering  
With pretty ‘may it please you,’ or ‘so it is’ –  
Their rapid insight and fine aptitude,  
Particular worth and general missionariness,  
As long as they keep quiet by the fire  
And never say ‘no’ when the world says ‘ay’. . .<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps most striking yet most undiscussed in this regard is the muffled echoes that can be found in Aurora Leigh of the story of Wollstonecraft’s real-life family. Aurora’s father is called “an austere Englishman,/ Who, after a dry life-time spent at home/ In college-learning, law, and parish talk,/ Was flooded with a passion unaware,/ His whole provisioned and complacent past/ Drowned out from him that moment.” (1.65-68) And while we do know that Elizabeth Barrett Browning had not read William Godwin’s Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft’s life in 1842 by the evidence of the letter she wrote her friend, we must suspect she had read it by 1854. Such a description is too strikingly apt a description of the dry and bookish philosopher William

Godwin's heartbreaking description of the passionate love he found and lost with the warm and tempestuous Mary Wollstonecraft. As Barrett Browning continues:

My father, who through love had suddenly  
 Thrown off the old conventions, broken loose  
 From chin-bands of the soul, like Lazarus,  
 Yet had no time to learn to talk and walk  
 Or grow anew familiar with the sun --  
 Who had reached to freedom, not to action, lived  
 But lived as one entranced, with thoughts, not aims --  
 Whom love had unmade from a common man  
 But not completed to an uncommon man -- 14

By the 1850's, Godwin's sad life after Wollstonecraft's death as a broken and emotionally remote man was a well-known story, a man "unmade" by love.

The two young daughters Mary left behind also suffered greatly from the loss of their mother, as Barrett Browning likely knew well. An echo of their story also sounds in the text. The ringleted little girl who was left motherless in Aurora Leigh was "scarcely four years old," the exact age of the young orphaned Fanny Imlay, Wollstonecraft's daughter who figured so often in her thoughts while traveling in Scandinavia. One can imaginatively step into a scene in the Godwin household that must have been quite like this sad one Barrett Browning describes: "Still I sit and feel/ My father's slow hand, when she had left us both,/ Stroke out my childish curls upon his knee." (1.19-21) It would be hard to briefly encapsulate the way Godwin's Memoir registers its grief and loss. It is a text which strives so often for a "rationality" that its effect is mostly

cumulative. Yet while Godwin strives for a dry and dispassionate tone in describing Mary's life and the effect of her loss on himself and his family, the occasional passage rings out with his sadness and despair: "it is impossible not to feel a pang at the recollection of her orphan children!" (219)

The other child that Wollstonecraft left, of course, at her tragic and untimely death was the infant whom she died in giving birth to, the future Mary Shelley. The descriptions of Aurora's "mother-want" and her strange fascination with the prominent portrait of her mother echo Mary Shelley's descriptions of her longing to know her mother and searching for evidence of her in many places, even to the point of reading her writings while sitting by her graveside, as Shelley's many biographers have noted. William St. Clair<sup>15</sup> notes that Godwin always kept a large portrait of Wollstonecraft in his study, particularly as he wrote the Memoir. One can imagine the young Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin staring at such a portrait, like the young Aurora Leigh, having only that representation for a mother. It is interesting, as well, that Barrett Browning casts Aurora as the "daughter" in this family narrative, perhaps seeing herself as a woman writer, both generationally and culturally, also the too-little-nurtured and too-soon-left child of a powerful revolutionary mother.

But Wollstonecraft lives on not just in the story of her family's life but in the legacy she modeled in her textual self-constructions. She used writing about herself in a factual and concrete setting in the Letters in Sweden as an effective rhetorical device to gain authority for herself as the

speaker in a *ethos* form of argument. Her ideological and polemical ends were best served by offering her inner self-making discourse, in all its affective and heartfelt “intimacy,” as well as the concrete experiences of a particular part of her own life, as the proof of the theories she advanced on the intelligence, courage, and competence of women – indeed, their equality with men – and the political and social injustices which too often awaited them. As William J. Fox wrote in the Westminster Review in 1831 (quoted in the headnote to chapter two), it is Mary Wollstonecraft’s “eloquent history” (my emphasis) even more than her polemics, or “eloquent lessons,” which teaches us the “better purpose” of our lives. This chapter will show the way in which Barrett Browning took that purpose very much to heart.

### **Romantic Victorians**

The rhetorical situation in which Barrett Browning was situated is striking in its outward dissimilarities with Wollstonecraft’s, yet even so, Barrett Browning’s position as female author held many of the same pitfalls. The dissimilarity primarily lies in her status as the best-known and most widely-admired poet of her day. At the time of Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning did not have to seek to carve a place for her voice in a male-dominated discourse or find herself perceived as a shocking interloper in matters that didn’t concern her, as did Wollstonecraft. Barrett Browning enjoyed the favorable historical position of arriving on the literary scene just as the great male Romantic poets “largely fell silent,”

in the 1820's, and well before her male Victorian contemporaries such as Tennyson, Arnold, and Browning emerged. While her gender never completely disappeared from critical assessment of her work, she was nearly always seen as a "serious" poet.

Yet we must not lose sight of her historical location, either. She was born only nine years after Wollstonecraft's death, in 1806. As Reynolds writes, "only a small amount of attention has been given to the effects of Barrett Browning's inherited Romanticism." (13) Indeed, "Elizabeth Barrett's formative reading years fell circa 1816-1830 and make her, in that sense, not Victorian at all." (12) As for many other first-generation Victorians, romanticism is the informing cultural and intellectual discourse of her work and makes the artificiality of late twentieth-century literary periodization all the more ludicrous, particularly in this situation. Barrett Browning herself felt that Aurora Leigh was mostly concerned with "the reiterated arguments for individual liberty and self-recognition,"<sup>16</sup> issues most closely allied with romantic ideology if still found, with a shifted focus, in the later part of the century, too. Of course, there is no doubt that Barrett Browning's mature work and major influence were exerted during the heart of the Victorian era, and that she intended Aurora Leigh to address her own "living age" -- an age whose cultural position had changed drastically since the Regency period of her childhood (an issue that will be addressed in greater depth below). However, let us retain a stronger sense of the way an inheritance of the romantic tradition played out in the later decades of the nineteenth century in order to correct the limitations which an overly-artificial

literary periodization has imposed on our understanding of the works in the period.<sup>17</sup>

In this particular case, we have evidence that helps us understand how romanticism played an important role in Barrett Browning's intellectual formation. Like Mary Wollstonecraft, George Eliot (and Aurora Leigh, for that matter), Barrett Browning spent her early writing years doing what we would now call freelance journalistic writing, honing her skills and reading widely in the cultural discourse of the period. Many of her writings show the strong influence of Coleridge in the way she champions an aesthetic framework that seeks to reconcile opposing forces and hold them in a kind of creative tension or "fusion." In particular, she wrote in The Athenaeum on June 11, 1842 that the poet must seek a reconciliation between the ideal and the real by either "subjectivity perfected," "objectivity transfigured," or "by attaining to the highest vision of the idealist, which is subjectivity turned outward into an actual objectivity."<sup>18</sup> Marjorie Stone says that Barrett Browning's desire to "reconcile polarities" eventually led to "the grand reconciliation of poetry and philanthropy, male and female, that concludes Aurora Leigh," (31) an issue that will be examined further below. In addition, one of Barrett Browning's surviving commonplace books shows her interest in a particularly pithy aphorism of Coleridge's, from The Friend:

Every power in Nature & in spirit must evolve an opposite as the sole means and condition of its manifestation: and all opposition is a tendency to re-union.<sup>19</sup>

It is easy to see how such notions were powerful influences in the evolution of romantic theory and poetry, but we can also see how they lent themselves to a project of re-envisioning the discourse of self in much the same way. As Reynolds puts it, what appears to be “the feminine margin with its valorization of the subjective and personal is presented [in Aurora Leigh] as the true account of the central, general, and political masculine world.” (35) The margins and center, the masculine and feminine, the public and private, not only need each other to exist but also have, what Bakhtin would call a “centripetal” tendency toward “reunion.”

However, Reynolds goes on to develop from this position an argument that I feel is overly concerned with the bifurcation of male and female roles in Barrett Browning’s politics and poetics. Rather, we must see that her striving after a Coleridgean fusion or unity of opposing categories rejects the primacy of a center/margin, either/or paradigm which keeps such poles eternally separate – as we have seen before, this is an incarnative model of language, idea, and selfhood. Herbert Tucker has interestingly argued that the overwhelming use of liquid, water, and dissolution language in Aurora Leigh speaks to this very issue. He argues that Barrett Browning, by carefully following the structure and unity of the epic in her poem, “keeps faith with the epic poet’s obligation to harmonize ultimacy with immediacy, macrocosm with microcosm: to give imaginative currency to a fluid universe that sponsors and nourishes the fluency of her heroic narrative....within a natural world whose physical horizon is liquid, or better yet deliquescent.” (70) The issue of the

epic form will be taken up further below, but this remaking of the relationship between apparent opposites by blurring its categorical edges – man/woman, past/present, inner/outer – also speaks to the larger rhetorical project of Barrett Browning’s text, one that is similar in its lineage to Wollstonecraft’s Letters. As the headnote to this chapter stated, “Inward evermore/ To outward – so in life, and so in art.” The seemingly “inner” project of her textual self-construction will be central for her “outer” ideological and polemical purposes.

### **“Inward Evermore/To Outward”**

As we saw in the previous chapter, Mikhail Bakhtin has offered some useful theories of what he calls “biographical” writing that give insight into the relationship of the inward project of writing the self and its outward purpose. As he writes: “[I]t is only an intimate, organic axiological participation in the world of others that renders the biographical self-objectification of a life authoritative and productive,”<sup>20</sup> or, in other words, there is nothing gained or compelling in writing the self without an “intimate,” living relationship with the world outside the self. As in Coleridge’s quote, the “manifestation” of one thing can only exist in the presence of its opposite. For writers such as Barrett Browning, Wollstonecraft (and even John Stuart Mill, who will appear in the next chapter), the very nature and grounds of writing the self was that self’s axiological relationship with the surrounding discourse – the voice of the other that sounded in people, culture, literature, speaking, and life, of the

world where they existed. Elizabeth Barrett Browning drew attention to this notion at the very head of Aurora Leigh when she wrote in her dedication that it was “the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered” (3).

There is so much in this text which invites readers to see the story of Aurora Leigh as the story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning – indeed Coventry Patmore based his whole criticism of it on the fact that since Mrs. Browning was the only successful female poet of Aurora’s kind that there had ever been, the story held no interest for the general public – one of the worst kinds of logical fallacies, certainly, but a belief held by a percentage of Barrett Browning’s readers. Surely the story of Aurora and the story of Elizabeth bear resemblances and the truth of the struggles to find a voice for a female poet in a male tradition would be Barrett Browning’s special province of personal knowledge. But the text works beyond the naive metonymy of author=protagonist that is the presumed basis for autobiography, allowing for the truth about a self, in its living, partial, and fragmentary way, to be expressed far more completely than would be possible in a closed-off and polished, retrospective narrative.

Wollstonecraft showed the way in her Letters in Sweden that female selfhood could be expressed best through a textual form which reflected its layerings, contradictions, circularities, and the specifically female aspects of self in relation to others. She perfected a form which was forward-looking, rather than retrospective and which foregrounded what Beaujour calls the “operational formula” of the self-portrait, (as opposed to the autobiography): “I won’t tell you what I’ve done, but I shall tell

you who I am" (his emphasis) (3) In fact, Beaujour argues that this is what was intended all along as the authentic marker for the self in text because it goes back to the foundational figure claimed for autobiography, Augustine of Hippo. As Beaujour writes, Augustine's narrative stance in his pivotal chapter three of book ten does not simply record his past misdeeds in a backward-looking catalog but is the record of the "disclosure of 'what I am at the very time that I am writing these Confessions.'" (204) This important shift in seeing how the confessing self is situated in relation to the recited past and the present telling is also closely related to the whole issue of memory and forgetting that informs that chapter, as well as to the purposes and effects such a confession will have on outside readers. As Augustine writes: "I also, Lord, so make my confession to you that I may be heard by people to whom I cannot prove that my confession is true. But those whose ears are opened by love believe me." (180) Barrett Browning re-frames this stance by saying that the poetic confession of Aurora Leigh require "communion and commission" with a "recipient artist-soul" (1.626). Authenticity and rhetorical persuasiveness are bound up in the "who I am now" confession of a self who knows that his or her discourse will have effects – but only in the presence of the hearer whose soul is informed by "recipient" love.

In a similar way, Wollstonecraft sought and gained "affection" and "intimacy" with her readers through her heartfelt confessional discourse and used it to ground her authority as an *ethos* speaker to effect ideological change (toward improvement in the legal and social status of women and society in general). Barrett Browning took that example and gave it both a

poetic and fictionalized shell in Aurora Leigh, yet still retained the rhetoric and purposes of Wollstonecraft's text. As Bakhtin so persuasively argues, during this time period no other genre than the novel could really be called "living," evolving, and changing – able to contain the discourse of life itself. The emergence of the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the dominant literary genre swept all others from its path. Indeed, so much so that the other genres in the nineteenth century were "novelizing" (our novel-in-verse is a perfect example). If readers felt they already knew her story – the celebrity-driven "Autobiography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Famous Poet" – they would not be "listening" to the real story she wanted and needed to tell of her own inner life and self-construction, a story that her public image bore little relationship to. She needed to "communicate" who she really was, in order to gain self-understanding. As Bakhtin puts it:

I achieve self-consciousness, I become myself, only by revealing myself to another, through another and with another's help. . . The very being of man (both internal and external) is a *profound communication*. *To be* means to *communicate*. . Life is dialogical by its very nature. To live means to engage in dialogue, to question, to listen, to answer, to agree...<sup>21</sup>

Regenia Gagnier, Anne K. Mellor and others have explored the way in which confessing the self – engaging in dialogue, questioning, listening, answering, and agreeing – has always been an important aspect of textual self-construction, particularly in texts by women and people who are marginalized in a culture, because they are the ones who have valued community and an understanding of the self in relation to the others of family and culture more highly than in the solitary male

ideology of self-sufficiency and self-enclosure. In that way, then, it is easy to see how women writers of the Romantic and early Victorian period were already re-writing the new script of literary self-narration to include the "outer," dialogical discourses that were silenced in the dominant paradigm. They are the voices that always sounded within the mainstream of the romantic ideology of selfhood and were in fact important aspects of the self-construction of the canonical males of the period. However, they were also the under-valued and under-acknowledged others within those writers' texts -- the Dorothy Wordsworths and Samuel Taylor Coleridges -- who made "the growth of the poet's mind" possible, even though the poet himself showed little overt understanding of their bearing upon that process. Nature in fact can be seen as the metaphorical placeholder for the discourse of the other in many texts of canonical romantic selfhood.

In addition, the "doubling" quality that has so often been noted in texts of the self is also related to this inner/outer, self/other dynamic -- and is central to the polemical and ideological nature of these texts. It is the two-fold burden both of the artist and the narrating self to "exert a double vision," says Aurora Leigh,<sup>22</sup> for the good that such a narration will do in the outer, receiving world:

The artist's part is both to be and do,  
 Transfixing with a special, central power  
 The flat experience of the common man,  
 And turning outward, with a sudden wrench,  
 Half agony, half ecstasy, the thing  
 He feels the inmost -- never felt the less  
 Because he sings it. Does a torch less burn  
 For burning next reflectors of blue steel,

That *h e* should be the colder for his place  
 'Twixt two incessant fires – his personal life's,  
 And that intense refraction which burns back  
 Perpetually against him from the round  
 Of crystal conscience he was born into. . . (5.368-379)

The narrating self who sees most clearly what can be gained from “flat experience” is the prophet-figure, whom Aurora calls the “artist” (with God holding the ultimate position as the “Supreme Artist” whose “work is all creation”). The gift not only of knowing how “inward experience” matters for the “outward” world but of being able to “sing” about it for the edification of the rest of humanity is the particular “twofold life” that is “conferred on poets”<sup>23</sup> The poet “transfixes” life, both capturing and holding it still for examination as well as transforming and translating it for the “universal” use of humanity. Living the fire of one’s “personal life’ and then having the vision to see it “refracted” all around conveys both pain and joy but gives the poet a special commission to make that personal life known, for the express purpose of the good it will do society in general – they have been given a “crystal conscience” in order to see more clearly than the common lot. For this reason, too, we can see why Barrett Browning felt that the most compelling form for sharing that personal life and its refraction would in verse-language, using the shape of the novel, because of the poet’s power “both to be and do” to “transfix with a special, central power” her own experience into the “universal.” Telling the self through the medium of poetry-in-novel is both “communion and commission,” says Aurora.

**Sage Discourse: "Communion and Commission"**

The authors of the Victorian period, to a large extent, built on the foundation laid by their romantic predecessors in the discourse of self and society, but found they often had to use its rhetoric in different ways and largely within genres other than poetry (with several prominent exceptions). This shift can largely be attributed to the different materialistic, bourgeois, and culturally conservative climate of the post-Regency era – and to the novel's generic triumph in the same time period. Later authors can be seen to have complicated the way the rhetoric of selfhood works in literature, making much more implicit the connections between self and subject which had previously been explicit – where Mary wrote and argued as Mary in the Letters in Sweden, Elizabeth Barrett Browning becomes "Aurora Leigh."

However, there is one area of Victorian cultural discourse where the voice of the self remained, at least overtly, explicit, and that is in the discourse of the "sages." These figures can be seen as one distinctive Victorian manifestation of the drive to polemical self-narration and whose discourse also addresses the way in which the relationship between the "inner" and the "outer" continued to be central to the aims and purposes of this type of writing. "The private sphere" and "the public sphere" were often the contemporary terms in which the cultural, political, and ideological debate surrounding the self/other relationship were couched, largely shaped by the sages who were, to a considerable

degree, the inheritors of the “public man” tradition going back to Edmund Burke.

Like Burke, it was primarily men who held the cultural stage as “sages”— the leading figures included John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, Thomas Carlyle, and Matthew Arnold. And although some women such as George Eliot/Marian Evans and Harriet Martineau also had a more limited voice in this discourse, Marjorie Stone, along with Patricia Yeager, argues that we should broaden our definition to see Aurora Leigh as a participant in that dialogue, as well. She says that Barrett Browning’s text has been overlooked as an example of Victorian sage discourse. Once again, this issue recalls the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft. As Stone writes:

Barrett Browning’s appropriation of the characteristic rhetorical strategies of sage writing in *Aurora Leigh* turns them into ‘emancipatory strategies’ identified by Patricia Yeager in Mary Wollstonecraft, the Brontës, and other ‘honey-mad’ women writers. Thus, the use of figurative language as ‘a half-covert but powerful form of argument,’ which Holloway discerns in Carlyle’s writing in particular, becomes the emancipatory strategy of engendering new gynocentric epistemologies through new metaphors.<sup>24</sup>

Avrom Fleishman’s wide-ranging study of autobiographical writing, Figures of Autobiography (1983) has been important and influential in helping define the issues that surround this discourse, yet it mentions Aurora Leigh only in passing and discusses only three women writers of any kind in nearly two centuries of literature surveyed (out of seventeen authors with their own chapters). However, Fleishman has

usefully outlined the biblical typology and prophet paradigms which underlie much nineteenth and twentieth century self-writing, including the discourse of the sages.

We will discuss the issue of prophet paradigms more completely below but we should be aware that much further critical work in the area of polemical self-writing needs to be done. Most scholars have continued to remain focused primarily on traditionally-constituted autobiographies, rather than seeing that a new way of defining both self-writing in general and sage discourse in particular is to link it to the Wollstonecraft/Burke model of the “ethos speaker” – rooted more in the confessional life story and self-example than in “sermonizing.” The particular and prolific “secular prophet” model embodied in Thomas Carlyle, a Calvinist-inspired position as a thundering “preacher” on the issues of his day, has overly obscured the way Sartor Resartus functioned at the outset of his career as a text much like Wollstonecraft’s and Barrett Browning’s – a confessional life text whose “figurative language” operates as a “half-covert but powerful form of argument” authorizing its writer’s rhetorical right to speak. Carlyle is more typically seen as the figure whose model fits in with what Holloway has identified as the particular pattern of sage discourse – a pattern of “sermonizing on the ‘signs of the times,’” followed by “the call for social and spiritual change” that precedes “presenting his vision of a redeemed society”<sup>25</sup> – a figure that Fleishman and J. Hillis Miller link to Old Testament paradigms.

Rather, we might see the speaker in a literary self-portrait as occupying a position more akin to a New Testament paradigm – an

incarnational model of thought, language, and selfhood, which authorizes rhetorical authority through the confession of a single life narrative. It is interesting and compelling to see that this is the female mode of writing the self -- the "honey-mad women" form of figurative and half-covert discourse. This "New Testament" paradigm can then be seen -- in a radical shift of critical vision -- as rhetorically foundational for Carlyle's later patriarchal position as "father-figure" to his age. (And, one might say that Matthew Arnold's first career as a self-exploring poet functions in much the same way.) All writers must find a way to enter the literary conversation and the anxiety attendant on such an enterprise has greater and lesser weight depending on the psychological and cultural hurdles that must be overcome on the way to that position. One authentic form of authorizing the self to speak and using the discourse of the self to address the living age must now be seen as the model most allied to the female and "New Testament" tradition of self-writing.

The use of the ethical argument and the redefinition through gender of the ethos speaker is a line of narrative development that can be traced from Mary Wollstonecraft's rhetorical response to Burke to the various ways that Victorian sage writers shaped the use of the personal narrative and the appeal to the emotions in political contexts. Mary's re-writing of the Burkean model provided the basis for a feminized redefinition of the "sage" -- ironically, one of the most patriarchal of narrative stances. When Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in describing the sublimely spiritual mountains of Aurora Leigh's Italian home (in the passage above that so closely echoed Wollstonecraft) said that they called

out for “communion and commission” (1.626) to a “recipient artist-soul,” she provided an apt metaphor for this kind of self-writing project, as well. Barrett Browning called for recipient readers both to close communion with her and to the commission of action in the outside world. And if it was Wollstonecraft’s “taxonomy of the self” that made for the associative links and jointures in her text joined nature, the self, and ideology, then Barrett Browning’s taxonomy can be said to be even more explicitly identified with self-determination and a resistance to the narrative closure of women’s lives implied by traditional story-plots such as the marriage convention. Barrett Browning is able to address the issue of women’s vocation much more explicitly than Wollstonecraft and to claim the role of artist as prophet/seer for her society -- seeing that role essentially and ardently as female. As Reynolds says, “a true gynocentric vision” (54) of self and society.

### **Telling the Story: Self-Portraiture and Epic**

A simple enough idea too often overlooked in our pursuit of high-minded purposes and complicated rhetorical strategies in texts of self-construction is the sheer interest of a good story told -- of the undeniable human pleasure of story-telling and story-hearing. In that way, then, it can be argued that stories about human lives have been used as a persuasive societal and cultural tools from the earliest societies’ historical uses of myth and epic as a way of organizing and making sense of the external world. For whatever reason, human beings “care for a story.” In

a letter Barrett Browning wrote to her close friend Nancy Russell Mitford on the planned writing of Aurora Leigh, in December of 1844, she rejected Mitford's suggestion of Napoleon as the subject of her verse-novel on "modern times." Not wanting to rehearse yet another known "great man" plot (yet another instance of her rejecting traditional male-based poetics), instead Barrett Browning wanted a new story that would provoke interest and curiosity – a "story of her own:"

If I had a story of my own I might be as wild as I liked, & I shd. have a chance besides of interesting other people by it in a way I could not do with a known story. . .But people care for a story – there's the truth! (22)

Even back as far as Augustine's Confessions, at the very foundation of what we call self-writing, the value and interest of stories is a central fact. As Augustine write: "The human race is inquisitive about other people's lives, but negligent to correct their own." (180) John Stuart Mill began his text of self-writing with the interesting strategy of denying that his life held any interest for anyone. However, as he must have known, the "good story" of his life was well enough known culturally (particularly his singular education) to have provoked just the interest he sought to deny. Barrett Browning dealt with the similar issue of being trapped with narrative expectations caused by her known biography by employing a textual form that allowed her to at least partially escape the equation of author=protagonist (that of the verse-novel, as discussed above).

This emphasis on the place and expectations of the reader is not incidental. The "addressee," the absolutely necessary "third person" in the

author/protagonist/reader triad, both grounds the very existence and purpose of confessional self-disclosure and “answers back” to that self through the dialogue of their own life discourse, inevitably affected by the exchange. Augustine’s quote calls attention yet again to the fact that there are intended effects of such narration – readers needs to “correct” their own lives based on the life story they have just encountered. “Lives” and “stories,” then, are inextricably bound together

Nearly the very first declaration of Aurora Leigh is: “I write.” (1.29) Throughout the text, as in Wollstonecraft’s self-conscious position as travel-journal writer, the act of writing itself is foregrounded as the act of self-construction, self-narration. The text’s opening invocation calls attention to the fact that Aurora “will write my story for my better self.” (1.4). Later in that same book she likens the soul to “a clean white paper,” “a palimpsest, a prophet’s holograph.” (1.825-6) “Books, books, books!,” (1.833) she says, were both her secret to life and to who she was in relation to her father. Romney likens Aurora, as a young woman yearning to discover her purpose in life, to “a book I found!/ No name writ upon it...” (2.75-6) Yet, Romney too is a kind of book: “you translate me ill” (2.369), he tells Aurora. She makes a more extended use of the metaphor in rejecting his offer of marriage for a second time:

I write in answer – ‘We Chaldeans discern  
Still farther than we read. I know your heart,  
And shut it like the holy book it is,  
Reserved for mild-eyed saints to pore upon,  
Betwixt their prayers at vespers... (2.835-839)

The metaphors of writing, reading, and books continue in Aurora's intense self-examination in Book 5. In her internal reverie, she keeps coming back to her belief that Romney sees her as "Too light a book for a grave man's reading!" (5.41) Aurora finds herself "dreaming a tale" about the lives of the women she watches on the streets of her adopted Italy (7.1229). And, finally, in the strange, culminating scene of Romney and Aurora's reconciliation and confession to each other, Aurora says "'You have read/My book, but not my heart...'" (8.477), finally separating herself from a too rigid conception of herself as her text – and allowing for the admission of that which cannot be textually controlled, her desire for Romney and his love. Earlier, Aurora had literally torn up, without reading, a letter Romney had written in which his desire to marry her invoked the threatened narrative closure of the standard marriage plot, as he told her the story of their family's history overlaid with the cultural narrative that casts him as her rescuing knight. Over and over again in Aurora Leigh, writing and reading are shown to mean gaining self-knowledge and the ability to know others.<sup>26</sup>

This foregrounding of the trope of writing and the book as a way of standing for the self and its life is similar to another extended metaphor in the text – that of the portrait. Just as the example of writing and the book is one way of casting the relationship between inner and outer, self and other, the portrait also functions as a form of representation for selfhood, without making any claims for its ability to un-naively reconstruct that life. Portraiture gestures towards the life and offers some partial and fragmentary, mediated information about it – without pretending to be

the life, but also without doubting that such a representation is “authentic” for its own purposes.

Michel Beaujour’s writings about the self-portrait shed light on the issue of reference implicit in any form of the self in text. These are not the smoothly linear and retrospective writings of the generically hardened autobiography. Rather, these texts are organized along “thematic” lines whose linkages and associations reside in the unique make-up of the narrating self and which shift and substitute as the life unfolds. As Beaujour puts it: “[t]he absence of a continuous narrative in the self-portrait distinguishes it from autobiography. So does its subordination of narration to a logical deployment, a collation or patching together, of elements under a head that...we will call the “thematic.” (2) In this way we can see that Aurora Leigh is held together by jointures under the common heading of Barrett Browning’s overarching and recurrent “thematic” interests – the status of the artist, female vocation, freedom and self-determination, and the appropriate place for love in a woman’s life .

The “system of cross-references, anaphoras, superimpositions, or correspondences among homologous and substitutable elements”<sup>27</sup> that describes the self-portrait “give(s) the appearance of discontinuity, of anachronistic juxtaposition, or montage, as opposed to the syntagmatic of a narration,” as Beaujour puts it. This form was amenable to the unique juxtaposition of the facts of Barrett Browning’s life and the circumstances of writing her text. As Deirdre David writes, Aurora Leigh is, to a large extent, a “discourse about society composed from other discourses.” (105)

The country upbringing and long years of illness and seclusion made Barrett Browning a readerly writer – someone who hadn't "lived" outside in the world much but for whom the world was made up of other discourses, her reading, her correspondence, her writing. Reynolds says that "the private processes of study, translation, reading, and criticism provided [EBB] with an internal world of reference made up exclusively of texts. Consequently, much of Barrett Browning's work then presents itself not as traditional autobiography, but rather as an intellectual patchwork" (14) much like Beaujour's description of the cross-references, superimpositions, and correspondences of the self-portrait. What is distinctive and important about the discourses which Barrett Browning "joins" in Aurora Leigh is the way they, as in Wollstonecraft's text, present the unique life story of a single woman in such a way as to compellingly witness and argue for what society should allow and acknowledge for all women – a place for both work and love, marriage and equality.

Aurora Leigh's "'lived' techniques of fragmentation and disruption"<sup>28</sup> are two of its distinctive textual markers. Both Bakhtin and Beaujour have written extensively about the way that just such markers – disruption and a disjointed sense of time – mark the existence of "life" in the text. Self-portrait is a form for the living, new things can constantly be added and adapted. As Beaujour puts it, "the totalization of the self-portrait is not *given* beforehand; new homologous elements can be added to the paradigm, whereas the temporal closure of autobiography is implicit in the initial choice of a curriculum vitae." (3) For Barrett Browning, the shifts and changes in Aurora's self-paradigm are signs of

progress, growth and change because the “record of Aurora’s intellectual life, supposedly written while it is still being carried forward and before she reaches any resolved understanding of her personality and potential.” Therefore, “the narrative must include error, misapprehension, modification, and revision.”<sup>29</sup> Even Burton Pike, as early as 1976, argued that autobiographical writing is most effective when written by the “young” who are “still growing” in their understanding of themselves.<sup>30</sup> Rather than seeing the text as “chaotic” or “out of control,” however, this form, which Reynolds calls “fictional autobiography” must allow “space to chart the conflicting processes of modification and reassessment. And crucial to this enacted experience is a chronological structure which includes the narrative of a past, present, and future” (28).

Barrett Browning herself helps us to see this connection by explicitly linking the self-narration of Aurora Leigh with a literal self-portrait, in the verse-novel’s opening lines:

Of writing many books there is no end;  
 And I who have written much in prose and verse  
 For others’ uses, will write now for mine –  
 Will write my story for my better self  
 As when you paint your portrait for a friend,  
 Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it  
 Long after he has ceased to love you, just  
 To hold together what he was and is. (1.1-8)

Just as Bakhtin spoke of the need for a completing “other,” this multi-layered address to the reader serves many rhetorical purposes, all of which call attention both to the situatedness of author, protagonist, and reader, as well as to the referential issues implicit in the project of self-narration.

The author says that this writing will do her good – it is for her “better self” – implying a discourse of self-edifying self-construction. She likens it, metaphorically, to a gift for someone else – a “portrait” painted for a friend. But not just any friend, a former lover, for whom this presumable love-token comes to stand both for the lost love and himself. It is a past-tense emblem both of the artist-lover-woman (he “keeps it in a drawer and looks at it/ Long after he has ceased to love you”) and for his own self-construction (“just/To hold together what he was and is”).

Yet the stereotypical figure of power and agency has been turned on its head here. “He” may have ceased to love “you” but it is the female-artist “you” who both chooses what self-gift the man will retain of her and determines what he will know and remember about himself – to “hold together what he was and is.” The act of composing the self-portrait, then, operates as a discourse of self-construction (“for my own uses”), a representation of that self for a loved other (“a friend”), and an enabling element of that other’s relationship to his own past and present (“what he was and is”). And here Barrett Browning draws very near to her revolutionary foremother Mary Wollstonecraft by completely re-making the relationship between self-narration, text, and reader. The discourse of the poet here accomplishes both incarnation and creation – enabling the reading self to literally constitute “himself” through her self-narration which requires “him” as reader – each completing the other yet also doubling back again when we see that the reading “he” is also a metaphorical stand-in for Aurora Leigh’s (and Barrett Browning’s) own “better self” – later, better self-understanding.

Through this dramatic account of the relationship between self, other, and text, Barrett Browning signals that the writing of this text will most definitely serve both her own and others' purposes, both specific readers and her culture in general. This self-portrait exchange is operating in the narrative time after the traditional love plot, the traditional giving of love tokens. In that way Barrett Browning also signals that her selfhood will not be fictionally emplotted either. This female self isn't the object of the male lover's gaze -- that time has past -- but rather exists as the female maker of her own image. The male friend is caught in the old story -- he is sighing over the portrait of a lost love -- and comes to know himself only through these conventional markers of love, these leftover tokens.

But the portrait's artist-maker does not. Her selfhood is neither in the artifact of the portrait nor does its existence as an artifact "hold her together." Rather, it is the active agency of that portrait's creation, the shifting, choosing, and adapting process, informed by her own self-paradigm, that helps her to a "better self." But even that position is never closed off and final. It too is constantly being layered over with new elements and correspondences. Even further, her selfhood is also contained in the act of giving to her lover-friend. Both Wollstonecraft and Barrett Browning would argue, at least in a limited way, that this kind of desire to give is also a foundational aspect of being female, that she lives with the knowledge that her self-artifact is more needed by "him" than her. In this case, Barrett Browning seems to be arguing that her authentic selfhood remains safe from its externalizing in narrative, it is

not her “essence,” or the “real” her. Rather, it is the part of the female self that she can willingly give to others, in a spirit of love.

Many of the most troubling parts of Aurora Leigh for modern readers (the parts that have led to Barrett Browning’s critical banishment to the “basement” of literature<sup>31</sup>), particularly in Book 5, have to do with her seeming valorization of a kind of voluntary female subjection, both in love and in art. But it must be seen that Barrett Browning makes no claims for any kind of an inferior/superior paradigm for women and men – quite the contrary, given Aurora and Romney’s relative status at the end of the book. Rather, she claims that women see men both “ideally/ And really” and know that men have greater need of the gifts of a woman than a woman does of a man:

. . .The man’s need of the woman, here,  
Is greater than the woman’s of the man,  
And easier served; for where the man discerns  
A sex (ah, ah, the man can generalise,  
Said he), we see but one, ideally  
And really. . . (5. 1073-8)

But she also knows that women have both a capacity and need to be absorbed into love, in a way that men do not:

. . .where we yearn to lose ourselves  
And melt like white pearls in another’s wine,  
He seeks to double himself by what he loves,  
And make his drink more costly by our pearls. (5.1078-11)

An uncritical reading of this text seems to imply that women are to completely lose their identity in men’s selfish desires. But this passage occurs in a troubling part of the narrative, when Aurora is so discouraged

by the actions and failures of herself and others that she sees men and women both in a moment of their weakest behavior – women wanting to utterly lose themselves in a man and men glad to take them up on it. Aurora sees this as the wrong way for the desire of loving and giving to be used. This passage is associated both with a period of artistic barrenness for Aurora and a time of utter rejection for the patriarchal Romney.

Of the many passages in Aurora Leigh which consider the role and purpose of the artist, some have been troubled, in a related way, to Barrett Browning's claims that the artist must sometimes have a passive, recipient soul waiting for inspiration ("I lay, and spoke not..." (7.1273)), and that such a position may be racked with pain and doubt. However, we must see that this description is similar to common Romantic expression of the nature of poetic inspiration. For example, it is well known that Coleridge likened it to the wind moving on the Eolian harp and Shelley described it as being like a breath of wind suddenly passing over dying coals. We should see Barrett Browning as operating within that poetic discourse, as well, and not look for female subjection to an oppressive culture where instead there may be "artistic subjection" to the muse.

Like many an artist, Barrett Browning seems to be saying that there is no enslaving that which is freely given. The artist retains the power to choose to share her vision, her selfhood, her "portrait" with a friend, in order to hold him together in future times without her. This is perhaps another version of the artist's spirit of "communion" and "commission" – sharing the gift-portion of the self in order to authorize good.

### **Telling the Story: Poetry, the Novel, and Form**

As Barrett Browning writes in Aurora Leigh, it is ludicrous to try and force life to fit a form with rigid generic boundaries when content should make its own form – life itself conforms to no such rules:

Five acts to make a play.  
 And why not fifteen? why not ten? or seven?  
 What matter for the number of the leaves,  
 Supposing the tree lives and grows? exact  
 The literal unities of time and place,  
 When 'tis the essence of passion to ignore  
 Both time and place? Absurd. Keep up the fire  
 And leave the generous flames to shape themselves. (5.229-237)

In much the same way, Barrett Browning has been taken to task by critics, both in her own age and ours, for her strange hybrid use of the verse-novel form. Virginia Woolf finds several examples of “absurd” poetic dialogue: “The simple words have been made to strut and posture and take on an emphasis which makes them ridiculous;” or, “Romney, in short, rants and reels like any of those Elizabethan heroes whom Mrs. Browning has warned so imperiously out of her modern living-room. Blank verse has proved itself the most remorseless enemy of living speech.” (211)

Yet Woolf, excellent critic that she was, also sees that the use of the poetic form had its purposes for Barrett Browning, as well, for the ends that she was after, no matter what modern taste has now turned to. As Woolf writes:

Thus, if Mrs. Browning meant by a novel-poem a book in which character is closely and subtly revealed, the relations of many hearts

laid bare, and a story unfalteringly unfolded, she failed completely. But if she meant rather to give us a **sense of life in general**, of people who are unmistakably Victorian, wrestling with problems of their own time, all brightened, intensified, and compacted by the fire of poetry, she succeeded. *Aurora Leigh*, with her passionate interest in social questions, her conflict as artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom, is the true daughter of her age. (212, my emphasis)

In other words, Woolf seems to be saying that Barrett Browning does not at all follow the conventions of a well-written realist novel – indeed if she even meant to – but has instead captured “life in general” within her hybrid verse-novel. She is a “true daughter of her age,” “transfixing” the passions, concerns, and conflicts of her time through the life story of this artist woman. But even beyond acknowledging the “Victorian-ness” of Barrett Browning’s use of the verse-novel, Woolf sees that the practice itself has literary purposes not unlike her own modernist prose, serving to heighten, compact, and raise to the importance of symbol certain images and moments:

As we rush through page after page of narrative in which a dozen scenes that the novelist would smooth out separately are pressed into one, in which pages of deliberate description are fused into a single line, we cannot help feeling that the poet has outpaced the prose writer. Her page is twice as full as his. . . The general aspect of things – market, sunset, church – have a brilliance and a continuity, owing to the compressions and elisions of poetry, which mock the prose writer and his slow accumulation of detail. For these reasons, *Aurora Leigh* remains, with all its imperfections, a book that still lives and breathes and has its being. (213)

Despite Woolf’s best efforts, she can’t make herself dislike *Aurora Leigh*: “We laugh, we protest, we complain – it is absurd, it is impossible, we

cannot tolerate this exaggeration a moment longer – but, nevertheless, we read to the end enthralled. What more can an author ask?” Because Barrett Browning has found a form in which she has caught the “life” of her age, her text still remains “alive” today.

The specifics of the unique way Aurora Leigh operates by compressing image, self-narration, and ideological polemics deserve some attention here, if only because, as Woolf later writes, it is a text almost completely without inheritors. A close look at one important example of the way Barrett Browning combines the interweaving discourses of this text will provide some illumination of her “voluble subjectivity.”<sup>32</sup>

A recurring pattern in the text is the overlay of Barrett Browning’s inner thoughts regarding her life, poetic inspiration, and the poet’s place in the world along with a present-tense narration of the story’s ostensible plot and alongside often regretful musings on the past, particularly regarding Romney – which then reproduce inner musings on her life and poetry, even directly calling attention to the act of writing the narrative itself. This cyclical pattern is not formulaic, by any means, but does contribute, as Tucker says, to the overall epic ring structure of the text. One long example of this poetic style, partially quoted earlier, is this:

Self is put away,  
And calm with abdication. She is Jove,  
And no more Danaë – greater thus. Perhaps  
The painter symbolises unaware  
Two states of the recipient artist-soul,  
    ...We’ll be calm,  
And know that, when indeed our Joves come down,  
We all turn stiller than we have ever been.

Kind Vincent Carrington. I’ll let him come.

He talks of Florence – and may say a word  
 Of something as it chanced seven years ago.  
 A hedgehog in the path, or a lame bird,  
 In those green country walks, in that good time  
 When certainly I was so miserable. . .  
 I seem to have missed a blessing ever since.

The music soars within the little lark,  
 And the lark soars. It is not thus with men.  
 We do not make our places with our strains –  
 Content, while they rise, to remain behind  
 Alone on earth instead of so in heaven.  
 No matter; I bear on my broken tale.  
 (3.136-156)

There is much to unpack here. Barrett Browning begins with a rumination on the link between herself as a female poet and the characteristics of poetic inspiration by likening the relationship to Zeus and Danaë, the mythical figure who, to quote Kerry McSweeney was, “shut up in a chamber by her father to ensure that she remain intact...[and then] visited by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold and impregnated by him.”<sup>33</sup> This veiled reference to Barrett Browning’s own virtual “imprisonment” by her father and her subsequent elopment and pregnancy are not the first time that Aurora Leigh likens herself to either Danaë (or Zeus) and form one of the “associative links” in this text between author, protagonist, and a veiled life confession. The passage then moves on to the potential visit of Aurora’s friend Vincent Carrington who may bring to her a remembrance of that “something” which occurred seven years previous, not just hedgehog crossing their path but a veiled reference to Romney’s proposal which occurred in that same wooded park. The “green country walks” then cause her to link her

thoughts with the singing “lark,” a metaphor for her own “song” which she feels does not rise sufficiently to “heaven.” Much of the middle part of the tale concerns Aurora’s searching after what constitutes the best possible poetry, eventually concluding that it will take a balance between vocation and female love in a marriage of equals. At this time, though, she only knows that she hasn’t yet achieved it. With a thud, she crashes back to the mundane task of bearing on her “broken tale.” It is interesting to see that Aurora, too, often links her characterization of the narrative as it is unfolding – a “broken tale” – in language strikingly similar to the way she feels about her own self, making many overt and implicit linkages between her writing and her selfhood – a link which Barrett Browning must surely have also felt.

Tucker spends much time in his essay carefully examining the “tripled threes” of the text’s epic structure in useful and interesting ways, lending weight to the claim that Barrett Browning meant to be as nation-making and foundational as any Homer. Yet he also says that within this structure we also see the way she “crystallizes” the story of her own life through the “poetic solution” of Aurora’s self-narration – an apt description of this literary self-portrait with its “cross-references, anaphoras, and juxtapositions.” As Tucker writes: “[The] last images of crystalline *Bildung* are precipitated out of the poetic solution in which Aurora’s selfhood have been dissolved, diffused, and suspended for a kind of re-creation to which the traditional *Bildungsroman* gave little play. The transparent stones of revelation, like the many books or building

blocks of the poem, are the gradual structures of Aurora's processual identity" (80).

Yet this identity-making montage also directly engages the issues of Barrett Browning's age, as well, creating a "polemics of self" as much as a singular confession. And Woolf argues that this text is just the form for such a project:

. . .we may suspect that Elizabeth Barrett was inspired by a flash of true genius when she rushed into the drawing-room and said that here, where we live and work, is the true place for the poet. At any rate, her courage was justified in her own case. . .her tortured ingenuity, her floundering, scrambling, and confused impetuosity have space to spend themselves here without inflicting a deadly wound, while her ardour and abundance, her brilliant descriptive powers, her shrewd and caustic humor, infect us with her own enthusiasm. (213)

She is persuasive, then, through the use of this hybrid discourse -- we are "infected with her own enthusiasm." As Woolf says, "the best compliment that we can pay Aurora Leigh is that it makes us wonder why it has left no successors. . .The conservatism or the timidity of poets still leaves the chief spoils of modern life to the novelist." (213)

If Woolf persuades us of the efficacy of Barrett Browning's use of poetic conventions, then Bakhtin tells us what she gained by incorporating the novel form, as well. The discourse of history, culture, and "becoming" enter into the narrative through the novel:

. . .prose art presumes a deliberate feeling for the historical and social concreteness of living discourse, as well as its relativity, a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle; it deals with discourse that is still warm from that struggle and hostility, as yet unresolved and still fraught with

hostile intentions and accents; prose art finds discourse in this state and subjects it to the dynamic-unity of its own style. (331)

The “open-endedness” of novel discourse and the possibility of struggle and change are “unprocessed givens” which help Barrett Browning’s text to remain “living” in Bakhtin’s sense. He had argued that both poetry and the epic are “dead” forms because they are cut off from this very process. By retaining the novel along with verse Barrett Browning re-animates a potentially dead genre.

### **Telling the Story: Epic**

We have discussed the way that the fragmentary, self-portrait nature of Aurora Leigh allows for a non-linear evocation of time in the text. Another form which telescopes and expands time in narrative is the epic, a form which has many connections to Aurora Leigh. Herbert F. Tucker is not the first critic to notice how the text seems to envision itself in an epic spirit and often seems to be re-casting epic conventions. However, he has done the most work on unpacking the specific rhetoric and structure of epic, including its use of time. The “epicizing conventions” he notices are “its ring structure, the procession of its narrative point of view, [and] its coordination of cosmos with psyche through images of fluid dissolution.” He argues that Barrett Browning deployed these tools to loosen “the realist novel’s grip on Victorian narrative as a shaper of women’s lives” (62) – intending to counter the

pervasive ideology of “domesticity” and female containment too often deployed there.

In Tucker’s scheme, out of Aurora Leigh’s nine total books, Books 1 and 2 and Books 8 and 9 form the “outer ring,” These sections are primarily concerned with the time Aurora is in Italy, in the beginning as a child and in the end as a new-made adult. They follow autobiographical conventions of time and narrative. The middle of Tucker’s rings is the “Marian group” formed by Books 3 and 4 and Books 6 and 7 – the former as the tale-within-a-tale of Marian Erle’s life, and the latter primarily concerned with Aurora’s time on the continent in Marian’s company. The center of the scheme is held by the compelling and troubling Book 5, which itself is divided into two rough halves, and in which the process of writing itself is foregrounded and examined. Tucker argues that epic conventions offered Barrett Browning another important set of writerly tools with which to write the self, “looking past the novel and autobiography:”

. . .epic offered nineteenth-century writers a set of story-telling conventions that were arguably more flexible than those of popular prose forms like fiction, (auto)biography, and history. From Homeric rudiments, writers of epic from Virgil to Milton and Wordsworth had with increasing address developed means of playing against one another the different immediacies of present-tense narration and of invocation or apostrophe. (68)

Tucker gives Barrett Browning the revolutionary credit she deserves for radically re-appropriating “so famously masculine a genre” for the purposes of female self-narration:

She found in epic models a traditional means to an untraditional, genuinely novel end, by crossing the linear plots of the *Künstlerroman* with desultory devices drawn from women's traditions of epistolary and diaristic narrative. (68)

There is no doubt that the "epistolary and diaristic" narrative stance that is typical of women's writing has been re-framed by Barrett Browning in terms of an epic of self-definition.

However, I question whether it is the *Künstlerroman* that Barrett Browning "crosses" with women's writing here and not rather the rhetoric of the "ethos speaker," as in the model framed by Wollstonecraft. This position is clearly allied with an epic tradition, as well. In either case, the collapse and conflation of time, the to-the-minute epistolarity, the retrospection, the journal and diary entries, and the re-copied letters – women's writing all – included within a heroic, epicizing life narration make Aurora Leigh an "epic passionately given to the gender-solvent, genre-absorbing fluency of love." (80) The shifting time and narrative stances of Aurora's life and writing begin to converge in book 8 and 9 as the distance between narrator and protagonist narrows to nothing and the time of the reported past comes nearer to the actual writing present:

I have written day by day,  
With somewhat even writing. Did I think  
That such a passionate rain would intercept  
And dash this last page? (9.725-8)

What he said, indeed.  
I fain would write it down here like the rest. . " (9. 728-9)

Epic serves another purpose in the western tradition and that is as a placeholder for many traditional cultural narratives. Beaujour has identified those cultural and historical discourses as essential for the self-portrait writer for the shape they provide to hold the slippery narration of the self. A self-portrait writer's "culture provides him with the ready-made categories that enable him to classify the fragments of his discourse, his memories, his fantasies." (4) But even within the "hollow of a mold" that comes from the traditional forms such as epic, self-portraits still contain the unique "content" of the individual self who authors them. The author reworks "these unprocessed givens" of life and "arranges them under headings only to connect them haphazardly according to the imperatives of a personal taxonomy." (5) One way that personal taxonomy can be understood may be by examining its ideological effects – the way the life intersects with the beliefs embodied in the tale.

### **The Exemplary Life**

At the age of 10, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote the first of several autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical stories re-casting her own life in several different ways. This particular text spoke of a female poet named "Beth" who wanted to be "the feminine of Homer. . .the greatest woman poet who ever lived" (Mermin 11). Since ten-year-old girls might be some of the most knowledgeable readers of exemplary life writing, so much of it having been written for readers like themselves, "Beth" certainly would have known that for girls to become great poets

they would have to write that story themselves. Since “Beth” grew up, in one way or another, to become Elizabeth Barrett Browning we have at least one piece of evidence that speaks to the effectiveness of that process. It is my argument that “Beth” went on re-writing her life because she found that the stories her culture offered her as models for female selfhood were not adequate or appropriate. And while I doubt that Elizabeth Barrett Browning would call her life “exemplary,” it seems very likely that Aurora Leigh served a purpose much like an exemplary life narrative in writing back to her culture a new way of seeing female selfhood. In such a way, and perhaps even more strongly than Mary Wollstonecraft, she also speaks back to Samuel Richardson’s pervasive fictional influence as the definer of proper female behavior and creator of “female exemplars.”

In the century after the first publication of Richardson’s didactic novels of female selfhood the omnipresent influence of the Pamela/Clarissa figure had triumphed as the model for appropriate female behavior. However, in an unpublished letter which Barrett Browning wrote to her sister Arabel, still in the family collection, shows how directly she means to refute the male-constructed version of female virtue. As Reynolds writes: “In a lengthy unpublished letter, Barrett Browning compared Marian to Richardson’s Clarissa, noting that Marian should be permitted dignity and purity and that she should ‘triumph’ over Clarissa in being allowed to live” (44). Barrett Browning goes even farther than that, constituting Marian’s life as a kind of Mary/Savior figure, redeemed by her unwanted pregnancy and the unmitigated femaleness of

the bodily experiences of motherhood. Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, Barrett Browning seems to be saying that the birth of an unexpected and apparently unfathered child can have meaning for individual lives almost incalculable to measure. The female imagery surrounding the book's final visions of a New Jerusalem and the "cloistered" sisterhood of Marian and Aurora's home in Italy also show how Barrett Browning conceives of female exemplars far differently than Richardson.

And the book had its intended ideological and polemical effects. Susan B. Anthony traveled with Aurora Leigh wherever she went, speaking on women's rights and the suffragette movement. Barrett Browning was a good friend of Margaret Fuller, another prominent American feminist, who wrote that Aurora Leigh was the "bible" of nineteenth-century American's women's-rights workers. The "personal taxonomy," then, of Barrett Browning's text and life vehemently testify to a female-constituted vision of triumphant life – not just "happy" or "successful" but utterly dominant, re-making nations, cultures, and even humanity itself. We can see this particularly in the utter, crushing defeat of Romney Leigh at the end of the text. He is not just chastened, he is utterly re-made through Aurora's vision and together they embark on a world re-making mission, with God's blessing, based on her literal name – a new "dawn" for humanity:

The world's old,  
But the old world waits the time to be renewed,  
Toward which, new hearts in individual growth  
Must quicken, and increase to multitude  
In new dynasties of the race of men;  
Developed whence, shall grow spontaneously

New churches, new economies, new laws  
 Admitting freedom, new societies  
 Excluding falsehood: HE shall make all new.'  
 My Romney! --Lifting up my hand in his,  
 As wheeled by Seeing spirits toward the east,  
 He turned instinctively, where, faint and far...  
 Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass  
 The first foundatons of that new, near Day...

Aurora Leigh, then, must be seen as a complex text of interwoven self-narration overlaid with a radically feminist re-vision of what constitutes life itself and art's relationship between the two. Barrett Browning's "personal taxonomy" within the text, then, is even more revolutionary than Wollstonecraft's.

For some reason, certain feminist critics of our period have misread as "an embarrassment to 20th-century readers" what Reynolds calls Barrett Browning's "condemnation of socialist endeavour" (16) in Aurora Leigh, perhaps overly-valuing contemporary politics at the expense of accurately seeing her text. Not so, as Stone points out. Rather Aurora criticizes Romney's over-intellectualization and "theorizing" -- not his socialist plans. His motives they agree on and work toward together in the story's triumphant end. Reynolds rightly says that "Elizabeth Barrett's particular cultural context places her at the confluence of Romantic and feminist ideology" (16) but says that it was a "contradiction" to her and so it made her believe in her class superiority as a form of coping, even implying that she embraced Carlyle's reactionary politics. Of course this is not at all so, she admired Carlyle's writing on heroes but so did most of the Victorians. Her anti-slavery and other political poetry such as "The Cry of

the Children” and “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” were some of her most popular and influential contemporary texts.

For women readers, then, what is instructive in a life text is not the lesson of how to choose well – likely there will be little choice available – rather it is how to live within the straitened circumstances and circumscribed life limits that women inevitably had, how to be woman within that bounded category of humanity. As Barrett Browning dreams for the text that became Aurora Leigh:

I don’t want to have to do with masses of men. [I want to] touch this real everyday life of our age, and hold it with my two hands. I want to write a poem of a new class, in a measure – a Don Juan, without the mockery & impurity. . .under one aspect, – & having unity, as a work of art, – & admitting of as much philosophical dreaming & digression (which is in fact a characteristic of the age) as I like to use...

In a way similar to Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas, Barrett Browning constructs a life text which offers philosophizing, a nominal story, much emotion, and the living issues of the day. But much more than that, like Mary Wollstonecraft, she offers her life as “exemplary” in one sense. She gives the example of herself as a “text,” if you will, that can be read as instructive – herself as the “proof” of her belief that women can write their own lives. Her epic of the self equates the woman poet with the re-making of the nation in “better” and “higher” ways and argues that the discourse of human selfhood is foundationally female – imagining God’s way of loving and acting as identical to the way of the mother.

## Notes to Chapter Three

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- <sup>1</sup> See Folkenflik, The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation, 1-5.
- <sup>2</sup> Which is not, of course, to say that women or men who were not "prominent" did not write autobiographies at this time (one thinks particularly of Chartist autobiographies). However, the genre itself can be said to have hardened its framework and cemented itself as an accepted form through its wide acceptance and use as a vehicle for well-known men to tell their life stories.
- <sup>3</sup> Mellor has also been instrumental in recovering previously-neglected female authors of the period including Helen Maria Williams and the two female poets who were so influential for Barrett Browning – Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans.
- <sup>4</sup> This premise is central to the claims that Stone, Mermin, and Tucker make about Aurora Leigh. All three spend at least a part of their arguments showing how, in one way or another, Barrett Browning had such foundational aims for her epic of female selfhood.
- <sup>5</sup> Mermin 11.
- <sup>6</sup> Tucker, 63.
- <sup>7</sup> Cora Kaplan, Aurora Leigh and Other Poems, 1978, Women's Press facsimile reprint.
- <sup>8</sup> 27-28 March 1842.
- <sup>9</sup> 24 December 1844.
- <sup>10</sup> 15 January 1846.
- <sup>11</sup> Hope End, September 1821.
- <sup>12</sup> See Kathleen Blake, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Wordsworth: The Romantic Poet as a Woman."
- <sup>13</sup> Bk. 1.427-437.
- <sup>14</sup> 1.175-184
- <sup>15</sup> in The Godwins and The Shelleys.
- <sup>16</sup> Reynolds, 18.
- <sup>17</sup> I admit to a strong feeling about this issue. A prominent scholar of romanticism once told me that attempting to recover the largely under-examined importance of Coleridge's writings throughout the Victorian period was an "old-fashioned and conventional" enterprise. In fact, I think the opposite is true.
- <sup>18</sup> Quoted in Reynolds, 19.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Stone, 31.
- <sup>20</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book" in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, appendix 11, ed. trans. Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 311-312.
- <sup>21</sup> 312.
- <sup>22</sup> 5.183-88.
- <sup>23</sup> 5.381.
- <sup>24</sup> Stone, 158.
- <sup>25</sup> Stone, 148.
- <sup>26</sup> Stone and Reynolds also refer, in differing ways, to the way writing and reading embody self-knowledge in the text.
- <sup>27</sup> Beaujour, 3.
- <sup>28</sup> Reynolds, 12.
- <sup>29</sup> Reynolds, 28.
- <sup>30</sup> Pike, "Time In Autobiography."
- <sup>31</sup> see Virginia Woolf, The Second Common Reader.

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<sup>32</sup> Tucker, 80.

<sup>33</sup> in the footnote to this passage in the World's Classics edition, 1993.

## Chapter 4/ Chaney

### **“...so uneventful a life as mine:”**

#### The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill

If ever an autobiography sounded like a novel in its opening sentences, surely this one of John Stuart Mill's does: "I do not for a moment imagine that any part of what I have to relate, can be interesting to the public as a narrative, or as being connected with myself." In fact, he spends the first page of the text justifying what has "made me think it desirable that I should leave behind me such a memorial of so uneventful a life as mine"(25). But why? This was one of the Victorian period's most famous men – a Member of Parliament, one of its most prominent philosophers and political economists, a man who had lived a public career for over fifty years and who died being eulogized by Gladstone as the "saint of rationalism." How can his life narrative not be "interesting" as being "connected with" himself?

Yet perhaps it is not the rationalistic philosopher we see in the these first two sentences so much as Dickens' abandoned and abused child, David Copperfield, whose life story also asks "whether or not I will turn

out to be the hero of my own life." Many scholars over the years have noted the strong similarity between these two texts and have speculated in various ways on its possible meaning. The simplest interpretation may be that Mill was a similarly mistreated child and that Dickens' powerful portrayals of that experience registered strongly in Mill's psyche. Indeed, Dickens may have rendered that figure "safe" enough for Mill to invoke it in his text without unduly raising suspicions as to Mill's actual upbringing, something he surely would not have overtly done. Yet the lingering image of the child hangs over both David Copperfield and the Autobiography, no matter how famous and "caressed" (to use Dickens' term) each author subsequently became. It is as if that child's life is still present and still being understood by its middle-aged, successful, and famous male author – its discourse not retrospectively put in its place but rather a continuing and unfinalized aspect of the self-making narrative of both men, whether the textual form be novel or "autobiography."

Yet even beyond its Dickensian opening, Mill's Autobiography has invited various interpretations almost since the time of its publication. For Jonathan Loesberg, it is hardly a narrative at all but primarily a philosophical tract meant to provide empirical evidence for Mill's theories. For Arnold Levi and Avrom Fleishman, the Autobiography is a Freudian nightmare, full of psychological evidence of self-repression and submission. As is well known, Thomas Carlyle dismissed it as "the autobiography of a steam engine." Perhaps James McDonnell summed up its contradictory and misleading discourse best when he wrote: "Mill's thesis is that his mind was progressive, his education unusual and

successful, and that he has incurred debts to those who helped him along the road....[But] underneath the thesis there runs an antithesis which implicitly states: 'My mind was nearly crippled; my education was of dubious value; I hate my father.'<sup>1</sup>

But there are also other ways to read Mill's almost pathologically self-effacing text of self, perhaps the most outwardly straightforward yet inwardly complex text under consideration here. Mill's Autobiography can now be seen as yet another example of the literary self-portrait whose "authenticity" is registered as much in its gaps, silences, and thematic juxtapositions, as in its seemingly generic status as a traditional form of life writing. Rather than traditional autobiography this text instead provides some of the strongest evidence yet for the existence of the literary self-portrait whose combination of patchwork, thematic confession, dialogic discourse, and rhetorical aims nearly define Mill's Autobiography.

### "The Life"

This complex text came into being in several stages. The first stage concluded in 1856 when Mill and his wife Harriet finished writing the major part of John's Autobiography. Harriet and he worked side by side on the document they intended as – what they called – "the head" of the entire body of philosophical and political writings published under John's name. They were anxious at this time about the state of their health (both had tuberculosis) and were eager to see their "best thoughts" published before they died "if not in the best form for popular effect, yet in the state

of concentrated thought – a sort of mental pemican, which thinkers, when there are any after us, may nourish themselves with and then dilute for other people.”<sup>2</sup> (“Pemican” is the name for dried, stored food used by some Native American tribes.) The writings they were referring to included The Utility of Religion, On Liberty, The Subjection of Women, The Elements of Political Economy, and A System of Logic, along with numerous journalistic writings of Mill’s and all of his correspondence. Indeed, they would likely be proud to know that the modern publishers of Mill’s collected works at the University of Toronto have honoured his wishes and have published the Autobiography at the “head” of all his works – it is the first text of the first volume.

When Harriet died suddenly at Avignon in 1858, Mill was abject in his grief. As Mill’s biographer Michael St. John Packe has written, “In his first keen misery, his only wish was to publish the hoard of work they had accumulated during their marriage, and then die.”<sup>3</sup> But he eventually recovered from this depression with the help of Harriet’s daughter Helen and from time to time during the remainder of his life he “took out the text of his Autobiography and tried again to set out dispassionately what above all he wished posterity to know.” “The Life,” as he and Harriet had called it, was finally published after Mill’s death in 1873.

Yet such a chronology, though truthful, evades all that intervened in both Mill’s life and his text to make the Autobiography finally escape the traditional boundaries of its ostensible genre. The “mental pemican” he and Harriet wrote together was a heavily edited text, at least one early version of which survives. In it we can see how carefully they fashioned

the public narrative of John's early life and education, deleting several important sections dealing with Mill's mother and other family members and changing nearly every instance of strong or passionate language. In addition, the "pematic" they wrote together takes up only the first three-quarters of the text as a whole and directly deals with events only until 1840. The final section, which he entitled simply "The Remainder of My Life," covers nearly thirty-three years and includes his entire public career, both in Parliament and as a public "sage" figure. This fascinating concluding chapter immediately follows the hagiographic one entitled "The Most Valuable Friendship of My Life" in which Mill rhapsodizes so tellingly about Harriet, calling her a "greater than Shelley" in poetic sensibilities. Harriet's role in the composition of both Mill's life and text will form a large part of the discussion as to why this text escapes the generic bounds of traditional autobiography and so deserves some closer attention here.

While it is not surprising for a grieving husband to rhapsodize over a beloved wife whose "friendship has been the honour and chief blessing of my existence" (145) we need only think of the contrast between Mill and Godwin's passionate yet rationalistic commitment to bringing the "truth," however constituted, about Mary Wollstonecraft's life to print in his Memoirs of the Author of 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman'. Comparing Godwin's measured language with Mill's unbounded encomiums about Harriet's gifts presents a troubling image of Mill frantically seeking enough words to praise his wife completely. Indeed, the stone on Harriet's burial crypt in Avignon is nearly overflowing with

words – George Eliot said that it seemed that the words themselves would spill over the marble and keep going forever, after she and George Henry Lewes stopped to see it while touring the continent. (In fact, the tomb became a common stopping point in France for Victorian tourists.) Yet unlike Wollstonecraft who had a public career of her own and many writings left behind to sanction Godwin's claims for her character and sensibilities, Harriet Taylor Mill left only one published pamphlet and virtually no contemporaries who could substantiate what Mill wrote about her. Indeed, most were staunchly unimpressed.

Yet Mill persisted in calling hers a "rich and powerful nature." She was "a beauty and a wit" with "deep and strong feeling" and a "penetrating and intuitive intelligence." Hers was "an eminently meditative and poetic nature" and her mind "a perfect instrument." It is nearly impossible here to recreate the compounding effect of such language over pages of text – Mill simply cannot say enough. However, this long passage will suffice as an example:

I soon perceived that she possessed in combination, the qualities which in all other persons whom I had known I had been only too happy to find singly. ...In general spiritual characteristics, as well as in temperament and organisation, I have often compared her, as she was at this time, to Shelley: but in thought and intellect, Shelley, so far as his powers were developed in his short life, was but a child compared with what she ultimately became. Alike in the highest regions of speculation and in the smallest practical concerns of daily life, her mind was the same perfect instrument, piercing to the very heart and marrow of the matter; always seizing the essential idea or principle. The same exactness and rapidity of operation, pervading as it did her sensitive as well as her mental faculties, would with her gifts of feeling have fitted her to be a consummate artist, as her fiery and tender soul and her vigorous eloquence would certainly have made her a great orator, and her

profound knowledge of human nature and discernment and sagacity in practical life, would in the times when such a *carriere* was open to women, have made her eminent among the rulers of mankind. Her intellectual gifts did but minister to a moral character at once the noblest and the best balanced that I ever met with in life.  
(146-7)

The possible reasons for such language, particularly in a life text of John Mill's, have kept scholars busy for over a century now. However, Avrom Fleishman term "two deities" probably comes closest to a critically-accepted shorthand characterization of the Autobiography in present times. This depiction of Harriet and the equally dominating though less approving one of his father James Mill are the narrative centers of Mill's life tale -- it's "two deities." It is no surprise, then, given such a text, that he wondered whether or not he would be the hero of his own life.

However, there is also another overlooked yet compelling aspect of the way the Mills imagined their relationship, particularly John's depiction of himself as the "Scientist" and Harriet as the "Artist," and that is the example of the marriage between William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Recall that in Godwin's Memoir, his aim was to publish the "character" of his suddenly-deceased wife in order for the world to understand her "genius" better and to publish the ideas which she would nevermore herself be able to bring before the public. Godwin carefully elucidates the "fiery and tender soul" of Wollstonecraft and testifies to the gifts of her "vigorous eloquence" in much the same way that we see Mill here testify about Harriet. Indeed, some of the most moving passages of Godwin's Memoir are those at its very conclusion in which he describes

the balancing and modulating effect that Mary's temperament had on his, making it a "true marriage of equals" in his eyes.<sup>4</sup> As Godwin writes:

The loss of the world in this admirable woman, I leave to other men to collect; my own well I know, nor can it be improper to describe it...the improvement that I have for ever lost.

We had cultivated our powers...in different directions; I chiefly an attempt at logical and metaphysical distinction, she a taste for the picturesque...

But it was not merely...the difference of propensities, that made the difference in our intellectual habits. I have been stimulated, as long as I can remember, by an ambition for intellectual distinction; but, as long as I can remember, I have been discouraged, when I have endeavored to cast the sum of my intellectual value, by finding that I did not possess, in the degree of some other men, an intuitive perception of intellectual beauty...I have...seldom been right in assigning to them their proportionate value, but by dint of persevering examination, and the change and correction of my first opinions.

What I wanted in this respect, Mary possessed, in a degree superior to any other person I ever knew. The strength of her mind lay in intuition. She was often right, by this means only, in matters of mere speculation. Her religion, her philosophy, (in both of which the errors were comparatively few, and the strain dignified and generous) were, as I have already said, the pure result of feeling and taste. She adopted one opinion, and rejected another, spontaneously, by a sort of tact, and the force of a cultivated imagination...

...In this sense, my oscillation and scepticism were fixed by her boldness. When a true opinion emanated in this way from another mind, the conviction produced in my own assumed a similar character, instantaneous and firm....

This light was lent to me for a very short period, and is now extinguished for ever!

(272-3)

It is clear that the Mills had the Wollstonecraft-Godwin alliance in mind in their idealized depiction of their own "balanced" relationship. Both in the use of the specific terms to describe their varying "talents" and in the

dry and rationalistic tone, this passage of Godwin's can be seen to be echoed in Mill's.

Yet even beyond such obvious similarities within the text we can imagine that the Mills must also have felt akin to Wollstonecraft and Godwin as they too suffered societal reproof for a "scandalous" relationship. Harriet Taylor's unorthodox marriage allowed her to be John Stuart Mill's "intimate friend" for many years while still living with John Taylor. Eventually, she began living apart from her husband yet remained supported by and friendly with both him and their children. It was not until Taylor died that Mill and Harriet married, but by then they had been something of a "couple" (if a chaste and philosophical one) for nearly twenty years. That did not stop societal gossip, however, nor the disapproval of John Mill's mother and sisters. It was this "scandal" which forced Mill and Harriet to "retire" from public life until her death in 1856. We can imagine them turning to the example of Godwin and Wollstonecraft and the way society misunderstood and de-valued them as both a source of comfort for their own plight and as further proof of the "weakness" and "stupidity" of their present un-enlightened generation.

But we can, unfortunately, only "imagine" such a scenario. Any overt discussion by the Mills of their likely admiration for their revolutionary forebears has not survived the severe judgment levied at both Wollstonecraft and Godwin throughout the Victorian period and the censorship that Helen Taylor exerted as executor of the surviving papers of her mother and step-father. That is not to say, however, that more implicit connections cannot be uncovered. While the Mills would likely

have not dared to publicly embrace the model of Wollstonecraft's and Godwin's marriage, scholars have for many years traced the influence of Wollstonecraft's writing, particularly A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, on Mill's The Subjection of Women.

But even so, Wollstonecraft was so deeply marked by this time as a pariah that her name does not appear at all in any of the thirty-nine volumes of Mill's collected work, even as an aside. Godwin's name intriguing appears in two places – on a list of recommended reading for a young lady who seeks to be better educated (Godwin's novel Caleb Williams) and in a letter written to Leigh Hunt. In the letter, Mill seeks to clear up a potential misunderstanding with Hunt and acknowledges all the benefits which had been won by the sufferings of Hunt's earlier generation of radicals. As Mill writes:

I observed in a recent number of the M.R. a complaint made by you, in your usual gentle & kindly manner, of some reviewer who had lately spoken of Mr Fonblanque as having *rescued the journalism of the (radical) party from contempt*, an expression which by whomsoever used would be grossly unjust to several writers & to yourself more than any...but I have not found that I had anything to reproach myself with beyond omitting an opportunity which I might fairly, & indeed ought to, have used for putting upon record my sense of your great merits as a political journalist, & of what you have done & suffered in the cause, in these very times the badness of which is dwelt upon in the article in question...It was not yourself only, & Hazlitt, & Cobbett; **Godwin**, & Bentham, & my father, & various others, had laboured for radicalism with more or less of acceptance, & had gained or were gaining reputation for themselves individually, but the cause had not yet profited much by them: it has since, & we are now benefitting by what was then done – ...

ever truly yours  
J.S MILL<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to note the punctuation here. Godwin is linked on the other side of the semi-colon with both Bentham and Mill's father and "various others" at the place closest to himself. Hunt's "suffering" is a marker of the suffering of many for the "cause" of radical change – two people under the name of "Godwin" perhaps most of all.

Both the egalitarian marriage of temperamental opposites and the suffering that such a "scandalous" alliance prompts are embodied in the iconic Wollstonecraft-Godwin marriage and are surely the hidden model the Mills imagined themselves to be following, as well. Whether or not Harriet Taylor Mill was quite up to her end as a gifted artist and eloquent speaker remains questionable, however. She was surely no Mary Wollstonecraft. But perhaps all that matters in this case is that Mill thought her to be so and saw her fulfilling that role more than admirably for himself.

### **Confession and the Role of the Other**

Since it was Mill himself who claimed in the Autobiography that every one of his writings was a "fusion of two" (149) and that it didn't matter who "held the pen" – starkly claiming Harriet's co-authorship with himself – what, then, do we make of the idea of confession in a life text such as this? If "authenticity" is a textual marker of telling a "true" self, then can it be edited, especially by a dominating and highly critical other? Can two people tell one life? Whose life is it, anyway?

These questions are fundamental in understanding Mill's Autobiography because they make explicit the role of the "authoritative other" in life writing, as Bakhtin calls it, in a way that is much more implicit in Wollstonecraft's and Barrett Browning's texts. The role of the other in both the narrative of life-making and the making of life narrative is definitive, as we have already seen in several different texts. By ventriloquizing for the inner being we know as ourselves, the other provides a relational way for us to question who we are and to give answer for what we think. And the textual form for this dialogic relationship takes many shapes, from a "doubling" figure to a "speaking person" within narrative forms both fictional and non-fictional.

Confession can be seen, then, in the light of the "anti-self-consciousness" theory which Carlyle proposed and which Mill embraced. When you ask yourself whether or not you're happy, you immediately cease to be so, says the theory. Rather, you must find happiness "along the way" by not directly aiming at it. Besides echoing the language of the literary self-portrait as a "found object" which comes about through writing with other aims, such a theory also calls for the existence of the outside figure of the other whose being and qualities serve to reflect and confirm the self in question. I must have a goal which is not myself, it seems to say, but which answers back to me in a dialogue of self-reflection and self-making. I must have "heroes" who are "others" in my life.

Mill sought out authoritative others throughout his life. Jack Stillinger points out in his introduction to the early draft of the

Autobiography that Mill repeatedly talks about what he was "taught" by others, casting himself continually as the subordinate "pupil":

While [Mill] says in one place that his father gave him "the habit of thinking for myself" (p.149), he writes elsewhere, probably more truthfully, that he gave "implicit credence" in everything his father told him (p.57), and that "it would have been totally inconsistent with my father's ideas of duty, to allow me to imbibe notions contrary to his convictions" (p.60). . . Much of the *Autobiography* is, of course, concerned with showing how he outgrew the narrowness of his "taught opinions" (p.104), and it is worth noting how frequently he mentions, especially in canceled passages, the influence of *teaching* on him: his first contribution to the *Westminster Review* was "a theme written on the ideas which had been instilled into me by my teachers" (p.93); "I had been taught & had been thoroughly persuaded. . ." (p.119); "I had been taught & had always been convinced. . ." (p. 119); "I had been taught. . ." (p.120); his "early opinions" were, in first writing, those that he "had the good fortune to be taught" (p.140). Even after his "inauguration as an original and independent thinker: (p.110), the thinkers. . . were his "new instructors" (p.137), and, after he met her, Harriet was of course his "main instructor" (p.143) and he "wholly her pupil" (p.169). Still later, his stepdaughter became for him an "instructor of the rarest quality" (p. 27).<sup>6</sup>

Mill repeatedly casts himself in relation to the authoritative Teacher/Parent other first embodied by his father. Until the "mental crisis," Mill's own internal self-making voice was not even his own. As he writes in the first draft of the Autobiography, he acquired "a habit of leaving my responsibility as a moral agent to rest on my father, my conscience never speaking to me except by his voice" (60, my emphasis).

Of course, every person first gains consciousness of his or her self through the discourse of the other. As Bakhtin put it:

All that touches me comes to my consciousness -- beginning with my name -- from the outside world, passing through the mouths

of others (from the mother, etc.), with their intonation, their affective tonality, and their values. At first I am conscious of myself only through others: they give the words, the forms, and the tonality that constitute my first image of myself. . . Just as the body is initially formed in the womb of the mother (in her body), so human consciousness awakens surrounded by the consciousness of others.<sup>7</sup>

In this early phase of life, then, it is not surprising that the “authoritative other” should be the parent, specifically, the mother. We are limited by biology as to what we can know through our own perception in our earliest years. Rather:

I come to know a considerable portion of my own biography from what is said by others, by people close to me, as well as in the emotional tonality of these others: my birth and my descent, the events of family life and national life in my early childhood (that is, everything that could not have been understood or simply could not even have been perceived by a child). All these moments are indispensable for reconstructing an even minimally intelligible and coherent picture of my life and its world; I — as narrator of my own life — come to know all of them from the lips of others who are its heroes.<sup>8</sup>

So far, Bakhtin depicts a not-untypical portrait of how most people come to consciousness. We learn the “stories” that define who we are in relation to our other family members and even in our “national life,” as we grow up and hear them from those who are closest to us and in their “tones.” Indeed, psychologists have studied the way that children repeatedly desire to hear the varying “stories” of their lives — what their births were like, what things they said as children, how others commented on them, where they were when something of historical importance

happened – even when they have already heard them, repetition serving to reinforce their importance in understanding themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The “family narrative” of Mill’s text is organized, not surprisingly, around the idea of education. Mill intends for the first part of the Autobiography to dispassionately tell of his “unusual” education so as to convince people that children are capable of learning far more than is typical. While that remains true, the actual depiction of the methods in which he was educated and the emotional deprivation he was subject to remain legendary. As John Robson writes, “In his own time and ever since, the most common reaction to the Autobiography has been one of astonishment, mixed with either awe or horror, at his education” (4). It might best be said that James Mill used John as an educational experiment, teaching him a rigorous course of study through a strict pleasure/pain regimen, according to utilitarian principles. Robson has conservatively listed 169 different books in Greek, Latin, French, and English, on subjects ranging from mathematics to history, philosophy, and political economy, that Mill read and wrote on by the time he was sixteen. He was taught Greek and arithmetic beginning at age three and was not considered ready for Latin and rhetoric until the advanced age of eight. At six he wrote his own Roman history. As Mill writes in the Autobiography: “Of children’s books, any more than of playthings, I had scarcely any, except an occasional gift from a relation or acquaintance...” (30) Dickens satirized Mill’s well-known education in Hard Times as Mr. Gradgrind congratulates himself that “no little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon; it was up in the moon before it could speak distinctly. No little Gradgrind had ever

learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are! No little Gradgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gradgrind having at five years old dissected the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver."<sup>10</sup>

Yet all this astonishing intellectual accomplishment (which led Victorian phrenologists to call Mill the smartest man of all time), was conducted in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. James Mill was "the most impatient of men" (28) who was constantly correcting his son's "defects" and making him recite everything he had learned each day during evening walks. Mill was also put in charge of his younger sister's education at age ten and her relative lack of intellectual skill caused James to rebuke John's teaching rather than his sister's study. In addition, sounding nothing less than a Calvinist without religion, James had a horror of self-regard and emotions. As Mill writes, he "kept me, with extreme vigilance, out of the way of hearing myself praised, or of being led to make self-flattering comparisons between myself and others. From his own intercourse with me I could derive none but a very humble opinion of myself" (45-6). Meanwhile, "I was always too much in awe of him to be otherwise than extremely subdued and quiet in his presence" (46). In fact, he writes, "I never thought of saying to myself, I am, or I can do, so and so. I neither estimated myself highly nor lowly: I did not estimate myself at all" (46). Indeed, Mill thought he was a rather slow-witted person:

If I had been by nature extremely quick of apprehension, or had possessed a very accurate and retentive memory, or were of a remarkably active and energetic character, the trial [of his

education's effectiveness] would not be conclusive; but in all these natural gifts I am rather below than above the par. What I could do, could assuredly be done by any boy or girl of average capacity and healthy physical constitution... (44)

As in human development, however, it is during the time of adolescence when the voice of the parent begins to give way to a self's own inner self-construction, and not untypically this transition is marked by conflict. Mill has inscribed in the text the moment this first sound was heard -- in the famous passage describing the "mental crisis." It is worth our close attention to the specific words used in the Autobiography:

It was in the autumn of 1826. I was in a dull state of nerves, such as everybody is occasionally liable to; unsusceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement; one of those moods when what is pleasure at other times, becomes insipid or indifferent; the state, I should think, in which converts to Methodism usually are, when smitten by their first 'conviction of sin'. In this frame of mind it occurred to me **to put the question directly to myself...** (112)

Perhaps for the first time, Mill's inner discourse, the "conscience" that always had his father's voice, is heard in his own words. He "considers himself" and so asks himself a direct question:

"Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?"

And what is the resounding answer?

And an **irrepressible self-consciousness** distinctly answered, "**No!**"

Emphatically, his own narrating other speaks – literally “quoted” in the text of the Autobiography. He denies the authority of the “authoritative other” who is completely outside of his inner self-making – the voice of his conscience that had been the voice of his father – to gain his own “self-consciousness,” the voice of the “other” that is himself.

Bakhtin could be said to have predicted this very event in Mill's life when he writes:

The other who possesses me does not come into conflict with my *I-for-myself*, so long as I do not sever myself axiologically from the world of others....In this case, the axiological position of the other within me is *authoritative* for me; he can narrate the story of my life and I shall be in full inner agreement with him. (153)

But Mill was not in “full inner agreement” with this narrating other when it spoke in his father's voice. By the evidence of the text and his letters, Mill at this time was clearly ‘severed axiologically from the world of others” despite his interest in public affairs. He interacted with the colleagues and friends around him, but he did not enter into the kind of “axiological” self/other relationship in which each gives of himself and “completes” the other. He really was a “thinking machine” (113) by his own admission. And as he wrote in the early draft, he had no one he could actually talk to:

I sought no relief by speaking to others of what I felt. If I had loved any one sufficiently to make the confiding to them of my griefs a necessity, I should not have been in the condition I was...Advice if I had known where to seek it would have been most precious...But

there was no one on whom I could build the faintest hope of such assistance. My father...was the last person to whom in such a case as this I looked for help. (20)

As Mill so poignantly records in the Autobiography: "The words of Macbeth to the physician often occurred to my thoughts" (113). And what does the physician answer? "The patient/ Must minister to himself."<sup>11</sup>

Despondent even to the point of contemplating suicide, Mill did eventually recover with the help of Wordsworth's poetry and a highly emotional reading of Marmontel's Memoirs. It should not go unnoted that the first moment of Mill's recovery began in the act of reading another self-narration. Beyond the psychoanalytic implications of Mill's being so moved by reading about the death of a man's father, we should remember that he felt his entire self-construct had collapsed, that he felt there was no reason even to exist. Since the narrator-other is organizing not only a text of self, but the very inner consciousness of that self, reading the text of another self similarly distraught gives him the knowledge that he also could, in effect, write himself back into existence.

As Avrom Fleishman has noted, this "refusal of the finished and systematic in favor of the variable and modulated came about not only through the shake-up of Mill's mental crisis and recovery through poetry and love but also with help of his writing the Autobiography itself. In this sense his book is not only the visible image of his created self but the process through which he came to conceive and accept himself as a process."<sup>12</sup> We can now read Mill's relationship with Harriet in the more complex light that it deserves. It is perhaps too simplistic to equate Harriet

with James as simply another of the “two deities” of Mill's life. James is certainly the most famous person to fill the external Teacher/Other role, but there were others. Before Mill met Harriet, both John Sterling and Thomas Carlyle were strong candidates for this position. (Mill offered Carlyle his services “as an auxiliary” to him soon after the “mental crisis.”) Once Harriet Taylor entered his life, no one else was ever needed.

But it is important to see that Mill had already gained his own self-making voice by the time he met her. She is clearly one of the “others who are Mill's life's heroes” but she is critically different from James in this important way. Discussing the various labels that have been attached to Harriet by critics, Alan Ryan concludes that Harriet's role in Mill's life is less that of a parent and more that of a colleague, much like the place John Sterling once held: “Is Mrs. Taylor to be seen as the mother who supplies [for Mill] what Mrs. Mill, the ground-down *Hausfrau*, could not, or as an essentially sexless being who happens to combine Carlyle's sensibility with James Mill's practical-mindedness and is therefore fitted to “finish” the student whose father had taught him only half of what he needed to know? . . . We know that John Sterling briefly occupied almost the same place in Mill's life in the 1820's and 1830's, which [instead] suggests that Mrs. Taylor ought to be seen as John Sterling's heir” (125).

There is no doubt that Harriet was a very authoritative external other for Mill. She was clearly treated as an intellectual equal by Mill, with a strong voice in the composition of his written works (if she did not actually “hold the pen”). But Mill spent far more time living under the roof of his father than he ever did with Harriet, as a number of critics

have pointed out. The majority of their lives together was spent in the years of “confidential friendship” in which Harriet lived apart from John Taylor and Mill lived at home with his parents. They did not immediately marry when they could upon Taylor's death, and they spent many months apart in the short seven years they were married.

The specifics of their intellectual relationship, and particularly Harriet's contributions to the works published under John's name, have been explored in some detail by a number of scholars. Jack Stillinger was the first to compare the two drafts of the Autobiography for what they can add to the debate about Harriet's role in John's reported authorship, and he has uncovered some important information. In the early draft, we have the only large-scale physical evidence of Harriet's “joint authorship” with John. Overwhelmingly, her input was editorial in nature. Mill kept most, but not all, of her revisions. There is little textual evidence of her actual writing, however, except for the crucial description in the Autobiography of their own relationship with each other, which is taken almost directly from a letter she wrote to Mill on the subject. Harriet appears to have been much more concerned with propriety than John (probably because, as a woman, she had far more at stake) and Mill wanted the language of this description to be hers.

The many surviving letters John and Harriet wrote to each other are an interesting text in themselves, worthy of closer consideration than can be given here. In them, John's submissive language and Harriet's shrill and domineering ways have been the primary source of the negative critical constructs of their relationship until this time. By the weight of

their sheer volume, some critics have stated that, contrary to everything he wrote or said, Mill actually couldn't stand Harriet and her strong-willed ways. He chose to be apart from her often and in fact liked her better at a distance. This may be the case, but a more likely reading sees their absences from each other as not-uncommon behavior in Victorian marriages, particularly between two strong intellects who suffered from much ill health. And, indeed, for much of this time they were not even married.

It should also not be surprising, then, that once Harriet died and the need to be separate (which had been of primary concern to her) had ended, he, in effect, rejoined the world – so much so that he actually stood for Parliament. And although he had his triumphs and failures, and gives very short shrift to this time of his life in the Autobiography, in fact he died a beloved English treasure. But what cannot be missed is that however Mill writes of his life and the “others who are its heroes,” the construction of the Autobiography neither denigrates his “essential self” nor is a textual feint designed to conceal that same self. The actuality of his own self-consciousness and self-construction is recorded in the text of the Autobiography. No matter how much critics look in early drafts or rejected leaves or study erasure marks or Harriet's marginalia, they are looking for the “real” story of Mill's story as if the one in front of us were “false.” But such an idea has at its root an assumption of solitary, individualistic selfhood which by now must be seen as a false and misleading model.

### **Rhetoric and the Literary Self-Portrait**

As we have seen with Wollstonecraft's and Barrett Browning's life texts, the literary self-portrait provides a more open-ended and "living" textual form than the traditional autobiography, with its juxtaposed elements of discourse and "homologous" and "substitutable" elements. This "patchwork" textual form seems particularly congenial to those authors whose life has been largely informed by a "discourse about other discourses," or, as in Mill's case, a "bookish" life. Jerome Buckley reinforces this idea when he writes that "[t]he 'truth' of [Mill's] autobiography was shaped in part by the rhetoric he chose to employ and the models or paradigms he had encountered in his reading. It may be that the image of the lonely, driven child reared without tenderness was influenced by Dickens's portrayals of pitiful victimized waifs...[However], the crucial fifth chapter, presenting his breakdown and rehabilitation, is at all events decidedly literary in imagery, pattern, and direct reference. And the most immediate source of its design seems to be Sartor Resartus, described late in the chapter as Carlyle's 'best and greatest work,' read by Mill 'with enthusiastic admiration and the keenest delight.' " (227-8) Like Carlyle's great self-authorizing text, Mill's Autobiography contains elements of a multi-layered discourse of assertion, confession, and self-interlocution through the use of both a narrative "double" who embodies the author and the answering figure of a narrating and interpreting other.

Like Buckley, Janice Carlisle also explores the relationship of Mill's

Autobiography to Sartor Resartus and sees how Harriet Mill serves a role not unlike Carlyle's "English Editor." As Carlisle writes:

...Harriet Mill plays a double role in the Autobiography. She is both an ideal endowed with qualities that Mill found lacking in himself and, by virtue of his ability to recognize and value those qualities, she is also the occasion for Mill's assertion of them as his own. By identifying Harriet Mill as the source of the most far-reaching conclusions that he published under his own name, Mill allows himself to define their value in a way that, if they appeared as simply his own, could only seem grossly egotistical. This process recalls the doubling implicit in the semifictional and semiautobiographical form in which Carlyle proclaims his ideas in Sartor Resartus: because the Editor is praising Carlyle's thought as it appears disguised as the work of the German philosopher Teufelsdröckh, Carlyle can both glorify and question his own thoughts without appearing to do so. (256)

Yet rather than the awkward phrase "semifictional and semiautobiographical," however, we should see that both these texts are more properly called "literary self-portraits."

Carlyle's text is perhaps easier to envision as a literary self-portrait, with its heavy reliance on "poetic" figurative language, its foregrounding of fragmentary discourse (e.g., the paper bag full of scraps of writing), and its reliance on the dual narratives of Teufelsdröckh and the Editor, to name only a few of its elements. We must see, though, that even though Mill's Autobiography seems to be a linear narrative, in fact it also follows the literary self-portrait model. There are three aspects of the literary self-portrait which Mill's text seems to particularly highlight – its thematic organization, its shifting structure of time in narrative, and, finally, its open-ended and unfinalized ending.

To begin with, the Autobiography is not so much retrospective as thematic. Mill does not recount his life's story in a linear progression at all or take stock in overall lessons learned but rather organizes the text in several rough sections, foregrounding education. Such thematic organization has been misleading, however, since this scheme requires Mill to begin his life narrative with his childhood experiences just as in a traditional autobiography. This narrative trope of "beginning at the beginning" with his childhood outwardly masks the fact that nearly everything he tells about his youth is in regard to his education, from the age of three up until the time he left for a year in France at the age of fourteen. Mill relates virtually nothing of his growing up or home life outside of its relationship to his education. We know he sat side by side at the same desk as his father, he was in charge of various younger siblings' education, he had few playthings and no friends, he liked histories about Dutch independence, and loved music more than anything. But all the rest of the first third of the text relate directly or indirectly to what he learned and how he was taught and virtually nothing else.

In addition, the middle part of the narrative involves his "self-education" as he first began to write and work as a radical activist – education is still the theme but now he has broadened the horizons to those in which he "teaches himself." This is also the section which includes the "mental crisis" yet it, too, is largely framed in a textual discourse of what it "taught" him about the weaknesses of his father's education system and what he needed to "learn" anew – primarily, that the "life of feeling" matters, too.

The last third of the text revolves around the second “deity” of his life, Harriet Taylor Mill, and how her influence and opinions shaped his work and writing through their time of “confidential friendship” and marriage, and then in his public career after her death – but again primarily in terms of how she taught him. And, once again, the form may seem to follow the chronology of Mill’s life but the gaps in both time and information tell us that this is a more fragmentary discourse than it appears on the surface. Even the most dramatic episode of the text, the “mental crisis,” may have been manipulated to serve the thematic and ideological ends of the text. There is no doubt that Mill suffered this breakdown and was prone to recurring bouts of depression. But Janice Carlisle argues that Mill may actually have inserted a later and very severe episode of Mill’s depression that was brought on by James’ death and the scandal of his relationship with Harriet in the 1850s and used it to describe the one he first suffered in 1826, conveniently removing any hint of its cause as being either Harriet or James. Carlisle believes that the evidence of Mill’s continued work and involvement in outside organizations undermines his claim of being debilitated back in the 1820s and rather believes that the evidence of his textual output and letters more accurately describe a time of terrible debilitation like this in the 1850s when his relationship with Harriet forced them both into retirement. She may have been his “teacher” but the gaps and dislocation of this time period in the text attest to Mill’s difficulty in understanding and reconciling his life and his beliefs. In any case, it is important to see that the text as a whole is a carefully organized one whose “linkages” are

formed along thematic lines largely having to do with education and whose discourse shifted and changed over the course of its years of composition and the others who participated in its formation.

Mill's relationship with those "others" also highlights the way time and tense shift during the text's composition. The carefully constructed first two-thirds of the narrative, as we have seen, were composed by the 1850s, and were the intentional "distillation" of certain polemical positions of Mill's and Harriet's. However, there is a marked change in the last chapter of the book whose low-keyed title belies its importance, "General View of the Remainder of My Life." Outwardly, Mill's text implies that the time after Harriet's death was the mere "remainder" of his life, the leftovers not much worth mentioning. Such a textual stance honors the secondary theme of the Autobiography – Harriet's misunderstood genius. To remain consistent with that ideological position, Mill can hardly claim that the thirty-three years he lived after her death were very rewarding both for him and for the English public at large. Yet, in fact, that may have been true.

This last chapter was added after he was defeated for re-election to Parliament and is remarkable for its change in tone and address from the previous six, shifting mostly to the present tense and speaking to the immediate political concerns of the day (including his famous remark about being stupid and being Conservative.) The tone is one of passion and engagement with the political battles he was then waging for, among other things, Irish land reform, an expansion of the franchise to include women, and large-scale liberal reform, and is marked by the occasional

instance of a biting dry wit. Even though Mill continued to grieve over Harriet's death, he took clear pleasure at the consolation of concrete legislative work and his relationship with his step-daughter Helen (his "second prize in the lottery of life"). This renewed, late-in-life opportunity to have an effect in the world was clearly salutary for Mill.

Finally, the Autobiography must be seen as a literary self-portrait rather than a more traditional text through its "still-living" narrative stance. This is not a retrospective summing up of Mill's great life and accomplishments. Nor is it a balanced and self-totalizing distillation of his life's high points. In fact, it is largely the opposite. Other than addressing certain objections or explaining the circumstances surrounding the production of some of his well-known texts (although not all of them), Mill hardly makes any judgments about his contribution to his society's good, despite his lifelong work on its behalf. Rather, Mill's view of his life can be said to alternately broaden and telescope – to widen into the larger movements of society and intellectual history which were his interest and to narrow into the specifics of his occasional engagement with those movements in very specific terms. In fact, we might say "he hardly considers himself at all," leaving the task of evaluation and interpretation to others even as he strongly advocates for the positions he believes in. It is himself which goes without explanation. Mill finishes writing without finishing his life, saying simply: "Here, therefore, for the present, this Memoir may close" (229).

In fact, Mill may have been pre-disposed to the ontological and epistemological premises which undergird the production of the literary

self-portrait because of the strong tradition of associationism which he was raised on and continued to support throughout his life. Both James Mill and his close friend and mentor Jeremy Bentham were well-known authors and advocates of this eighteenth-century theory of psychology. This belief that all knowledge is produced through a “string of associations,” in James Mill’s terminology, was a strong one for many of the authors in the study, from Wollstonecraft and Godwin to Mill. Later, after his “crisis,” Mill slightly modified the metaphor to more closely echo the language of “weaving and re-weaving” used by Carlyle, Coleridge, Goethe. The idea is similar, though, even though the latter theory allows for change and recovery in a way that the rigidity of straightforward associationism could not. The idea that one can make and remake the self through a “many-sided” process of assimilation and re-configuration of associated elements is strikingly like the process described in the literary self-portrait – and in both, this process is largely accomplished through writing. As Mill writes in his System of Logic:

All that we are aware of, even in our own minds, is (in the words of James Mill) a certain ‘thread of consciousness;’ a series of feelings, that is, of sensations, thoughts, emotions, and volitions, more or less numerous and complicated. There is something I call Myself, or, by another form of expression, my mind, which I consider as distinct from these sensations, thoughts, &c.; a something which I conceive to be not the thoughts, but the being that has the thoughts,...I know nothing about myself, save my capacities of feeling or being conscious...<sup>13</sup>

It is remarkable how many times we encounter the impossibility of explaining ourselves – from Sterne to Wollstonecraft to Bakhtin and now Mill. There is simply “something I call Myself.” Yet it is also equally

remarkable how well the textual form of the literary self-portrait enacts this same inner discourse in text. It too does not pretend to understand completely this “something I call Myself” and rather records the way we narrativize the process of being and living within that unknowability. The retrospective and totalizing impulses of the traditional autobiography could never record this “still living” discourse.

Critics have frequently noted that Mill seemed to “write himself back into being” after his mental breakdown. The value he placed not only on his own works but on others shows how deeply he felt that it was through writing not only that ideas were captured and communicated but that “character” itself largely existed through its textual embodiments. We will discuss the issue of character in greater depth below but for now it is worthwhile to see the way in which Mill’s Autobiography is a literary self-portraits whose spaces and gaps can be bridged if not filled by laying it alongside of the rest of Mill’s vast textual output. By holding on to his many other “texts” – his letters, his diary, his journalism, his many other works of philosophy and political science – the reader can make further “connections” and “juxtapositions” of the “patchwork” of his life’s discourse. In this way, we can both highlight and recover the way this complex text is a much more hidden confession of a life, requiring the answering discourse of its reader. In a much more implicit way than we saw with Wollstonecraft and Barrett Browning, Mill’s text speaks to the responding discourse of its reader to “complete” its selfhood. “Here it all is,” he seems to say, “now put it together and see me.”

The possible gender implications of this position are not hard to see. Even so radical an egalitarian as Mill, by virtue of his masculinity and prominent societal voice, had a lot to lose in terms of cultural standing through an “authentic confession” of his life’s narrative given the terms of Victorian social custom. Somewhat like Barrett Browning (whose gender made her more “marginal,” though), Mill shared the double-bind of great cultural fame as well as a certain public image regarding his life history. And like Barrett Browning, Mill had to seek to escape that pre-written narrative, through the implicit and veiled nature of his “supposed” autobiography. But unlike Barrett Browning (and Wollstonecraft) he was an inheritor of the masculine literary tradition whose cultural force he could not fully escape – he will always come “after” in that sense. It is perhaps not surprising that this man, who was arguably Wollstonecraft’s greatest feminist follower, would choose a life discourse more closely allied with a female tradition of writing to elude the hardened generic categories of his own gender’s dominant tradition. The literary self-portrait form allowed Mill to record his “authentic” self-making voice even as he outwardly seemed to conform to the masculine ideal of solitary individualism and a retrospective life narrative through the use of its accepted generic form. He escaped traditional autobiography’s hardened generic categories while seeming at the same time to embrace them.

### **Writing the Self: Mill**

Mill was not only embedded in the male-dominated discourse of the western philosophical tradition of his period, he was one of its main practitioners, too. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the theories which address the relationship between self-narration and the philosophy of consciousness as it relates to this life text. In a different way from the utilitarian tradition, which grew out of eighteenth-century rationalism, the philosophical construct which Mill embraced after his "crisis" has its roots in the movement of ideas from the Enlightenment to its Kantian response in the nineteenth century. As is well known, the writings of the German philosophers who came after Kant -- filtered through their influential British "transmitters" (such as S.T. Coleridge and Carlyle) -- form a very important, "romantic" part of the ideas regarding selfhood in the early nineteenth century.

Avrom Fleishman has written that Mill came to see himself in the Autobiography as "process" rather than a "product." But the Autobiography is also the record of the way that Mill came to embody, in his own dialogic self-construction, both the utilitarian and the romantic traditions of his age. Mill states explicitly in the Autobiography that, after his mental crisis and new-found need to counter-balance the rationalism of his upbringing, he read the Germans widely and was clearly influenced by Coleridge's "German" philosophical theories: "...to build up my new fabric of thought...I was deriving much from Coleridge,

and from the writings of Goethe and other German authors..." (124). Like Coleridge, Mill attempted to counter the schism between the "artistic" and the "rational" with his new-found "many-sidedness." But not everyone believed such a thing was possible. Mill's contemporary Sir John Bowring said that Mill "was most emphatically a philosopher, but then he read Wordsworth and that muddled him, and he has been in a strange confusion ever since, endeavouring to unite poetry and philosophy."<sup>14</sup>

Others disagree, too, as to the actual success Mill had in accomplishing this task. Jack Stillinger subtly discounts the idea that "many sides" held sway in Mill's consciousness. Stillinger writes: "...actually [Mill's] modes of thinking changed less than he admits in the Autobiography. Before the crisis he was 'speculatively indifferent to poetry, not hostile to it,' afterward he was speculatively in favor of poetry, but still only speculatively, and at bottom he remained the remorseless logician" (21). But just because Mill did not write poetry does not mean he was only "speculatively in favor of it." Indeed, with this statement, Stillinger has sweepingly discounted Mill's influential "On Poetry," his two important essays linking together Coleridge and Bentham as "the seminal minds of the age," as well as the testimony of the Autobiography.

Instead, almost the entire body of Mill's textual output gives evidence of at least his attempt to "weave together" disparate positions as the concrete strategy for reconciling seemingly paradoxical positions -- as the literary self-portrait form of his life text shows us. As Mill writes in one of the more well-known passages of the Autobiography:

If I am asked what system of political philosophy I substituted for that which, as philosophy, I had abandoned, I answer, no system: only a conviction, that the true system was something much more complex and many-sided than I had previously had any idea of,...I never joined in the reaction against (the eighteenth century), but kept as firm hold of one side of the truth as I took of the other. The fight between the nineteenth century and the eighteenth always reminded me of the battle about the shield, one side of which was white and the other black. I marvelled at the blind rage with which the combatants rushed against one another. I applied to them...many of Coleridge's sayings about half-truths; and Goethe's device, 'many-sidedness', was one which I would most willingly...have taken for mine. (129-300)

The “mental progress” which Mill attempts to show in the Autobiography is that of “readiness and eagerness to learn from everybody, and to make room in my opinions for every new acquisition by adjusting the old and the new to one another” (189). Even political institutions, philosophies of politics and history, right ways to govern, right ways for societies to be ordered, all were grounded for Mill on the importance of many-sidedness and the ability to reject half-truths – or, in Bakhtin’s terms, to be “in full inner agreement” in the self/other relationship and to attain “due balance” in his self-construction:

I did not, for an instant, lose sight of, or undervalue, that part of the truth which I had seen before: I never turned recreant to intellectual culture, or ceased to consider the power and practice of analysis as an essential condition both of individual and of social improvement. But I thought that it had consequences which required to be corrected, by joining other kinds of cultivation with it. The maintenance of a due balance among the faculties, now seemed to me of primary importance. The cultivation of the feelings became one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed. (118)

But Mill may never have achieved his “many-sided” self-conception if he had never read Wordsworth and, through him, the rest of the German philosophers, an event which came about primarily through Coleridge's agency. Once again, we see how central Coleridge was for connecting the currents of intellectual discourse in this period.<sup>15</sup> In essence, as many scholars have shown, Coleridge drew on Schiller and Herder to work out an aesthetic theory which, as Mill wrote, attempted to attain “due balance among the faculties.” Coleridge's theories addressed “all sensibility and intelligence” without separating the mental qualities used in “rationalistic” and “creative” endeavours:

...when Coleridge says in the Biographia and elsewhere that the imagination reconciles opposites and smoothes away contradictions, he is reiterating a quality...discussed for well over thirty years. The concept is in Schelling, Kant, Schiller, Hamann, and Herder; and its general basis....can be traced to Plato. Coleridge says the....imagination “reveals itself in the balance...of opposite or discordant qualities...”<sup>16</sup>

Mill calls himself just such a Platonist in the early draft of the Autobiography, saying, “I have ever felt myself, beyond any modern that I know of except my father & perhaps even beyond him, a pupil of Plato, & cast in the mold of his dialectics” (48). Indeed, like Plato, Mill was a “student of Socrates” – the original master of the “dialogue,” as we shall examine in more detail below. At this point, however, we shall remain focused on the way Mill's attempt to “balance discordant qualities” affected his influential writings on liberty and authority.

### **Liberty and Authority**

The idea of “individuality” in a socially-constructed, other-oriented world is central not only to Mill's self-text, but to his entire philosophical and political system. Scholars have grappled for many years now with the apparent contradictions of Mill's works. Here was a man who championed such seemingly disparate positions as the importance of both liberty and authority, freedom and strict regulation. These “contradictions” can be seen clearly in utilitarianism itself. This system of political economy (which Mill helped name) posited individual self-interest as the driving force behind “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” – and yet also advocated highly interventionist and even authoritarian social and political policies. Alan Ryan notes that “we may agree that Mill approves of authority as well as individuality, but there is no escaping his insistence on individuality – it is after all the title of a chapter of Liberty and authority is not” (127). But perhaps we can see that these terms are not so contradictory as to be untenable, after all. By once again attending to the self-construction embodied in the Autobiography and the model it provides for the architectonics of these “paradoxical” positions, we can see their essentially dialogic relationship.

The key lies with the importance of the “authoritative other” in self-construction and consciousness. As Bakhtin has written, the individualism of the historical and cultural self “is an unmediated, naive individualism that is still not cut off from the world of others, still participating in the being of otherness – needing this otherness and sustaining its strength through the authoritativeness of this otherness.”<sup>17</sup>

Ryan makes the argument that Mill's "passivity" is, in effect, one of the strengths of his position. He learned in his own life the importance of authority as well as liberty, and made a place for it in his essay:

Mill's emotional dependency is in many areas not a handicap but a source of intellectual strength. In particular, it makes Liberty a more interesting essay than it might otherwise be, because Liberty recognizes numerous arguments in favour of various kinds of authority as well as the central case for individual liberty. Liberty is not an essay about doing your own thing; it is an essay about finding the best thing and making it your own. (129)

And making the best thing "your own" does not imply a solitary individualism. On the contrary, it implies a context of cultural being out of which a self is defined in relationship.

In this same way, the utilitarian philosophy is fundamentally grounded in the importance of the world of otherness -- "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" -- but driven by an "individualistic" self-conception -- "self-interest." As Adam Smith first outlined in Wealth of Nations, the idea of the "division of labor" in a society was one in which an individual maximizes his or her effectiveness through the coordination of the entire group -- all of whom will then benefit. In the utilitarian system, increasing societal productivity and well-being by reducing family size and having disincentives to welfare and incentives to work implied a belief in authoritarian measures to bring about greater individual freedom and happiness. Mill himself stated in On Liberty that:

...men should be free to act upon their opinions,....so long as it is at their own risk and peril...Acts, of whatever kind, which, without

justifiable cause, do harm to others, may be, and in the more important cases absolutely require to be, controlled by the unfavourable sentiments, and, when needful, by the active interference of mankind. <sup>18</sup>

Even the Poor Law legislation, while it may have been unfortunate policy, still had as its central premise the denial of the self for the greater long-term interest of the nation.

Bowing to authority, then, is only seen as a wholly “negative” act in that non-existent world of autonomous individualism. In fact, Mill is stating that liberty and authority are inextricably linked. There is a fundamental need for both. Indeed, acknowledging authority is one of the most completely “free” acts a self can perform. By definition of its fundamental relationship to the world of internal and external otherness, the self will always be in a kind of tension of these positions – liberty and authority, collectivity and individualism. It is not surprising, then, to see how often Mill insists on his learned ability to reconcile other such seemingly disparate positions in the Autobiography, as well.

### **Sage Discourse and the Rhetoric of Ethos**

But stepping back from the specifics of Mill’s influential writings on culture and society, we can see that they were also part of the larger discourse of the Victorian “sages,” as well. Scholars have speculated for many years as to why the figure of the “sage” seems to have been a uniquely Victorian phenomenon – the crisis of faith in the period, its rapid industrialization, and an inheritance from Romanticism have all

been offered (along with numerous other theories) as explanation. These writers, nearly all men (with the occasional inclusion of George Eliot/Mary Ann Evans), were the “secular prophets” of the age, giving “wisdom” to their readers, and setting the tone for the cultural debates of the period. John Holloway’s influential 1953 volume entitled The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument helped to solidify the critical terms and positions regarding these nineteenth-century canonical non-fiction prose writers. As Holloway put it, these writers “sought (among other things) to express notions about the world, man’s situation in it, and how he should live” (1). Without addressing the assumptions undergirding Holloway’s terminology (and the fact that he calls them all “men” even though he includes George Eliot as one of the sages), it is important for our purposes here to see that the discourse of the “leading man,” the “cultural light,” and even the “secular prophet” was a dominant part of Victorian cultural life.

Throughout history there have always been “wise elders” of one kind or another to help guide a society. However, the fact that these “guides” were not religious leaders but writers who used the testimony of their own lives in a rhetorical, polemical frame in order to influence the direction of their society has obvious importance for our purposes here. With the advantage of history it is possible to see that the widespread cultural influence of these “secular prophets” did not outlive the Victorian period. We know now that such moral certainty and such an earnest belief in the perfectibility of mankind met its end in first decades of this century. But it worthwhile for us to examine how the discourse of the

“sages” intersects with the rhetoric of the literary self-portrait, as well as the way in which Mill’s place in this pantheon both reinforces and undermines the gendered nature of this figure.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the rhetoric of *ethos* is an important part of the way the literary self-portrait authorizes the authenticity and persuasiveness of its speaker. This ethical argument style relies on the character of the speaker to persuade its listeners to the position the speaker advocates based solely on that same discourse. This classical rhetorical form was not only important for the ancient orators such as Cicero but, as we have seen, also for the influential figures of the “neo-classical” eighteenth century, particularly Edmund Burke. We have also argued here that Mary Wollstonecraft re-framed that discourse for her own purposes and initiated a female form of self-narration and rhetorical persuasion based on this same *ethos* style.

Support for this position comes from an unlikely source, however, when we see that even as far back as 1953, Holloway was using much the same terms to describe the discourse of the sages. Holloway writes that the persuasiveness of the sage’s argument was bound up in, to use Newman’s terms, the assent that they gained. Rather than the “credence given to a proposition in logic, science or mathematics” which only convinces a listener in an “abstract” or “notional” way, Holloway writes, when it comes to the important concerns of human life, we must give “Real Assent,” (7) which is precisely what he says the sages attained. As he puts it:

This kind of Assent is directed towards assertions based on the whole trend of our experience; and because of this foundation, their meaning is too rich to be sharply limited, always liable to be unfolded further, and likely to vary from one person to another in exact content. It is a meaning which arises for the individual out of his own history, and exists for him in vivid particular images that bring his belief to life. (7)

Just as in the literary self-portrait, these texts gain their rhetorical persuasiveness through the authenticating self-narration of their speakers and are as varied as the life narration which forms their "content." "Meaning," once again, being made out of an "individual and his own history."

This issue is also closely related to the contemporary Victorian fascination with the notion of "character," an issue that remained important to Mill, in particular, throughout his writing career. As Janice Carlisle has discussed at length, "character" was a term with multiple meanings, all related to the issues under discussion here – the unknowability of a person's "real self" as it intersects with outward manifestations of that same selfhood, even as stable identity was an unchallenged notion:

Unlike the twentieth-century definitions of *identity* or *the self*, *character* in Victorian usage was irreducibly public in its manifestations, equivalent to an individual's reputation or to a written reference, the "character" that a servant takes from one situation to the next. Whether their perspective on the subject was moral, economic, religious, or scientific, Victorians used the word in surprisingly similar fashions. Even a writer like Samuel Smiles, who declares that character is the 'moral order embedded in the individual' also insists that the test of character is one's behavior toward others. (4)

Carlisle argues that the idea of character consumed Mill who, she argues, felt he had no stable or fixed “character” of his own unless he could write it into existence. As she says, “Mill reveals the extent to which such an emphasis on the public dimensions of character provides the grounds through which writers are able to establish their individuality through their work. For Mill as for many of his contemporaries, writing involves the publication of character” (5).

As in the grounding of the *ethos* argument and in the literary self-portrait, who you show yourself to be through your words will “authorize” your importance to your community. For reasons having to do with the historical moment of the Victorian age, these “sage” figures answered the needs of their community through embodying this discourse and providing “wisdom” for their unsettled age. As Holloway puts it, these writings are morally persuasive because in them “...various arguments for limited truths accumulate one by one, until at last the enquirer simply finds his mind, under their legitimate influence, converging irresistibly on a whole philosophical or religious or moral outlook” (7). Perhaps now we can see that the Mills’ hope that John’s Autobiography would provide long-lasting food for the ages – a “kind of mental pemican” – is not so surprising after all, then.

### **The Adventurous-Heroic Autobiography**

As we saw earlier with Mary Wollstonecraft’s text, Mill’s Autobiography can usefully be seen not just as a literary self-portrait but as

a form of "biographical writing" which conforms to Bakhtin's unique categories. Recall that, in general, Bakhtin believes that "autobiography," his all-purpose word for life-writing, has two overall categories, the "social-quotidian" -- or the "story of the common man" -- and the "adventurous-heroic" -- or the story of the "leading figure" of a society whose life discourse is persuasive in his or her community. As with the persuasive discourse of the Victorian sages, our concern here with Mill's Autobiography will deal primarily with the second type.

Bakhtin gives three organizing elements of this form:

Adventurous-heroic biographical value is grounded in the **will or drive to be a hero** -- to have significance in the world of others; in **the will to be loved; in the will to live life's "fabular" possibilities**, the manifoldness of inner and outer life, **to the full**. These three values, organizing the life and actions of the biographical hero for that hero himself, are to a considerable degree aesthetic...<sup>19</sup>

As we saw with Wollstonecraft, this form comes the closest "to dreaming about one's own life" (159). It "is like a dance in slow tempo;... everything inward and everything outward strives here to coincide..." (160).

The first constituent of this type of autobiography is one of the most predominant elements in Mill's text. As Bakhtin describes it:

Striving for glory organizes the life of the naive hero, and it is glory that also organizes the *story* of that life -- its glorification. To strive for glory is to gain consciousness of oneself within the civilized mankind of history (or within a nation); it means to found and build one's own life in the possible consciousness of this civilized mankind; to grow in and for others, and not in and for oneself; to assume a place in the proximate world of one's contemporaries and descendants. ...In rendering others heroic, in establishing a pantheon of heroes, I seek to become a participant in such a

pantheon, to place myself in it, and to be guided from within it by the longed-for future image of myself that was created in the likeness of others...(156)

We may balk at thinking of Mill as “striving for glory” or driving to be a “hero” when we read his more-than-modest self-assessment in the Autobiography. But as Bakhtin defines it, this “striving for glory” has less to do with acquiring a place on Mount Olympus than the desire to matter in the larger historical and cultural context of the self's own world, as well as to its own descendants.

Of course, public position was important to Mill. His whole life was concerned with his role and influence in the affairs of society and the changes he could effect there. We can see how both he and Harriet explicitly and implicitly address this issue in their letters to each other as well as in the Autobiography itself. Stillinger has carefully noted the way the tone of the text moved from John's “anguished” voice in the early draft, to the final, starker and much more “public” published version. As he has written, “Mill's successive revisions within the early draft show the same kind of progress from private to public, and from public to more public, voice. Often at the suggestion of Harriet he suppressed personal and family details that, had they been kept in the later draft, would have made the Autobiography a more recognizably human document...” (15).

We have already considered the various ways that Harriet's influence in Mill's life figures into his “striving to be a hero” in the world through his life narration. We can see several of these related strands at work, all in the service of the relationship between a “fair representation”

of his life and the “good” it will do, in a long letter dated 10 February 1854 which Mill wrote to Harriet:

I...have read through all that is written of the Life -- I find it wants revision, which I shall give it....mostly passages in which I had written, you thought, too much of the truth or what I believe to be the truth about my own defects. I certainly do not desire to say more about them than integrity requires, but the difficult matter is to decide how much that is. Of course one does not, in writing a life, either one's own or another's, undertake to tell everything -- & it will be right to put something into *this* which shall prevent any one from being able to suppose or to pretend, that we undertake to keep nothing back. Still it va sans dire that it ought to be on the whole a fair representation....As to matters of opinion & feeling on general subjects, I find there is a great deal of good matter written down in the Life which we have not written anywhere else & which will make it as valuable in that respect....as the best things we have published....But we have to consider, which we can only do together, how much of our story it is advisable to tell, in order to make head against the representations of enemies when we shall not be alive to add anything to it. If it was not to published for 100 years I should say, tell all, simply & without reserve. As it is there must be care taken not to put arms into the hands of the enemy.<sup>20</sup>

Another way of characterizing this kind of awareness of one's self in history is just as Bakhtin has written: “The heroic constituent in biographical value is characterized by this organic sense of oneself within the heroicized mankind of history; by the organic sense of being a participant in it, of experiencing one's essential growth within it, of taking root in it and gaining full consciousness and understanding of one's own works and days within it” (156).

The second element in this type of life writing is the self's quest for love as an element of self-construction. As Bakhtin writes:

The second constituent... is love. The thirst to be loved; the consciousness of oneself, the seeing of oneself, and the forming of oneself in the possible loving consciousness of another; the striving to turn the longed-for love of another into a force that impels and organizes my life in many of its constituents: all this, too, constitutes growth in the atmosphere of another's loving consciousness. (157)

Clearly, Mill strove to “turn the longed-for love of another into a force that impels and organizes” his life. As we have already seen, Mill’s love for Harriet bordered on the irrational to many of his friends and family members. It certainly was powerful and all-encompassing. We can point to many things which testify to this all-important aspect of Mill's self-construction – his diary, his letters, his behavior toward anyone who slighted Harriet, including his own family – but perhaps most tellingly, we can point to the text of the Autobiography itself. Clearly, Harriet held the place as John's “longed-for love.” As we have already seen, much of his self-narration involves the celebration of Harriet as a greater mind than either Shelley or Carlyle; he is “wholly her pupil.” As Mill wrote near the end of the Autobiography, after Harriet's death: “My objects in life are solely those which were hers; my pursuits and occupations those in which she shared, or sympathized, and which are indissolubly associated with her. Her memory is to me a religion, and her approbation the standard by which, summing up as it does all worthiness, I endeavour to regulate my life” (183). As Bakhtin explained it, “all narrowly personal moments are organized and regulated by what I would wish myself to be in the other's loving consciousness – by the anticipated

image of myself, which must be axiologically created in that consciousness" (157).

More than one critic has pointed out the central role Harriet played in the construct of the public man John Stuart Mill, no matter how much they both wished to keep their relationship a private matter. Most people in Mill's own time believed that she was a snare and a hindrance to his genius. Carlyle wrote to his wife Jane that "Mrs. Austin had a tragical story of [Mill's] having *desperately in love* with some young philosophic beauty. . . .and being lost to all his friends and to himself. . . (a woman with) great dark eyes, that were flashing unutterable things while he was discoursin' the utterable concernin' all sorts o' high topics. . . she was full of unwise intellect, asking and re-asking stupid questions."<sup>21</sup> A very much smaller few, such as William Fox, felt that she was an important help to his work. Continuing into the twentieth century, critics have chastised Mill's need for Harriet's love as an unfortunate and even inappropriate part of his self-narration: "Harriet of the incomparable intellect. . . was largely a product of (Mill's) imagination, an idealization, according to his peculiar needs, of a clever, domineering, in some ways perverse and selfish, invalid woman."<sup>22</sup>

But in any case, their love story is not the private business they desired but is intricately and forever bound up in the public and historic assessment of John Stuart Mill. As Bakhtin has written:

...love may spill over into the historical-heroic sphere of the hero's life as well: the name of Laura intertwines with the laurel (*Laura/lauro*), and the anticipation of his own image in posterity intertwines with his image in the soul of the beloved; the form-giving axiological power of the beloved — they reinforce each other

mutually in his life and merge into a single motif in his biography...  
(158)

Interestingly, Fox used the same metaphor of Petrarch's Laura when he saw the magnificent grave shrine Mill built at Avignon for Harriet:  
"Surely a greater than Laura is buried here."

The third constituent of this type of life writing is the one we see least of in Mill's determinedly dry narrative, but it is present nonetheless. Bakhtin calls it "the adventure-value," a wishing to "leave everything open" or "play:"

..it is almost completely free of anything that has objective and meaning-related validity – it is *playing* with life as a "fabular" value, freed of any answerability with the unitary and unique event of being. . .(but) adventure-value (also) presupposes an established world of others, in which the adventure-hero is rooted... (159)

Mill himself emphasizes the importance of this aspect of life when he explicitly embraces the "cultivation of feelings" he found through Wordsworth's poetry. The "habit of analysis" he thinks, is what brought on his mental crisis and he vows to embrace the "openness" of feelings. As we saw earlier, too much "analysis" brings on major depression – "ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so" (118). But more implicitly in his self-narration is the small glimpses of Mill's warm and even playful side, the part of him that loved music and despaired that it was theoretically feasible for all musical combinations to be exhausted. This is also the part of his character that is ironic and sarcastic, particularly in the last section of the Autobiography. Recalling

how he caused an uproar by saying that "the Conservative party was by the law of its composition the stupidest party", he explained himself in his own note to the text: "Now, I do not retract this assertion; but I did not mean that Conservatives are generally stupid; I meant, that stupid persons are generally Conservative" (212).

As was said earlier, the first part of self-narration comes from the lips of the parent and the others "who are the heroes" of that life. The narrator does not begin as the hero of his own text. "When I narrate my own life," says Bakhtin, "in which the heroes are those who are others for me, I am step by step woven into its formal structure (I participate in my own life, but I am not the hero in it); I put myself in the hero's place, I captivate myself through my own narration. Wherever I am in solidarity with others, the forms in which others are axiologically perceived are transposed upon myself. It is thus that the narrator **becomes** the hero" (154).

We began with David Copperfield's question about whether or not he would turn out to be the hero of his own life, and perhaps it is not so remarkable a query, after all. Indeed, the very aptness of his words may well be what has lent an air of "authenticity" to that fictionalized text of self. But in any case, as we have seen, the "narrator" and "hero" are both aesthetic "others" in a text. Writing about one's own self may seem to be a closed activity that we are entirely in control of, but as Bakhtin writes, that can never be because a self-narration always spills beyond the self alone:

Biography is not a produced *work*, but an aestheticized, organic, and naive *act* ....(it) is deeply trustful....it presupposes a benign or kind self-activity which proceeds from outside its bounds and encompasses it as a whole...(but) biography, just like confessional self-accounting, points beyond its own bounds. (165)

Mill appears to understand this fact by so clearly intending for the text of his life to stand at the head of his entire philosophical and political output -- to "point beyond its own bounds." Some critics have taken this self-consciousness as a "negative" aspect of the Autobiography, something that compromises its integrity as an "authentic" text of self.<sup>23</sup> But, once again, this presupposes the naive, unitary construct of selfhood that we have shown to be fundamentally unsound. The philosophical and political concerns of Mill's other writings, particularly On Liberty and The Subjection of Women, do spill over into the text of the Autobiography quite decidedly, and quite predictably.

### **The Project of Selfhood**

Bakhtin gives us another, more accurate model than the "solitary individual" paradigm of both the way we narrate our lives as they are lived and as they are written -- the "aesthetic of lived life." This "dance in slow tempo" between inner and outer being in one's own self-construction has far-ranging implications for political and philosophical thought, as both Mill and Bakhtin show us in their texts. By seeing life and text as both constructed by the inner narrating other we can move beyond older and more unsound constructions of selfhood in narrative.

The importance of the individual in a larger social context is something Mill was concerned with from the earliest days of his life. As we noted many times now, the Mills intended for the Autobiography be a "mental pemican" – literally "concentrated food" – to nourish the liberal intellectuals of the future. The Autobiography, then, acknowledges its "moral responsibility" to society and seeks to be a text that acts in that realm. But without the narrative of the self-telling other inside that kind of social action would be impossible. Even for such a champion of individualism as John Stuart Mill, to live means to engage in dialogue; I become myself only by revealing myself to another, through another and with another's help. "Our own discourse is gradually and slowly wrought out of others' words that have been acknowledged and assimilated," Bakhtin says, "the boundaries between the two are at first scarcely perceptible."<sup>24</sup> The interaction and dialogue of these kinds of discourse shape the history of the psyche and the development of the self. As Bakhtin has written:

I achieve self-consciousness, I become myself, only by revealing myself to another, through another and with another's help. The most important acts, constitutive of self-consciousness, are determined by their relation to another consciousness....The very being of man (both internal and external) is a *profound communication*. *To be* means to *communicate*. . Life is dialogical by its very nature. To live means to engage in dialogue, to question, to listen, to answer, to agree...<sup>25</sup>

And we have textual evidence of this very self-construct in not only John Stuart Mill's Autobiography but also Mary Wollstonecraft's Letters in Sweden and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh. The "profound

communication" that occurs when the discourse of life is "confessed" by the inner narrator to the answering world is so powerful that it can move nations, as we have now seen. The form of the literary self-portrait deploying the rhetoric of the *ethos* argument are the textual embodiments which incarnate this "dialogical life."

## Notes to Chapter Four

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- 1 James McDonnell, "Success and Failure: A Rhetorical Study of the First Two Chapters of Mill's *Autobiography*", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 45.2 (Winter 1976) 109.
- 2 Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill*, (New York: Macmillan, 1954) 371.
- 3 Packe, 409.
- 4 However, Godwin also perhaps over-emphasizes the "romantic," "emotional," and "unstudied," aspects of Mary's personality in way that reinforces the very gender categories that Mary sought to erase.
- 5 *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill: 1812-1848*, ed. Francis E. Mineka, (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1963) 358-9, my emphasis.
- 6 *The Early Draft of John Stuart Mill's Autobiography*, ed. Jack Stillinger, (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1961) 19. The page numbers are Stillinger's and refer to locations within this edition of the *Early Draft*.
- 7 Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 96.
- 8 Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* 154.
- 9 The potential for *harm* in these family narratives is also implicit when parents and others misuse the power of these self-making stories to tear down a child's sense of worth.
- 10 Dickens, *Hard Times*, 54.
- 11 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V. iii, 40-45.
- 12 Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography: The Language of Self-Writing in Victorian and Modern England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 153-4.
- 13 Quoted in Carlisle, 22.
- 14 William Fox, *Memories of Old Friends*, page 113 (journal entry for August 7, 1840) quoted in Jack Stillinger's introduction to the early draft of the *Autobiography*.
- 15 Graham Hough's groundbreaking essay in 1964, "Coleridge and the Victorians", was the first to re-examine the critical assumption summed up by biographer E.K. Chambers who stated that Coleridge's influence evaporated like "a will o' the wisp light" and all that remained of his legacy was "a handful of golden poems". More recently, U.C. Knoepfelmacher and Lawrence Poston have attempted to examine further some parts of the Coleridgean influence in the nineteenth century.
- 16 James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981) 223.
- 17 *Art and Answerability* 156.
- 18 John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty", *John Stuart Mill: Three Essays*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975) 69.
- 19 Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* 156.
- 20 F.A. Hayek, *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor: Their Correspondence and Subsequent Marriage* (U of Chicago P, 1951) 194.
- 21 "John Stuart Mill" in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*.
- 22 *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*.
- 23 See two works in particular. Jonathan Loesberg's article, "Free Association: Mill's *Autobiography* as the Fiction of a Philosophy" in *Interspace and the Inward Sphere: Essays on Romantic and Victorian Self*, ed. Anderson and Weiss, (Macomb: Western Illinois UP, 1978) -- and Gertrude Himmelfarb's *On Liberty and Liberalism: The Case of John Stuart Mill*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).
- 24 Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Creation of a Prosaics*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 199) 221.
- 25 Mikhail Bakhtin, "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book" in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, appendix 11, ed. trans. Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 311-312.

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### Conferences

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James Slevin, Georgetown University, chair
- **Letters of the Spirit: The Texts and Contexts of Romanticism**  
"I stretched out my hand to eternity:" The Ideology of Self-  
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 Member of Executive Writing Committee, co-author of  
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- **Computing and the Humanities** (CATH '94) September 1994  
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 Oxford University (held in Glasgow, Scotland)
- **The Conference on 18th and 19th Century  
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 Organization Co-Founder, 1991  
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### References

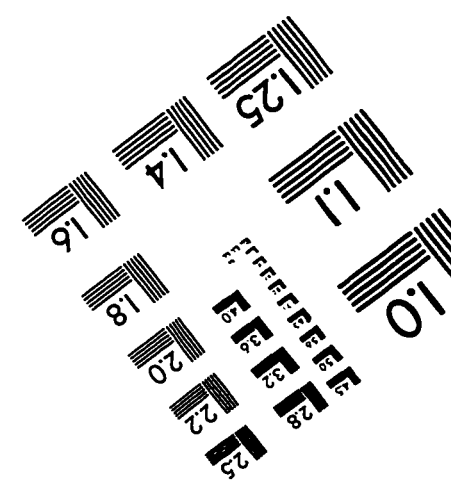
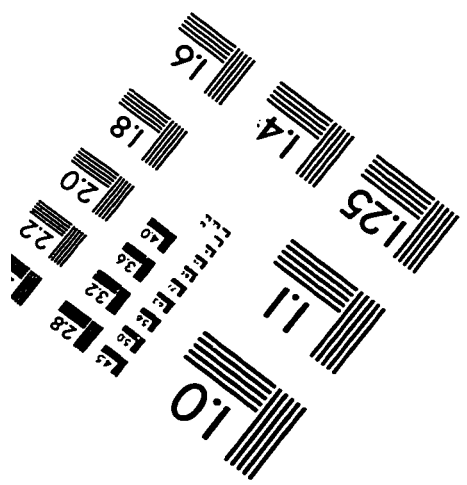
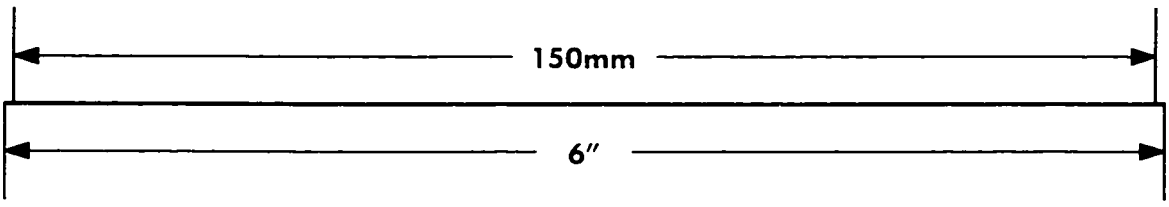
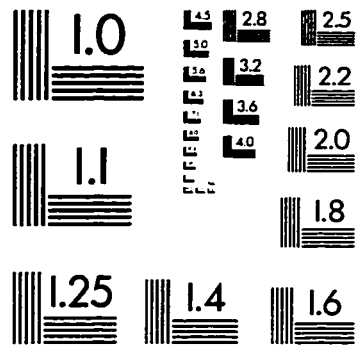
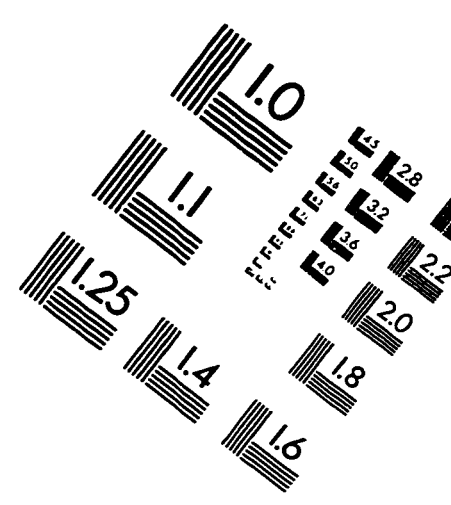
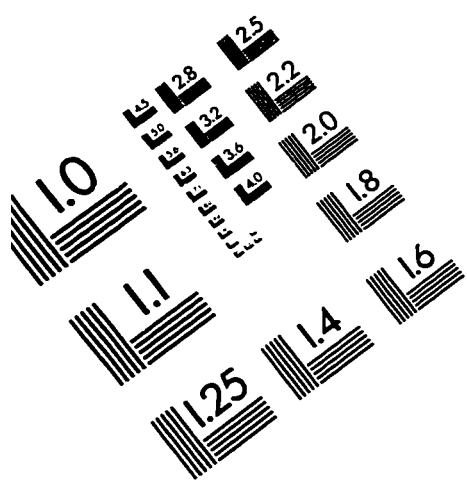
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# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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