



HAL
open science

Introduction: Marginal and Subaltern Lives: Victorian and Edwardian Alternative Self-Representations and Subjectivities

Aude Haffen

► **To cite this version:**

Aude Haffen. Introduction: Marginal and Subaltern Lives: Victorian and Edwardian Alternative Self-Representations and Subjectivities. *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens*, 2023, 98 Automne, 10.4000/cve.13742 . hal-04516447

HAL Id: hal-04516447

<https://hal.science/hal-04516447>

Submitted on 22 Mar 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Introduction

Victorian and Edwardian Autobiographies

Autobiographies victoriennes et édouardiennes

Aude Haffen



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/cve/13742>

DOI: [10.4000/cve.13742](https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.13742)

ISSN: 2271-6149

Publisher

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

Brought to you by Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3



Electronic reference

Aude Haffen, "Introduction", *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* [Online], 98 Automne | 2023, Online since 09 March 2024, connection on 22 March 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cve/13742> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.13742>

This text was automatically generated on March 18, 2024.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Introduction

Victorian and Edwardian Autobiographies

Autobiographies victoriennes et édouardiennes

Aude Haffen

Marginal and Subaltern Lives: Victorian and Edwardian Alternative Self-Representations and Subjectivities

- 1 Like many aspects of British Victorian and Edwardian society and cultural production, the broad generic category of life-writing brings forth a rich set of contradictions, perhaps more intensely so when it involves the author's own interpretation of his or her factual and subjective experience, as is the case in autobiographies and related forms of self-representation and performances of the 'I'. Far from being hindered by the prevailing norms of middle-class decency and sexual repression associated to the period, the multiple forms taken by textual self-expression in nineteenth-century-and-early-twentieth-century Great Britain appear to have been triggered and animated by the very tensions generated by what Simon Joyce highlighted as 'the gaps between [Victorianism's] theoretical self-image and its practices' (Joyce 14). To name only a few of such apparently conflicting binaries, with frequent overlaps, compulsory respectability and transgressive desires, liberal progressive promises of emancipation and repressive legal and moral constraints, edifying confession and militant testimony, social determinism and individual agency, editorial control and the ruses of unhampered self-expression, gruff reticence and narcissistic wordiness not only coexist on the global scale of autobiographical production, but often dynamically inform individual works.
- 2 The autobiographical genre's academic aura as well as its material conditions of production and circulation have consistently depended on a disproportionate number of hegemonic upper-class white male 'lives' being studied and marketed as 'extraordinary'—a celebration of 'the elite few at the expense of the many' which feminist cultural critic Liz Stanley exposes as 'classism writ large and confirmed by

sexism and racism' (Stanley 13). Foucauldian, postcolonial and feminist critics among others have highlighted that autobiography, in its canonical form of a linear introspective self-narrative, has extolled aesthetic singularity, spiritual freedom and moral agency while actually buttressing hegemonic structures of power-knowledge which excluded other possible forms of epistemic, bodily and social ways to relate to 'oneself'.

- 3 Michel Foucault has argued that modern Christian and secular forms of confessions have enforced and reiterated a regime of compulsory inner self-scrutiny which produces modern Western 'subjects', constituted as such by this assumption of a mostly sexual inner truth to be searched, deciphered and confessed (Foucault 1976, 78–80). By placing confessional discourses at the heart of the modern nexus of power-knowledge shaping Western subjectivities and singling out the Victorian period as an inexhaustible, 'polymorphous' producer of discourses on sexuality (Foucault 1976, 45), he has famously reversed two powerful assumptions: that of the liberating power of self-narratives, and that of the 'Victorian' age as a regime of sexual repression through the compulsory silencing of deviant desires and invisibility of sexuality as a whole. For him far from allowing a myriad of particular life-experiences and forms of emancipated self-awareness to challenge hegemonic norms, modern Western autobiography has created normative subjectivities bound to understand themselves according to culturally dominant views of what individual subjects and their sexual desires should be like—views legitimated, from the mid-nineteenth century, by the moral and epistemic apparatus of medical and criminal science (Foucault 2001a, 346; 2001c, 1477–81). However, Foucault also valued, and brought to light, obscure personal records able to resist and even unsettle dominant epistemic frameworks, such as the memories of Herculine Barbin, labelled as a 'hermaphrodite' by nineteenth-century scientific discourse, but whose own pre-sexualised subjective experience of the mono-gendered space of the convent eludes modern epistemic obsession with sexual and gender binaries (Foucault 2014, 14–16). Besides, he suggested that other forms of self-examination and 'objectivation of the soul' (Foucault 2001b, 1245) may derive from a pre-Christian, Ancient Greek and Roman practice of self-writing—a companionate, mutual exercise in self-improvement, an art of living practiced and written in common, for example in Marcus Aurelius's correspondence with Fronto or Seneca's letters to Lucilius, rather than an individual withdrawal into an isolated, self-sufficient, ontologised 'I' to be purified, but also preserved, defined and constituted through the acknowledgement of its own most intimate thoughts and inner desires.
- 4 Similarly, feminist, Marxist and postcolonial critics have exposed the pitfalls of classic forms of autobiographical writing for subaltern subjects—the most obvious one being that they are compelled to follow prescribed literary tropes and models of identity, in other words to use the language of their patriarchal, class and colonial oppressors (Lionnet 1; Smith 19–20). As Regenia Gagnier has argued, in the Victorian and Edwardian era the widespread circulation of popular realist fiction produced by middle-class authors, including the developmental master narrative reiterated by the Bildungsroman, encouraged lower-class writers to borrow bourgeois models of self-representation and subjectivity which had little to do with their actual experiences and yet determined how they perceived their lives—a gap between ideology and experience which in some cases led to the disintegration of the narrative the working-class writer

was hoping to construct, but also to 'the disintegration of personality itself' (Gagnier 46).

- 5 Such dominant narrative patterns, which circulated across the blurred boundaries between realist novels and Victorian autobiography proper, were indeed setting paradigms encouraging readers and, among them, aspiring memoirists, to privilege linear progress from pre-school days to public positions of authority over the reality of their largely disempowered relational spatial positions, to value individuality more than community, self-sufficiency more than cooperative dependence, and to pursue the ideal of a strictly gendered stable domesticity at the expense of other forms of intimacies—namely, to vainly try to recapture a coherent, unique sense of 'self', reinforced through patterns of crises and recoveries, while their experience was closer to that of fragmented, multiple selves mostly determined by exterior circumstances. In other words, working-class men were made to understand themselves and structure their life narratives according to the ideological framework of respectable bourgeois liberal imperialist subjectivity while having barely any material access to such middle-class lives (Gagnier 43-48).
- 6 Gagnier also highlights the gap between the familial and gendered ideology conveyed by realist novels and the actual experiences of working-class women autobiographers, as well as the psychological cost of this gap, when their existences amounted to a 'sequence of non-correspondences to middle-class norms' (Gagnier 49). However she examines a corpus of working-class autobiographies, often dismissed as 'non-literary' by life-writing critics, whose authors circumvented middle-class ideological prescriptions by successfully, usually through political awareness and collective public engagement, differentiating their self-representations from bourgeois models of subjectivity and from the stereotypical or sensationalised 'poor' of realist fiction (Gagnier 138-70).
- 7 More generally speaking, post-Foucauldian cultural critics and life-writing theorists dialectically engage with both the ideological pitfalls of autobiographical writing—mostly an essentialization of identities and a false consciousness of minority authors due to hegemonic strictures—and its invaluable ability to destabilise, through disidentification, failure to perform, tactical addresses to a double audience and other textual strategies, the very frames of acceptability and recognisability the genre may seem to endorse (Smith 28-31; Lionnet 131). This is what Frédéric Regard suggests, equating any textual inscription of the 'self' with operations of elusive displacements and volatile errancy:

N'y aurait-il pas, de manière consubstantielle au travail autobiographique, une résistance à l'assignation à résidence, se doublant éventuellement de l'ouverture de voies inexplorées ? (Regard 2000, 15)
- 8 Minority 'subjects' willing to leave a trace of their lives may self-censor, repress or express through other literary means (fictional, poetic, metaphorical) and within other textual circuits (personal diaries, letters, private circulation) all aspects of their personal experiences which elude patterns of public acceptability and recognition. Or they may indeed resort to the ruses of textual self-expression, namely its ability to destabilise meaning, occupy antagonistic discursive spaces and upturn structures of power against themselves. Through his archival excavation of the prehistory of French homosexual autobiographies in nineteenth-century France, mostly found in the more or less coerced, supervised and edited testimonies of medical-psychiatric and forensic

‘case studies’, Philippe Lejeune has shown that allegedly deviant, abnormal ‘subjects’ can engage in a strategic collaborative compromise with the classifying-normalizing-pathologizing disciplinary apparatus, suspecting that their testimonies will always somehow transcend such discursive limits and institutional constraints—especially thanks to the unpredictable variety of reader identifications and the subversive promises of reception practices (Lejeune 1987, 83-84).

- 9 In his parallel study of two apparently opposed models of dissident self-inscription, André Gide’s ‘sincere’ revelation of his deep, true, authentic homosexual ‘nature’ and Oscar Wilde’s playfully subversive disavowal of the relevance of such things as sincerity, nature, truth and depth, Jonathan Dollimore also highlights the strategic possibilities of self-writing for ‘deviant’ subjects either excluded from standards of intelligibility or forced into reified, pathological identities. Oscar Wilde’s essays, with their fin-de-siècle textual dispersion of bourgeois selfhood and paradoxical destabilisations of the binaries underlying the Victorian social order, involve, Dollimore argues, an implied anti-confessional stance (Dollimore 9-10)—insofar as they still rely on hegemonic cultural and moral values positing the ‘subjective depth’ (Dollimore 15, 16) of a pre-social, pre-linguistic essentialised subject, autobiographical pledges of honestly disclosing the truth of one’s life are unlikely to alter the status quo. However, Dollimore suggests that these two models of textual assertion of transgressive desires and dissident modes of existence are dialectically interwoven. While Oscar Wilde’s literary challenge to the foundations of Victorian moral hierarchies may sound more radically subversive, actually a more traditional Christian ethos of honest self-scrutiny and public confession may generate empowering identifications likely to trigger radical forms of communal resistance (Dollimore 71-72).
- 10 Wilde’s own ostensibly confessional text *De Profundis*, his long letter to Alfred Douglas written from Reading prison in 1897, was itself the object of very diverse, not necessarily mutually exclusive, critical interpretations (Aquièn 11-18). Critics who read this text as an affirmation of human dignity against the abject degradation of prison life, the reclamation of his name by an anonymous prisoner deprived of social recognition, and evidence of the redemptive benefits of intense suffering (Aquièn 11-12, 17) imply an ethics of moral depth, spiritual growth and personal integrity in keeping with traditional autobiographical models and at odds with Wilde’s previous works. Different interpretations uncovering a tongue-in-cheek continuation of the Wildean aesthetics of masks, added to a barely disguised advocacy of homosexual love (Aquièn 13, 18), highlight a more thoroughly rebellious attitude towards the foundations of Victorian society, in keeping with the subversive attitudes and ideas he had displayed before his imprisonment. These plural ways of reading *De Profundis*, linked to the complexity of the author’s psychological and aesthetic motives for composing this letter/autobiography, epitomise the fruitful contradictions and potentialities of the genre when it is appropriated by oppressed, subordinate and marginalised ‘selves’.
- 11 Thus, in a similar way, from a cultural-historical perspective, notwithstanding its indisputable association with hegemonic subjectification and dominant narrative conventions, life-writing’s capability to document disempowered lives and allow marginal voices to be rescued from erasure, especially thanks to deliberate class-and-gender-conscious publication enterprises or posthumous editions of letters and diaries, makes it a powerful tool for social historians willing to challenge traditional accounts

enhancing the role of the great and famous. In the case of contemporary Victorian and Edwardian studies, paying close attention to singular self-representations by subordinate or intellectually dissident subjects also participates in a broader intellectual project—that of challenging monolithic and teleological historiographic views of the period, by foregrounding its heterogeneous materiality and potential for ideological deviations from and alternatives to a liberal capitalist, scientific, gendered and racialised modernity.

- 12 One significant example of this cultural and intellectual endeavour is Regenia Gagnier's literary engagement with working-class men and women's 'subhegemonic articulations' (Gagnier 41) of their material experiences and self-perceptions, meant 'to provide alternative images of possible subjects in many situations of autonomy and relatedness, antagonism and participation' (Gagnier 26). A closely related enterprise is feminist cultural critic Liz Stanley's use of 'renegade sources' (Stanley 215) such as Victorian women's diaries and letters to deconstruct official auto/biographies' ideological creation of unique 'selves', essentialised according to gender and class stereotypes and detached from their actual connectedness to others through strong friendship networks and participatory militancy. While she fully acknowledges that these 'other textual products of Victorian feminism' (Stanley 216) are no more transparent reflections of 'true selves' than their published auto/biographical counterparts, insofar as they also '*construct . . . the social world*' (Stanley 176), they are keystones in her material critical project of exposing (self-)censorship and the textual 'weaving' into auto/biographies and edited diaries of ideologically selected 'facts' construed as acceptable to the reading public (Stanley 130). Read in conjunction with other unpublished and published materials, these dissonant minority textual productions suggest that viewing the public as a homogeneous reading market may have led authors of auto/biographies to misconstrue their audience and miss a full range of available alternative discursive possibilities—'many seditious things *were* thought and written and published by the supposedly stodgy Victorians' (Stanley 131), including feminism, anti-racism and sexual freedom. Stanley's other insight derives from studying the self-published spiritual autobiographies of three nineteenth-century American Black women who became Methodist itinerant preachers, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw and Julia Foote (Stanley 110-17), and from reflecting on her own editing work of the diaries of English working-class domestic servant Hannah Cullwick (Stanley 158-80). What these nineteenth-century self-representations by 'unwomanly' women reveal is that post-structuralist and post-modern alleged discoveries of fragmented selves and displaced identities detached from any stable foundation were already the core material and subjective experiences recorded in these texts, whose authors, through their non-conformist ways of living and determined disconnection from the category 'women', seemed to be 'entirely aware of the ontological shakiness of "women" and indeed of "self"' (Stanley 110).
- 13 To be heard and for their existences to become visible and recognisable, subordinate or marginalised voices, whether female, queer, racialised, lower-class or intellectually, politically or religiously dissident, could adopt the codes of the canonical genres of autobiographies and memoirs while strategically failing to perform expected models of selfhood and intimating the existence of more complex forms of identities. If we consider the example of slave narratives in the context of abolitionist propaganda in the late-eighteenth-to-mid-nineteenth centuries, scholars have explored the negotiations between the autobiographer's urge to be the sole agent of his or her life

narrative and various demands extrinsic to the author-protagonist's proclaimed singularity and authorial mastery—from the interiorisation of the tropes of Enlightenment development narratives and sentimental novels understood to mark the author's secure place within the category of 'humanity', to more or less explicit requests from British and American publishing markets and white-dominated abolitionist institutions acting as mediating and legitimising editors. Lisa Lowe has exposed the ideological use of the first self-narrative in English by a former African slave, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789). Extremely popular in Great Britain and widely read in the author's lifetime and through the early nineteenth century, this 'quintessential narrative of progress' (Lowe 16) metonymically signified the triumph of modern British freedom over a distant primitive stage of development, and thereby eluded at least two other possible historical accounts—that of slavery remaining an irreparable event haunting emancipated subjects and liberal modernity; and that of slavery continuing across the British Empire, after its 1807 and 1833 legal abolitions, in forms compatible with free market liberalism such as the exploitation of colonised laborers, settler practices of land appropriation and removal, and the persistence of 'conditions of enslavement' jarringly at odds with 'so-called emancipation' and abstract individual rights (Lowe 13). And yet, Lowe argues, ellipses, 'contradictory shifts in voices and tempo' (47), interruptions and digressions, together with inconsistencies pointing to a cleaved, unstable narrating subject, mark the limits of such an ideological containment of Equiano's complex, heterogeneous life narrative, and open it to alternative possibilities of reception:

British abolitionists read Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* as a life which fulfilled Christian redemption and liberal economy. Yet slaves, former slaves and others could 'listen' to the complex tones of Equiano's narrative, and hear the 'otherness' embedded within the text. (Lowe 58)

- 14 Similarly, Frédéric Regard's analysis of *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831) and Lawrence Aje's examination of the evolving autobiographical narratives of their enslavement written by African American abolitionist campaigners and political activists Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, in the mid-nineteenth century and later, highlight Black autobiographers' compulsory recourse to rhetorical and intertextual tropes allowing them to be recognised as unique gendered *human* subjects, but also as typical representatives of the condition of enslavement, in terms acceptable to their white British and American readers. Regard shows that the melodramatic mode and the European 'discourse of the heart' (Regard 2010) are strategically integrated into Mary Prince's self-narrative to fit into British representations of a respectable female human subject. Aje demonstrates that in order to testify to the former slaves' humanity and fitness for freedom, literary tropes borrowed from the sentimental novel and the Bildungsroman are grafted onto liberal progressive patterns of individual emancipation. Whether internalised or imposed by patronising editorial interference, these topoi signify the mediation of a white European cultural filter between the authentically experienced reality and its textual intelligibility, and thus undermine the authority and freedom of the author-narrator's testimony. Such extraneous requirements betray the singularity of the Black authors' experiences and, Aje remarks, may carry strong echoes of the former slaves' subordination to and dispossession by white hegemonic practices. Thanks to later revising, the use of fictionalisation and self-publishing, though, Aje argues that their

authorial agency over their texts was tentatively reclaimed and that the political position of Black militants within abolitionist activism was exposed.

- 15 As several of the essays in this special issue will illustrate, material and ideological frames tampering with the authorial singularity of the first-person testimonies are to be considered and probed into, in particular through attentiveness to editorial processes, media circulation, collaborative writing and the autobiographer's tactical awareness of the audience(s) he or she addresses. However, these constraints are unlikely to stifle the singularity of subjective experience and autobiographical style, which a combination of close reading and genetic criticism may be able to trace in the displacements, inconsistencies, dis-identifications and performances of the narrated and narrating I's.
- 16 Instead of integrating classic autobiographical models and the expectations of mainstream middle-class society by agreeing to a dialogical compromise with dominant discursive practices, autobiographers can, on the contrary, inhabit minor spaces of self-expression eschewing conventional institutional authorisation, or address future generations of readers with more progressive moral standards. The archival excavation of minority voices, combined with biographical criticism bringing to light the life-based foundation of fictional or poetical works, have an essential role to play in establishing a more inclusive field of 'autobiographical writings'. A few illustrations of the 'renegade' textual expression of minority identities and of unorthodox modes of self-writing and circulation will provide a contextual backdrop to the non-canonical or hybrid forms of autobiographical writing examined in this special issue.
- 17 A well-known example, already mentioned above, is the generically unstable Wildean letter/autobiography *De Profundis*, both canonical and uncategorisable, both a private letter to Alfred Douglas and a public confession, whose Biblical title was added by Wilde's friend and literary executor Robert Ross, and which can hardly be read independently of its severely restricted material conditions of production in Reading prison (Aquien 5–10). Another example from the field of nineteenth-century queer history and minority life-writing is the private personal diaries of Anne Lister (1791–1840), partially written in code, and revealing same-sex desires and rebellious transgressions of gender laws which make their author recognisable to us today as 'a proto-modern lesbian subject' (Roulston 268). Their decryption and publication by Helena Whitbread in 1988 have indeed paved the way for a new understanding of Regency and Victorian proto-lesbian subjectivities, which challenged former critical emphasis¹ on a desexualised continuum of female friendships making women's self-awareness of their *sexual* difference irrelevant (Stanley 218). However, Roulston argues, because of their textual ambivalence and the diarist's conservative, elitist resistance to modernity, they also resist modern frameworks of appropriation and must be valued 'on their own terms, in all their richness and contradictions' (Roulston 268); they must also be examined in the light of the queer history of shame and censorship illustrated by their long thwarted publication through the succession of their original encryption and hiding, and their later discoveries, decoding, disavowals and re-'closeting' (Roulston 270–71).
- 18 Similarly, through a close textual study of the 'strategically queer' published minor poetry of late-Victorian poet, essayist and feminist activist Amy Levy (1861–1889), combined with insights offered by her correspondence, Carolyn Lake has uncovered

possibilities of constructing an alternative, non-heterosexual, self-representation, circumventing its exclusion from dominant cultural and discursive practices:

[Levy's poetry] is actively navigating how to represent an existence that is almost entirely denied by cultural, legal and linguistic institutions, resulting in a near symbolic annihilation. Levy's poetics and her politics of the minor engage lyrical modes that give voice to a pre-lesbian subject. (Lake 247)

- 19 To add one more example of how subaltern subjects' willingness to communicate their experiences can be reclaimed to enrich and diversify the autobiographical canon, again Regenia Gagnier's pragmatic engagement with retrieving working-class lives comes to mind. Besides analysing full-fledged autobiographies by authors who self-identify as members of the working-class, she focusses on two sorts of testimonies which, though publicised through mediating institutions, retain their value as first-hand documents of alternative self-understanding—and contribute to rescuing working-class existences from their stereotypical treatment in middle-class realist fiction and their reification through social scientists' taxonomies. Her first corpus is the letters collected by the Working Women's Cooperative Guild in 1913 in a campaign for the provision of maternity care: in publicly writing about their suffering bodies and their needs in politically motivated testimonies enabled by their communal 'we' as Guildswomen, Gagnier shows that these working-class correspondents were empowered to break the middle-class taboo surrounding female bodily experiences and thereby to undermine the abstract body/mind and private/public binaries sustaining the social and economic order: 'As organized, self-educated Co-Operativists, the Guildswomen transformed themselves from subjective isolation within their bodies to subjects with claims upon the State' (Gagnier 63).
- 20 Gagnier's second corpus is almost paradoxical, insofar as the medium enabling the expression of working-class subjectivities is the series of interviews conducted by middle-class journalist and social reformer Henry Mayhew, published in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849-50, then in his socio/ethnological compilation of testimonies *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-62), in the context of his comprehensive empirical investigation of the material living conditions of the lower classes. She reclaims these interviews from their dismissal as instances of hegemonic discursive disciplining of the unruly masses, and instead suggests that his 'subjects' influenced Mayhew as much as the other way round (Gagnier 64). While acknowledging that 'interviews are clearly not autobiography' (65), Gagnier shows that the journalist's view of his informants became gradually so thoroughly absorbed into the multiplicity of their own distinct singular relations to the material world that he abandoned his initial classification borrowed from mainstream political economy in order to create new categories. Striving to encompass the intersubjective impact of his consistent close contact with the words and material environment of his interviewees, Mayhew wreaked havoc on the Victorian status quo by challenging class barriers, undermining the universality of 'childhood' and unsettling the foundational dichotomy between mental and manual labour.
- 21 These examples from the margin of what usually counts as 'autobiography' demonstrate the collective effectiveness of allowing the singular voices and perspectives of subaltern subjects to be heard. As they overpower the theoretical frames meant to contain them, they also reverberate back on both how the subaltern subjects perceive themselves and how they are seen and represented in dominant literary and social discourses.

- 22 Though operative and posited as a premise for this special issue, the dichotomy between the subversive power of subordinate lives and marginal media and the disciplinary power of legitimised authors and canonical forms may need to be qualified and unsettled. Indeed, close analyses of canonical authorised autobiographies widely understood to discipline sexual, racial, gender and class identities may bring to light uncontainable paradoxes and deviances which, at least modestly and provisionally, thwart their assumed ideological closure. Two classic Victorian works, which have generated close textual, genetic and biographical analyses, may serve to illustrate this point, John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (first drafted in 1851, published in 1873) and Charles Dickens's most autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield* (published in instalments in 1849-50).
- 23 John Stuart Mill's autobiography, which appeared five months after his death, has become a Victorian classic. Written by the most famous liberal philosopher of the period, whose aim was to contribute to the improvement of humanity, it may easily stand for the process of shaping liberal humanist subjectivities through exemplariness associated to the genre in its authorised forms. Anticipating what is now termed 'autotheory', John Stuart Mill's 'life' serves as a practical experiment putting to the test liberal utilitarian principles of political philosophy—the author's own development is meant to literally *embody* the idea of progress, as he assesses through introspection and retrospection how, and if, the autobiographical subject 'John Stuart Mill' was successfully moulded by his father's educational principles into a unique personality enjoying both freedom and happiness (Knüfer 183). And yet, Aurélie Knüfer argues, this written 'life' calls for critical readings which reclaim John Stuart Mill's thought against its distorting appropriation by some dogmatic versions of liberalism reducing individuals to abstract social atoms cut off from their vital interconnectedness. Mill's 'life' is indeed far from epitomising the abstract liberal ideals of rationality, individuality, independence and self-sufficiency, as they are constantly challenged within a text which bristles with paradoxical tensions between individual freedom and social determinism, openly evokes the young protagonist's crack-up, and affirms the protagonist-narrator-author's thorough indebtedness to others—besides his father, and more essentially so from a feminist and socialist perspective, his wife and philosophical companion Harriet Taylor, as well as a nexus of social, institutional and cultural conditions (Knüfer 184).
- 24 Regarding another ideological function attributed to highly legitimised forms of self-narratives, that of reinforcing, through the name on the front cover, the notion of individual authorship at the expense of other forms of plural, collaborative cultural production, Mill's text has been the object of close archival scrutiny revealing not a single authorship, but a joint one involving Harriet Taylor's crucial role, as advisor, editor and stylist, in reshaping Mill's self-image (Stillinger 21-22). Mutual intellectual formation and a cooperative view of subjectivity are thus brought to light as genetic scholarship unearths the history of texts and restores the female authorships that have been persistently erased from the history of literature and philosophy.
- 25 The diversity of literary and cultural interpretations of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* is another well-known instance of how critical readings may disrupt and displace meaning in a text assumed to stabilise mainstream Victorian values and police identities. Due to its form, an autobiographical fiction and Bildungs/Künstlerroman, conjoined with its diegetic rejection of erotic and social transgressions, it has been read

as the epitome of popular realist fiction's role in shaping a cultural model of disciplined individual progress towards healthily gendered subjectivities, productive domesticity and middle-class gentlemanliness associated to linguistic mastery and authorial genius (Gagnier 221). According to this framework of reception, David, comically misgendered in the 'I am born' first chapter, renamed 'Daisy' by his schoolfriend Steerforth, gets to overcome his 'undisciplined heart' and 'dissipations' in order to become the successful 'hero of [his] own life', thanks to his sane antagonistic abjection of the lower classes and his literary self-discipline (Gagnier 33, Buckton 212, Sedgwick 176). But critical readings combining close textual analyses with a biographical approach taking into account veiled references to Dickens's own life unsettle those perceptions of a linear smoothing out of ambiguity and heterogeneity. Oliver Buckton, for example, reads the novel as not only autobiographical fiction, but also fictional autobiography or autofiction—namely, as an ambivalent exposure of the real author's unconscious erotic formation and class anxiety, under the aegis of an implicit 'phantasmatic pact'²⁶ with the reader, encouraging a quest for authentic referential meaning through the very gesture of denying it (Buckton 195-96). Currents of homosocial libidinal energies have been visible enough for queer critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to condense the narrator's development into 'the painful learning of how to triangulate from Steerforth onto women, and finally, *although incompletely*, to hate Steerforth at the expense of his death' (Sedgwick 176-77, emphasis added). Oliver Buckton offers a more thorough analysis of the underlying social and homoerotic subtexts haunting the main developmental plot, arguing that the autofictional project driving the text is that of an exposure of the real author's traumatic childhood experience of social abjection when he was subjected to the proximity of male working-class bodies at the blacking warehouse where he was apprenticed at the age of twelve (Buckton 192). This game of secrecy and exposure is tightly interwoven with the author-narrator-protagonist's melancholic renunciation to homoerotic desires for the sake of mature heterosexuality—transgressive desires which are simultaneously signified and disavowed by the subplots of the protagonist's romantic friendship with Steerforth and ambiguously sexualised repulsion towards lower-class villain Uriah Heep (Buckton 201). As these irrational currents of desires and repulsion fail to be entirely contained by David's development and Dickens's emplotment, an intimation of deviant otherness undercuts the narrative embrace of middle-class gentlemanliness and fulfilling heterosexual domesticity.

- 26 Thus, despite the association of autobiography and its fictional counterparts with a disciplining of identities according to a male heteronormative bourgeois paradigm, self-narratives by authors who occupy the centre, or at least the culturally recognised periphery, of Victorian and Edwardian studies yield inexhaustible possibilities of critical interpretations. Enabling critical studies of relatively legitimised voices to coexist, within the space of this thematic issue, with analyses devoted to relatively subordinate ones, whose social, legal or gender exclusion, marginal racial status, or temporary militant defeats seemed to condemn to cultural-historical oblivion, will undoubtedly generate fertile echoes and dialogues between diverse forms of singular self-expression and self-representation.

Presentation of the Contributions

- 27 The autobiographical texts and lives studied in this special issue span a large portion of the nineteenth-to-early-twentieth-century era characterised as the Victorian-Edwardian age, from Elizabeth Parker's sample made around 1830 to Emmeline Pankhurst's and Constance Lytton's 1914 retrospective accounts of their suffragette militancy. Several groupings of these Victorian and Edwardian autobiographers would have been possible—according to their notoriety in their lifetime and after, or depending on their degree of social and cultural marginalisation or centrality on class, gender, sexual, ethnic, religious and intellectual grounds, or based on the range of their motivations for sharing their life experiences—, with inevitable overlaps and contradictions destabilising these very boundaries. It is a recognition of life writing's ubiquity and broad appeal across race, class and gender barriers to gather in the same issue articles devoted to humble figures not destined for fame with studies of well-known cultural, political and literary figures of the era, incarnating important artistic, philosophical and civil rights movements which were all, to a variable extent and with different degrees of personal exposure and willingness to jeopardise one's respectability, heterodox and oppositional to the status quo—notably Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism, agnosticism, freethought secularism and Theosophy, feminism and sexual tolerance. The order of presentation of the articles and the groupings suggested below are by no means intended to preclude attentiveness to other significant thematic and strategic echoes and overlaps.
- 28 The first two articles give pride of place to non-canonical material media of self-expression, privileging interpersonal communication and transmission over introspection. In 'Autographs, Autobiography, and Black History in Britain: the Congo House Autograph Book', Robert Burroughs reclaims from comparative cultural neglect the autobiographical subgenre of the autograph book, whose fragmentariness and brevity had deterred sustained critical attention to its ability to disclose more than ethnological and sociological information, and to significantly reveal individual subjective experiences. After retracing the short history (1889-1912) of an institution steeped in Great Britain's imperialist embrace of its evangelical civilising mission, but also perceived as potentially threatening to race hierarchies, Burroughs offers close analyses, in terms of both their textual content and their context of personal address, of a sample of the book's twenty-four autographic texts, composed between 1903 and 1906, mostly by black students with diverse South African, Western African, Caribbean and American origins. Highlighting the subtle, often contradictory autobiographical specificities of a medium situated below broader circuits of economic exchange, Burroughs probes into the unresolvable tensions between conventional presentations of the self and more intimate forms of self-disclosure, as well as between two forms of subjectivities, one forged through the commonality of experiences within the Institute, and the other through the highly codified assertion of a unique subjective individuality implied by the medium. This allows him to interrogate several assumptions about black subjectivities in the context of academic attempts to decolonise Victorian and Edwardian studies—do race and ethnicity constitute the main ground of communal identification? Is the display of conventional Victorian beliefs and values to be construed as a fully conscious personal embrace or as a public performance of

compliance mirroring the students' role in advertising their faith and knowledge to potential benefactors of the Institute?

- 29 Róisín Quinn-Lautrefin focusses on another non-canonical material mode of autobiographical inscription, situated outside the dominant male-gendered printed forms of the genre. In 'Elizabeth Parker's Sampler/Diary: The Autobiographical Needle', she examines the personal and social significance of Elizabeth Parker's embroidered life-story—a cross-stitched text in red silk threads, composed around 1830, which reveals its author's social position as a domestic servant, exposes the sexual and physical abuse inflicted by her employer and conveys her emotional distress and religious questionings. Quinn-Lautrefin argues that like other nineteenth-century women proficient in the feminine language of needlework samplers, the autobiographer creatively and strategically resignified the practical, educational and domestic uses of her medium in order to fully exploit its feminine exclusiveness, tactile dimension and associations with bodily and domestic intimacy, for the dual purpose of unhampered self-expression and transgenerational transmission.
- 30 The following three articles illustrate the ability of the autobiographical genre to bypass and reach beyond its individualising telos, in order to espouse the author's commitment to broader causes—as the autobiographers strategically use their own dissident experiences to challenge the social, cultural, religious and political order.
- 31 In "“Rents in the Veil of Time”: Annie Besant's Auto-biographies of Giordano Bruno', Muriel Pécastaing-Boissière sheds new light on the autobiographical writings of feminist, socialist, anti-colonial activist and advocate of free thought and Theosophy Annie Besant. By drawing an extended series of parallels between her self-narratives and her biographical texts and public lectures on Giordano Bruno from 1876 to 1911, Pécastaing-Boissière captures the process of cross-fertilisation between Besant's continuously evolving self-(re)presentations and her biographical investigations of the Renaissance paragon of intellectual rebellion against obscurantist religious power. She demonstrates that as Besant constructed her biographical subject in her own image and vice versa, her initial fascination with, and use of, a major historical icon of Victorian secularist dissidence grew into a more and more personal identificatory merging with Bruno: implying she was his reincarnation and could remember events from his life, she boldly and strategically transcended gender as well as individual and temporal barriers. Simultaneously, she blurred the lines between two supposedly distinct epistemic and literary modes, autobiography and biography, paving the way for alternative narratives of the self capable of expressing complex tensions and controversies, notably within the Theosophical Society, that the teleological trajectories of canonical spiritual autobiographies would have failed to convey.
- 32 In addition to radical public actions like hunger strikes which challenged the thoroughly male-dominated social and political order of Edwardian Great Britain not only by demanding enfranchisement, but also by physically transgressing the norms of female respectability (Auer), the circulation of self-narratives and biographies was also a key political tool for the suffragette movement. This is what Chloé Clément's article 'Shaping a Collective Identity through Self-Representation: Early Suffrage Autobiographies and the Militant Experience' highlights, by focussing on the testimonies of two prominent Edwardian suffragettes, Emmeline Pankhurst and Constance Lytton. Against the grain of its prevailing association with promoting models of autonomous individuality, Clément shows that the autobiographical genre, as a

textual threshold from intimate subjective experiences to their public display, is reclaimed for radical feminist self-expression and participatory activist purposes across social classes. Clément argues that if the protagonists-narrators' spiritual and political self-development drew its strength from the collective militant virtues of rebelliousness and martyrdom publicised by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the converse is also true—the textual recording and reconstruction of their experiences of individual and communal resistance contributed to offering practical models of militant behaviour as well as symbolical models of identification meant to strengthen mutual bonds of feminist solidarity within the suffragette movement and beyond.

- 33 William Fize's contribution also explores, though in a deferred rather than frontally political context, the ability of socially dissident personal testimonies to act, through interpersonal and transgenerational transmission, as a public challenge to patriarchal norms of oppression. In 'Sexual Inversion, Smoke, and Mirrors: The (In)Visibility of John Addington Symonds's Homosexuality in his Autobiographical Writings', Fize compares the Victorian essayist's posthumously published *Memoirs*, which centrally feature the protagonist-narrator's gradual acceptance and apology of same-sex desires, with his participation to the circulation of late Victorian medical discourses on homosexuality, notably by making his life story into a case study for *Sexual Inversion*, a textbook of sexology written in collaboration with Havelock Ellis. Both a privileged subject of upper-class society assumed to embody respectability and a marginalised homosexual subject that medical discourses had started to pathologise as degenerate and abnormal, Symonds exposes the mechanisms and psychic cost of what is now known as the homosexual 'closet'. Fize argues that by disclosing Symonds's path towards recognising homoeroticism as something natural and healthy, while acknowledging his painful strategies of social concealment and sexual containment, his *Memoirs* shape a model of identification for future homosexual readers and thus pave the way for militant advocacy of legal reform.
- 34 While they also focus on public figures concerned with conveying their ethical, artistic and intellectual heterodoxy through their works, the two final articles offer insights into the marginal territories of autobiographical writings. Indeed, neither the embrace of a fictional literary form seemingly cut off from the author's life, and even from Victorian reality in the case of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, nor T. H. Huxley's denigration of his contemporaries' infatuation with an untrustworthy, self-indulgent genre, precludes critical approaches informed by life writing theories and positing an autobiographical continuum between various literary modes of self-expression and textual media.
- 35 In 'Dramatic Autobiography: The Poetic Voice Recreating Itself in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Bride's Prelude"', Raphaël Rigal propounds a suspension of autobiography's definition in terms of a referential equivalence between author and narrator-protagonist and suggests considering a broader autobiographical space, where the distinction between fictional persona and real historical self is neutralised. He argues that the Pre-Raphaelite artist's dramatic monologues should be studied through the lens of autobiographical theory: Rigal focusses on Aloÿse's disclosure of her seduction, sexual transgression and distress, within the medieval context of the poem 'The Bride's Prelude', and reads it as a fictional autobiography, insofar as it brings into play complex forms of address and invocation, as well as a cleaving of the speaker's 'I' between her traumatised past self and her narrating contemporary self.

From an ethical standpoint in the context of Victorian patriarchal subjection of women, Rigal claims that the oppressed heroine deploys an unhampered testimony which empowers her and that the diegetic presence of an almost silent compassionate listener encourages the reader's own sympathetic response to the speaker's self-exposure.

- 36 In 'T. H. Huxley, Reluctant Autobiographer', Bénédicte Coste examines the autobiographical writings of the famous evolutionist and defender of scientific rationality from a double perspective: she highlights the highly controlled rhetorical construction of his public persona as an agnostic intellectual, self-consciously drawing from the intertextual canonical resources of the apology and the confession; and she explores the nexus of public circumstances and interpellations which induced him to overcome his lack of interest in individual personality and his contempt for a genre he considered to be as irrelevant as fiction. Coste shows that T. H. Huxley was compelled to defend his intellectual identity as an agnostic, a word he had coined in 1869 and which had become the object of various misinterpretations. Then she offers a close analysis of an autobiographical continuum comprising a very short text formally adopting the codes of the genre while subverting them with self-conscious irony ('Autobiography', 1889), and periodical contributions published that same year to respond to polemical attacks against agnosticism from the Anglican clergy, by re-asserting his absolute trust in rational investigation. Coste thus demonstrates that Huxley merges the narrative of his intellectual *Bildung* with the public-oriented definition of his scientific identity, eschewing the pitfalls of marking a dichotomy between private individual and public man of science or resorting to the fin-de-siècle vogue for masked self-revelations.
- 37 These studies of nineteenth-and-early-twentieth-century British self-representations are both diverse and resonant with echoes—to name a few, the motif of women's empowering reappropriation and displacement of autobiographical conventions; how an evolving sense of self is conveyed in terms of spiritual conversion narratives; an interpersonal, community-minded, fundamentally *addressed* quality common to many of these self-affirming texts; and the use of a continuum of various media for purposes of self-expression. From a cultural and literary perspective, they invite us to follow in the footsteps of Regenia Gagnier and reclaim as worthy of close analytical study autobiographical texts written by subaltern subjects and intellectual outsiders. In order to do so, life writing studies as an academic field may need to further break free from literary standards set by the institutional celebration of a narrow corpus of novels, which has tautologically validated some referential life narratives as worthy of interest while dismissing others for failing to delineate recognisable individual 'characters'—sufficiently self-reflective, capable of transcending bodily and other material experiences, and deeply invested in traditional formative institutions like the family, the school and the Church within which, and against which, a resistant private 'self' can assert itself (Gagnier 28, 223). Such an emancipation from the dominant models of Victorian imaginary literature would help revise stereotypical understandings of subjectivity and pave the way for an empathetic engagement with a broader spectrum of life writers articulating and communicating their experiences. Similarly, from a historical perspective, these explorations of complex forms of interdiscursive and interpersonal identity construction prove that archival research into first-hand material testimonies by individuals and communities is essential and very likely to unsettle master narratives and dominant frames of interpretation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AJE, Lawrence. 'Fugitive Slave Narratives and the (Re)presentation of the Self: the Cases of Frederick Douglass and William Brown'. *L'Ordinaire des Amériques* 215 (2013). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/orda.507>.
- AQUIEN, Pascal. 'Présentation'. Oscar WILDE, *De Profundis, La Ballade de la géôle de Reading*, trad. et ed. P. AQUIEN. Paris : Flammarion, 2008.
- AUER, Christian. 'L'autoreprésentation de femmes en conflit : les récits d'emprisonnement des suffragettes.' *Anglophonia Caliban/Sigma* 27 (2010). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/caliban.2154>.
- BUCKTON, Oliver S. "'The Reader Whom I Love": Homoerotic Secrets in *David Copperfield*'. *ELH* 64. 1 (Spring 1997): 189-222.
- DOLLIMORE, Jonathan. *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford: OUP, 1991.
- FADERMAN, Lilian. *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: William Morrow, 1981.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité I. La volonté de savoir*. Paris : Gallimard, 1976.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. Préface de *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B.* 1980. Paris : Gallimard, 2014.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. *L'herméneutique du sujet*. 1980. Paris : Seuil/Gallimard, 2001a.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. 'L'écriture de soi'. 1983. *Dits et écrits II*. Paris : Gallimard, 2001b. 1234-49.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. 'Interview de Michel Foucault'. 1984. *Dits et écrits II*. Paris : Gallimard, 2001c. 1475-86.
- GAGNIER, Regenia. *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920*. New York, Oxford: OUP, 1991.
- JOYCE, Simon. 'The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror'. *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*. Ed. Christine L. KRUEGER. Athens: Ohio UP, 2002. 3-17.
- KNÜFER, Aurélie. *La philosophie de John Stuart Mill*. Paris : Vrin, 2021.
- LAKE, Carolyn. 'All the world is blind': unveiling same-sex desire in the poetry of Amy Levy'. *Changing the Victorian Subject*. Eds M. TONKIN, M. TREAGUS, M. SEYS and S. CROZIER-DE ROSA. Adelaide: U of Adelaide P, 2014. 241-57.
- LEJEUNE, Philippe. *Le Pacte autobiographique*. 1975. Paris : Seuil, 1996.
- LEJEUNE, Philippe. 'Autobiographie et homosexualité en France au XIX^e siècle'. *Romantisme* 56 (1987) : 79-94.
- LIONNET, Françoise. *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989.
- LOWE, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2015.
- REGARD, Frédéric. *L'autobiographie littéraire en Angleterre. Géographies du soi*. Saint-Étienne : Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2000.

REGARD, Frédéric. “He told me to hold my tongue” : de la violence physique à la subjectivation politique dans *The History of Mary Prince*. *Anglophonia Caliban/Sigma* 27 (2010). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/caliban.2014>.

ROULSTON, Chris. ‘The Revolting Anne Lister: The U.K.’s First Modern Lesbian’. *The Journal of Lesbian Studies* 17.1 (2013): 267-78.

SEDGWICK, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.

SMITH, Sidonie. ‘Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance’. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 10 (1995): 17-33.

STANLEY, Liz. *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*. Manchester, New York: Manchester UP, 1995.

STILLINGER, Jack. ‘Who Wrote J. S. Mill’s “Autobiography”?’ *Victorian Studies* 27.1 (Autumn 1983): 7-23.

NOTES

1. In particular Lilian Faderman’s conclusions in her pioneering feminist work on the pre-history of modern lesbian identities, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981).
2. Buckton uses Philippe Lejeune’s concept of ‘*le pacte fantasmatique*’. See Lejeune 1996, 42.

AUTHOR

AUDE HAFFEN

Université Paul Valéry – Montpellier 3 (EMMA)