

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02810-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography

Edited by Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## I

MARIA DIBATTISTA AND EMILY O. WITTMAN

## Introduction

Future historians may one day characterize ours as the era of Everybody's Autobiography. The phrase and the concept belong to Gertrude Stein, who revolutionized the genre first by telling her life story in the voice of her life-partner, Alice B. Toklas, and then in claiming that her own life represented, in the most meaningful if not the most accurate sense, Everybody's Autobiography. Stein was being deliberately mischievous in suggesting that she, a self-proclaimed woman of genius, an expatriate living in Paris who nonetheless self-identified as ineradicably American, was a representative figure of her time and, more controversially, of human nature itself. Stein's irony perhaps no longer registers with its original comic force. Today anybody, if not everybody, can write an autobiography, and as a cursory glance at any current bestseller list will testify, public appetite for the genre in all of its forms appears insatiable. The avid readership for autobiographical writing has become so widespread that it qualifies as a cultural obsession. Virtually all major and minor literary periodicals feature reviews of the latest tell-all autobiographies of politicians, financiers, socialites, writers, celebrities, and, increasingly, ordinary people who feel that their private story will be of public interest. They are not often wrong.

The academic study of autobiography, although relatively recent, has a rich if unsettled tradition of scholarship to draw on. The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s saw a surge in studies of autobiography as scholars across the historical and critical spectrum began to appreciate that autobiography demanded more systematic attention than it was receiving. Early theorists of the form, most notably Elizabeth W. Bruss, George Gusdorf, Roy Pascal, and Jean Starobinski, sought to provide a definition of autobiography that would at once allow them to differentiate it from related genres, establish a canon of autobiographical works, and make a case for the study of autobiography as a valuable scholarly pursuit.<sup>1</sup> Yet the very capaciousness that made the genre hospitable to many diverse critical agendas also made it difficult to define. Scholars were immediately confronted with the challenge of making

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02810-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography

Edited by Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

MARIA DIBATTISTA AND EMILY O. WITTMAN

sense of an unruly genre that resists most attempts to unify it. Indeed, James Olney, one of the most influential scholars of autobiography, has registered his ambivalence about the term and the usefulness of thinking of autobiography as a genre. Noting in *Memory & Narrative* that he has never “met a definition of autobiography that I could really like,” he describes his work as “exploratory in nature rather than definitive.”<sup>2</sup>

It is easy to understand, easier still to sympathize with, Olney’s skepticism that genre criticism will ever make sense of the diverse forms, audiences, styles, and motives that are loosely grouped under the rubric of life-writing. Memoir, reminiscences, diary, journal, autobiography, lyrical essay, personal letters, fictional autobiography, even biography – do these constitute an autonomous genre with distinctive literary traits or a loose assemblage of works whose most common feature is a shared preoccupation with personal experience? G. Thomas Couser looks to linguistic evidence to establish the essential coherence of autobiography as a genre. He notes that in the English language

the pronoun that signifies the self is triply singular: in number, in capitalization, and in being the sole single-letter pronoun. Typographically identical with the Roman numeral  $\text{I}$  and phonemically identical with the word *I*, it puns on the notion of a single point of view. These fortuitous features of our linguistic system reinforce our sense of the privileged status of the self, and the language seems to encourage us to conceive of the first person as unique, integral, and independent – like the pronoun that represents it.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the features in our linguistic system that underscore and reinforce our sense of the self as singular and autonomous are not fortuitous, but historically conditioned. Karl J. Weintraub argues that “the autobiographical genre took on its full dimension and richness when Western Man acquired a thoroughly historical understanding of his existence.” He dates this historical understanding at around “AD 1800.”<sup>4</sup>

However, over the last four decades, the very notion of individuality, as either a linguistic or a historical construct, has been repeatedly challenged and examined. The concept of the individualized self as a bourgeois notion was most vigorously and subtly contested by thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School, perhaps most significantly by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (published in German in 1944). Some scholars of autobiography have gone further, arguing that the Enlightenment concept of the self is necessarily Eurocentric and fails to consider life-narratives that unfold within the matrix of community and tradition. Other critics wished to dispense with genre criticism altogether. Whereas Georges May and Roy Pascal distinguished autobiography from

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02810-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography

Edited by Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

adjacent genres of autobiographical writing such as the memoir, the private journal, and autobiographical fiction, Paul de Man, in his pivotal and controversial essay “Autobiography as De-Facement” (1979), argued that autobiography is a mode of reading, not a genre. Making use of the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia (“the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech”), he argued that, like prosopopoeia, autobiography can represent the voice and name of the subject it questions, but the result will necessarily be a disfigured representation. Autobiography, he concludes, “deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores.”<sup>5</sup> In *Figures of Autobiography: The Language of Self-Writing in Victorian and Modern Language* (1983), Avrom Fleishman argued forcefully that autobiography has “no history as a genre” and that life “indeed, the idea of *a life* – is already structured as a narrative.”<sup>6</sup> Although both de Man’s and Fleishman’s theses have been widely disputed, they remain useful when thinking about autobiography and how its generic boundaries have been drawn, redrawn, and forcefully challenged at different points of time.

Despite such deep disagreements about the character and conventions of autobiography, theorists of autobiography in the past few decades have made great strides in developing conceptual tools and critical vocabulary to help us understand the problem of self-knowledge, the nature of the autobiographical mode, and the significance of reading autobiographies. In his seminal essay “The Autobiographical Pact” (published in French in 1975), Philippe Lejeune advanced the important notion of “contractual autobiography” and coined the invaluable notion of the “autobiographical pact.” In one of the most frequently cited definitions of autobiography in recent critical literature, he argues that autobiography can be defined 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.”<sup>7</sup> Lejeune’s stipulation that the personal narrative be written by a “real person” is crucial for establishing the legitimacy as well as uniqueness of autobiography as a literary genre. Hence Lejeune’s insistence that, for a work to be understood as part of this distinct genre, “the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical.”<sup>8</sup> Michel Beaujour’s *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait* (published in French in 1980) borrows Lejeune’s use of the term “self-portrait” to designate life-writing from which a continuous narrative is absent. In his view, the “operational formula” for a number of works by writers including Montaigne, Rousseau, Michel Leiris, and Nietzsche is “I won’t tell you what I’ve done, but I shall tell you *who I am*.”<sup>9</sup> In the face of generic fuzziness, and in recognition of the literary nature of life-writing, Laura Marcus, in *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Criticism*,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02810-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography

Edited by Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

MARIA DIBATTISTA AND EMILY O. WITTMAN

*Theory, Practice* (1994), introduces the helpful and widely adopted term “auto/biography,” a term that refers to either the genre of autobiography or biography, or else works that involve a fusion of the two.<sup>10</sup>

Yet however loose and baggy a monster autobiography seemed to be, there still appeared to be little room for the life-writings of women and ethnic and racial minorities. Or at least that is how autobiography was talked about until Olney’s *Studies in Autobiography* (1988). Olney justifiably saw the essays in his book, which introduced innovative “demographic” approaches to the interpretation of autobiography, as markers of a shifting tide. Indeed the rise and growing influence of feminist criticism, African American and ethnic studies, and popular culture in the academy in the 1980s brought to light autobiographical traditions that had been too long neglected. Scholars working in these critical disciplines introduced new objects of study and broadened university curricula in their wake. Françoise Lionnet’s *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1989) and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s edited volume *Women, Autobiography, Theory* (1998) challenged the universalist premise of a unique selfhood and called for “a feminist theory of women’s autobiographical practices.”<sup>11</sup> In the past three decades, key work, much of it documented in the essays in this volume, has continued to widen the scope of autobiography studies to further the discussion of identity, including relational identity, as well as focus on race, gender, class, and the body. As these developments indicate, the place of autobiography in the academic curriculum has changed dramatically and its legitimacy as a field of study strengthens daily. Autobiography, once considered, as Olney ruefully observed, “a kind of step-child of history and literature,” is now recognized as an independent genre with its own genealogy.<sup>12</sup>

This volume of essays presents a historical overview of the genre from the foundational works of Augustine, Montaigne, and Rousseau, through the great autobiographies of the Romantic, Victorian, and modern eras, to the more untraditional autobiographies of the present day, which include, to mention only two of the contemporary turns on the classic form, the new and ethically controversial hybrid, the “fictional memoir,” and the self-expatiating blog that grows by daily or even hourly installments and theoretically will conclude only with the blogger’s death. Of necessity, this overview is geographically circumscribed. Even a companion that seeks to be as comprehensive as possible cannot be exhaustive. It is for this reason, for example, that we have not included a chapter on non-Western life-writing. One or two chapters would not do the topic justice and indeed may well have only managed to trivialize it. Thus to avoid the conceptual sprawl and the inevitable dilettantism that can afflict surveys that aspire to

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02810-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography

Edited by Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

be all-inclusive and all-representative, we have restricted our focus to the authors, texts, and generic offshoots that replicate or refuse to conform to the paradigm understood to be instituted by Augustine's *Confessions*, the foundational text distinct and powerful enough to engender the tradition of autobiographical writing as we now know and understand it in the West.

The tradition is, in fact, so richly inhabited that certain figures – even those who, like Goethe, loom large on the historical horizon – fail to make their claim sufficiently clear to the contemporary imagination. In many ways, Goethe is an instructive case. He is arguably the first autobiographer to attempt to show the individual in his relation to the universal, and thus to explain his personal development from a philosophical and scientific point of view. The first three parts (Books 1–5) of his autobiographical *Poetry and Truth* (1811–1833) represent his intellectual and poetic development as analogous to that of a plant, and so make his artistic maturation appear perfectly organic, in fact typical. This claim to universality, however, has not proved as convincing or as compelling as Rousseau's insistence on absolute singularity. Moreover, it was Kierkegaard and Nietzsche who astounded as philosophers of the self. For Nietzsche, autobiography is *the* philosophical problem, one in which psychologizing and the transvaluation of values coincide in a lifelong project of self-analysis. In the preface to *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is* (1888), his final work before his descent into madness, Nietzsche hails his audience: “Hear me! For I am such and such a person,” he cries. “Above all, do not mistake me for someone else.”<sup>13</sup> He proclaims himself not only alone *among* mankind, but above mankind, delivering to humanity from the heights his *Zarathustra* – “the greatest present that has ever been made to it so far.”<sup>14</sup> The corresponding text for Kierkegaard is his *The Point of View of My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History* (finished in 1848, published posthumously and in full in 1859). In this work, Kierkegaard gives an autobiographical account of his use of pseudonyms, fictional identities that he transformed from a disguise of authorship into a creative mode of self-replication and ventriloquism, an imaginative feat that has no parallel or rival until Fernando Pessoa in the early twentieth century.

We have arranged the chapters in chronological order and devised rubrics to reflect changing views of the moral character, the psychological nature, and the ethical stature (or strength, to invoke Nietzsche's way of thinking) of the autobiographical subject. Thus the *Companion* begins with a section called “Foundations,” continues to the period of “Consolidations,” in which autobiography begins to assume the authority and allure of a tradition, and concludes with two sections devoted to works that divert or refract classical autobiographical forms to express radically new, often troubled concepts of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02810-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography

Edited by Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

MARIA DIBATTISTA AND EMILY O. WITTMAN

selfhood; “Deflections,” which considers works that redirect the autobiographical urge into previously unexplored, sometimes forbidden realms of experience and behavior; and “Prisms,” which explores the life-writings of those who have survived catastrophic historical dislocations (Nabokov) or exterminations (Anne Frank, Primo Levi), or pervasive institutional racism (Malcolm X). We close with a group portrait of late modernist and contemporary autobiographies that, by deliberately blurring the dividing line between fiction and nonfiction, inevitably threaten to rupture the “autobiographical pact.” These experiments have been incalculably abetted by the technical resources and ontological fluidity offered by the Internet, which has opened up new ways of projecting and narrating the self.

We start then with “Foundations” to lay the groundwork for this volume, presenting essays on those writers who – in the form of either confession or self-portraiture – established the foundations of autobiography and endowed it with the prestige of the exemplar (of God’s will, of truth-telling). Although many Greeks and Romans, from Xenophon to Julius Caesar, had penned their memoirs, autobiography was a relatively late phenomenon in Western culture, coming at the moment when Christianity was grafted onto the classical tradition. Augustine’s *Confessions* has traditionally been regarded as fundamentally different in kind from these earlier works, a difference distinct and powerful enough to engender the tradition of autobiographical writing as we now know and commonly understand it. At the outset, however, we confront a problem that would bedevil the genre from its ostensible origins in the *Confessions* to the present day: Is the *Confessions* in fact the first autobiography? Historian and classical scholar Garry Wills insists that “it does not fit into that genre.” Wills takes Augustine at his word that the *Confessions* is addressed to God, who accordingly “does not need to learn anything about Augustine’s life”: “Augustine is trying to acknowledge the graces that make his life part of sacred history – whence the constant use of Scripture.”<sup>15</sup> Still, the *Confessions* has human readers, for whom Augustine (354–430 CE), a Church father candid about his early life and personal struggles with his faith, poses still relevant questions about the ethical choices and the spiritual form of an individual life. Moreover, this candor allowed Augustine and future writers to move outside the biographical, third-party, descriptive mode to prod, investigate, and question his own emotional and spiritual motives in ways that are still relevant today. In particular, Augustine established the confessional structure of the autobiographical act and made the primary and climactic event of his life story the moment of his conversion. This moment of conversion, or turning point, has imposed itself as the dominant paradigm of autobiographical narratives of self-development and self-understanding, even if, as Adam Becker reminds

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02810-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography

Edited by Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

us, “reading the *Confessions* requires a certain hermeneutical amnesia” (Chapter 2). Since Augustine’s *Confessions*, the manifest paradox confronting the autobiographer within his act of textual composition has been his experiencing his past self as at once the same as his present self, continuous with it, and yet strangely, uniquely, as other to it.

Spiritual autobiography also was the main form of life-writing in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, as he canvasses a broad array of medieval writing, John V. Fleming cautions us that “consideration of autobiography in the European Middle Ages and the early modern period must be prefaced, however briefly, by some recognition of the difficulties arising from social and intellectual developments that separate the earlier historical periods from modernity” (Chapter 3). These texts, often cast as spontaneous, simple, unmediated, and candid, in part because of their mysterious and erotically charged content, must be situated in their specific historical contexts. In this way, they can tell us a great deal about premodern conceptions of selfhood and about the culturally sanctioned models of identity of this time. Two key questions inform inquiries into these spiritual writings: How did spiritual adepts write about their personal experience of the divine while still adhering to the Christian doctrine of humility? How did individuals write about their lives before a modern tradition of autobiography was established? *The Book of Margery Kempe* (completed in 1438), regarded by many to be one of the first autobiographies in the English language, offers a heuristic example. Margery was an illiterate woman who dictated her book first to a male scribe and, when he died, to a local priest. One issue, then, that figures importantly is how, given that the task of interpreting the Bible and God through the written word was reserved for men, Margery translated her sensory and sensual experiences into language. Fleming aligns and compares her work with Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love* (c. 1390).

John of the Cross (San Juan de la Cruz) is known to have introduced a distinctly literary dimension into mystical writings, most famously by characterizing his spiritual travails as the “dark night of the soul,” a metaphor that has not lost its power to describe certain states of spiritual abjection. His writings are frequently contrasted with the stylistic and religious raptures that form the singular experience of his compatriot Teresa of Ávila’s *Life* (c. 1565), a work that Fleming sees as a “transitional text,” heading in “discernibly new directions” (Chapter 3). Yet what unites them is perhaps stronger, Fleming suggests. Reading them in concert with other medieval writers including Abelard and Heloise, Petrarch, and Angela of Foligno, he argues that, whereas modern autobiography is “grounded in *subjectivity*,” early autobiography is “generally grounded in *exemplarity*.”

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02810-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography

Edited by Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

MARIA DIBATTISTA AND EMILY O. WITTMAN

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne's *Essays* (1580, 1588) heralded the advent of a distinctly modern subjectivity, that is, of individuals self-aware, detached, and secular in reflecting on their lives and their experience of other people. As the penultimate chapter of this *Companion* shows, Montaigne's *Essays* continue to provide inspiration and example to writers of the contemporary memoir and creative nonfiction. His life was in many ways exemplary of a certain kind of writerly detachment before the world and before himself. At the age of thirty-eight, Montaigne withdrew from the social and political world precisely in order to write about himself more honestly and more clearly. This project is registered in the very title of his work: *Essais*. In sixteenth-century French, the title suggests an overall attempt or test or even a practice, a meaning still present in the current French verb *essayer*. Montaigne's self-imposed solitude allowed him to be determinedly non-doctrinaire and non-doctrinal in expressing the opinions he was "essaying." Montaigne, averse to universal statements, was arguably the first writer of the self to write candidly about his own physicality and the pains, most famously his excruciatingly painful kidney stones, as well as pleasures of the human body. Lawrence Kritzman, making use of Michel Beaujour's concept of the literary portrait, argues that what Montaigne calls the members of his body become the members of his life story. Kritzman also highlights the real and imaginary autobiographical elements in Montaigne's self-portrait with particular attention to the fiction-making process in his celebrated essay on education.

Critical discussions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (completed in 1770) inevitably focus on its relationship to Augustine's *Confessions*. But equally important is the way Rousseau's multiple attempts at self-portraiture represent a response, at times a quite self-conscious one, to Montaigne. Like Montaigne, Rousseau took himself to be his own best subject and, like him, sought to naturalize the idealizing conventions of self-portraiture so that he might "confess" the full rather than doctored truth about himself. To this end, Rousseau seized on and transformed the confessional form from a sublime conversion narrative in the Augustinian mode to a life determined by an event that he attributes to a momentary madness: the writing of his first discourse after seeing a notice for a contest offered by the academy of Dijon. This chance encounter initiates him into the career of writing, but also into a lifelong unhappiness: "All the rest of my life and of my misfortunes followed inevitably as a result of that moment's madness."<sup>16</sup> Rousseau suggests that the imperative to write comes from the outside, an outside that necessarily claims the individual, disrupting his plenitude of being and taking him outside himself, away from his natural goodness. Despite his convictions about literature and society, Rousseau ostensibly wrote his three autobiographical

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02810-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography

Edited by Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

works not for himself, but for other people. Throughout his autobiographical writing, he stresses that he was made for (*fait pour*) another, simpler existence. The paranoia that always threatens to destabilize Rousseau's mental balance is offset by his determination to enlist the reader's sympathy for himself and to gain posthumous partisans who would compensate him for the misunderstanding of which he felt he had been a victim throughout his life. For Rousseau, Eli Friedlander argues, "the writing of life becomes work of and for the afterlife" (Chapter 5). His autobiographical projects become a way for him to regain his composure and calm, exonerate himself, and settle scores, ostensibly for good.

The rubric "Consolidations" encompasses the historical period when autobiography became predominantly a narrative of self-realization. The first chapter of this section treats Romantic autobiography. Maintaining that "[a]utobiography is an inherently Romantic form," Frances Wilson notes that "talk about the self was understood to have been the current charging the first half of the century, the impulse not just of poetry and confession but of criticism, philosophy, literary prefaces, journalism and journal writing" (Chapter 6). In particular, the British Romantic movement celebrated the imaginative as opposed to the rational self, especially in its identification with nature and the divinities that seemed just beyond the reach of human consciousness. Within this expanded horizon, writers channeled the autobiographical urge into more personal and intimate forms of self-address and self-revelation. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's memoir of his schooldays and his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), with its chapters of autobiographical notes and dissertations on various subjects, offers an instructive contrast to Dorothy Wordsworth's more self-enclosed diaries and poetry. But it is her brother William Wordsworth who transfigured the autobiographical impulse into the epic poetry of *The Prelude* (1799, 1805, 1850), a semi-autobiographical poem, begun at twenty-eight and, significantly, reworked for the rest of his life.

The Romantic autobiographical conceit that figures the poet's life as literature culminates in Lord Byron. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (published between 1812 and 1818), Byron creates a new kind of historical as well as literary personality: the Byronic hero – a figure whose magnetism and romantic charisma made it difficult, arguably even for Byron, to differentiate between the Byronic hero and Byron himself. As Wilson notes, the success of the lengthy poem

lay in the perceived identification between the aristocratic and world-weary Harold, who leaves behind his ancestral pile to wander in Europe and the Levant, and the aristocratic and world-weary poet who left behind his own ancestral pile, Newstead Hall, to wander in the same places before returning home to write the poem. (Chapter 6)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02810-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography

Edited by Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

MARIA DIBATTISTA AND EMILY O. WITTMAN

In contrast, John Keats's letters represent a completely different, but equally powerful and influential mode of self-vindication in his account of the "negative capability" of the poetic personality. For Keats, the supreme example of "the Man of Achievement" is not Byron, whose life is writ large on the public stage, but Shakespeare, of whose life we know relatively little. In Keats's famous definition, Shakespeare was a man "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."<sup>17</sup> His letters, written without any ostensible narrative link, nevertheless reveal the standards by which Keats assessed the nature and character of his own achievement. In this sense, Keats's letters are declarations of those artistic principles by which he hoped his own life would be measured and not found wanting. Wilson examines this Romantic identification of life with literature by considering two best-selling Romantic autobiographies: De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* and Harriette Wilson's *Memoirs of Herself and Others* (1825). Both autobiographies, she demonstrates, "turn self-reflection into a hall of mirrors" and find "authenticity in the assimilation of other texts" (Chapter 6).

In the mid- to late nineteenth century the novel usurped many of the first-person techniques and some of the prestige of the autobiographical narrative. Pivotal childhood experiences, crises, and growing awareness of the environment are frequently shared characteristics of both fictional and non-fictional approaches to autobiography in the Victorian era. Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1836); Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Villette* (1853), and *The Professor* (posthumous, 1857); George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860); Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860–1861); and Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) helped establish the conventions and secure the reputation of autobiographical fiction. Nonetheless, this was a rich period for nonfiction autobiography that to many critics represents the golden age of the genre. Tellingly, the word autobiography was first used in its modern sense in 1809 by the poet Robert Southey. Yet even as its meaning seemed to stabilize, the form itself began to ramify into splendidly original and arresting forms, including John Ruskin's *Praeterita* (1885–1889), *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin* (1887), and John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1873) – works that chronicle the formation of a scientific and philosophic mind. Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* (1897), written in prison, provides an eerie postlude to the late Victorian tradition that also boasted Cardinal Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864). These autobiographies tend to be more impersonal and less anguished and introverted than Romantic self-chronicles. Reflecting the often controversial theories of the new biological, psychological, and social sciences, Deborah Epstein Nord's chapter examines Mill and Darwin through the lens of significant work on intergenerational dynamics