

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ENGLISH AUTOBIOGRAPHY – 19th Century

Romantic Period (Wordsworth)

Wordsworth

Wordsworth's *Prelude* is an autobiographical epic poem. Subtitled the "Growth of a Poet's Mind," it was begun in 1798 and addressed to his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in the same year that they published *The Lyrical Ballads*, their revolutionary first book of poems. It was to be a prologue to a longer three-part epic called *The Recluse*, which Wordsworth described as "having for its principal subject, the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement." But in the later years he wrote only parts of the longer poem, and for this and other reasons *The Prelude* was not published until after his death in 1850. Critics estimate that if the entire project had been completed, it would have been three times the length of Milton's great epic about the Creation and the Fall of Man, *Paradise Lost*.

Nevertheless, *The Prelude* alone is of epic length and a demonstration of how the romantic sensibility viewed the growth of a poet's mind as a subject of epic importance and grandeur. In so doing it also celebrates many central romantic subjects: childhood, nature, revolution, and the god-like power of the individual imagination.

In structure, the poem follows Wordsworth's development from early childhood and "School-Time" (Books 1 and 2); to his studies, vacations, reading, and travel while at Cambridge (Books 3-6); his contrasting experiences afterwards in London and the country (Books 7 & 8); and his residence in France during the French Revolution (Books 9-11). It ends in his later, mature years with philosophical reflections on "Imagination and Taste" and the poetic imagination (Books 12-14).

What distinguishes *The Prelude* from what could be many other accounts of an English life in the same years are Wordsworth's blank verse and his presentation of outstanding moments in his experience as powerful epiphanies that somehow transcend their more or less ordinary surroundings. An early example comes in the middle of Book One. "Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear" (ll. 301-2) he writes, before describing how when he was ten he liked to go out at night snaring woodcocks. But he then confesses that he sometimes stole birds that had been caught in other people's traps, only to hear "among the solitary hills / Low breathings coming after me, and sounds / Of undistinguishable motion, steps / Almost as silent as the turf they trod." (ll. 322-5) This sensation is soon followed by the longer description of his stealing a "little boat tied to a willow tree" (l. 358) on a summer evening. He rows away, looking at a hill astern in order to hold to a straight line, when "a huge peak, black and huge, / As if with voluntary power instinct, / Upreared its head." (ll. 378-80) This "huge peak" that had previously been out of sight behind the lower hill grew taller and darker the farther he rowed, making him feel more and more guilty. It continued to haunt him for days and nights, and was evidence of nature's moral teaching.

Thus does Wordsworth illustrate how nature had a moral presence and power and how such experiences have stayed with him. They are epiphanies, or "spots of time," that arise in the ordinary but also transcend it.

A more famous example comes in Book 6, as he and friends are climbing in the Alps. They stop to eat "Their noontide meal" and fall behind their guide. Then, in attempting to catch up, they climb higher and higher, becoming more and more frightened, only to have a peasant tell them that instead of climbing they "must descend, and there should find the road,..." (l. 579) Without knowing it, "we had crossed the Alps." (l. 591) This experience devastatingly illustrates the power of "Imagination – here the Power so called / Through sad incompetence of human speech,..." (ll.592-3) It was like both an "unfathered vapour" that rose from "the mind's abyss" and also the moment when "in such strength / of usurpation, ... the light of sense / Goes out," and a flash reveals "The invisible world." Here "doth greatness make abode,..." (ll. 599-602).

The young Wordsworth was a restless traveler and seeker, and after college he tried living in London, where he found amusement in its endless sights and diversions. But he also found them trivial,

appeals only to what he called "fancy," as opposed to "imagination." So after escaping back to the country, he next went to France, which was in the midst of its revolution. He also took up with a French woman, Annette Vallon, with whom he had a daughter, although this is not revealed in the poem. Instead, he describes the hopes and horrors of the revolution, saying, at one point, when its hopes and promises were greatest, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!" (Bk., 11, ll. 108-9).

The last three books, being more philosophical, do not reveal as much about his immediate life, except for the account in Book 14 (ll. 1-129) of his climbing Mt. Snowdon, which is the last of his great epiphanies. But unlike the experience of crossing the Simplon Pass in Book 6, it has no elements of awe and terror (what the Eighteenth Century called the Sublime). It even begins very prosaically, including a description of the dog that belonged to his and companion's guide teasing a hedgehog. Then, as Wordsworth sees the ground in front of him appear to brighten with each step, he looks up to see the moon "naked in a firmament / Of azure without cloud, and at my feet / Rested a silent sea of hoary mist." (ll. 40-2) Beyond are the "dusky backs" of hills, and farther off is the Atlantic Ocean, all majestic in the moonlight. The scene, which must be read carefully, is a great romantic moment, where Nature and a man's higher sensibilities merge in the "highest bliss / That flesh can know...." (ll. 113-4).

Questions for Further Study:

1. Compare Wordsworth's descriptions of London in Book 7 with Boswell's experiences in his *London Journal*. What do the differences reveal about their different character and values and the purposes of their autobiographies?
2. Gibbon spent many years in Switzerland, but says little or nothing about its mountains. Wordsworth makes the crossing of the Simplon Pass an epiphany. What does this tell you about their different sensibilities? About the "Age of Reason" and the "Romantic Age"?
3. *The Prelude* is often slow going and its blank verse hard to follow. Is this a defect or the inevitable consequence of Wordsworth's sometimes ineffable experiences and epiphanies? Could the same story be told in prose?

Victorian Period (Newman, Mill, Gosse)

John Henry Newman

Newman was one of the most controversial Victorians. After an elite education, he graduated from Trinity College, Oxford, and became a fellow of Oriel, a sister Oxford college. There he and three other young fellows, John Keble, Edward Pusey, and Richard Henry Froude, became engaged in studies of religion and church history that led to their eventual espousal of Anglo-Catholic doctrines. They published their views in a series of "Tracts for the Times" that defined what soon became known as the Oxford Movement. In "Tract 90," published in 1841, Newman argued for the compatibility between the "Articles of Religion," the core beliefs of the Church of England, and Catholic theology – a radical position that led to an official ban of the Tractarians and Newman's resignation from the Oxford church where he had been the vicar since 1828. In 1845 he became a Catholic. In 1846 he went to Rome and was ordained as a priest. Returning to England in 1847, he began preaching in Birmingham. And in 1854 became the rector of the new Catholic University of Dublin, although he later became disappointed with the university and the Irish Catholic clergy and returned to England.

His *Apologia pro Vita Sua* first appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1864. Charles Kingsley, an Anglican priest and author of many popular novels and stories, had written a pamphlet attacking Newman titled *What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean*, accusing him of inconsistency and lack of respect for truth. The *Apologia*, which should not be thought of as an apology, was Newman's answer. His purpose was not to express regret or say he was sorry. Quite the opposite, it was "a defence of myself." (p. 189) As such, it has become a classic intellectual and spiritual autobiography, admired for the author's sympathetic self-presentation and rhetorical strategy by readers who may or may not agree with Newman's religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, the modern reader may get impatient with Newman's many references to church history and teachings, his Latin quotations, and the doctrinal issues that no longer seem as important as they did to Newman and his friends and opponents. What is "Eustasianism" (the union of church and state)? Who were the Monophysites (defined by the dictionary as Syrian and Coptic Christians who believed that "in the person of Jesus there was but a single divine nature") and why were they important? What was the doctrine of the *Via Media*? What was meant by "Liberalism" in Newman's time?

Questions like these, however, should not prevent us from appreciating Newman's skill in defending himself. He was not just a learned man. He was a very thorough man who could quote at length from his earlier writings. He had great respect for his friends and was warm and generous in his praise of them. He had written lovely hymns as well as sermons and tracts. "Lead Kindly Light," which he wrote in 1833, while traveling in Italy and France, is still sung in many churches. And he is very modest in speaking of himself and the difficulties of recounting his experience. As he asks in the beginning of Chapter III, "For who can know himself, and the multitude of subtle influences which act upon him?" (p. 81)

Questions for Further Study:

1. Examine carefully how Newman describes one of his teachers and associates (e.g. Pusey, Keble, or Froude). How does his praise of them reflect on him?
2. He describes the years up to 1841 as "the happiest time of my life." (p. 69) Why were they? How important are the Biblical echoes, like "seven years of plenty," in his saying this? Also note his skillful use of images and analogies, like the one of house and furniture?
3. Do you sense a change of tone in the concluding pages of the *Apologia*, when Newman examines why the English distrust Catholics and quotes from the "Catechism of the Council of Trent"? Is the change effective?

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill's autobiography is remarkable in many ways, beginning with its story of his education by his father James Mill (1773-1836), the follower and associate of the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and the economic philosopher David Ricardo. A serious, free-thinking, conscientious Scotsman, James Mill recognized his little son's brilliance and began teaching him early. "I have no remembrance of the time when I began to learn Greek," Mill says on the third page. "I have been told it was when I was three years old."

His education continues to be the primary subject, which is part of what makes his autobiography so different. Until Mill's time, most autobiographies were stories of religious experience and conversion, in the traditions of Kempe and Bunyan, or records of the writer's works and achievements, like Gibbon's and Benjamin Franklin's. (It should be noted that though we think of Franklin's as a great American autobiography, he actually began it while he was living in England and was a British subject.) To be sure, education is inevitably an element of these earlier autobiographies, but Mill's education was entirely secular, not religious, and was a goal in and of itself, not a means to other goals like wealth or fame or good works. Chapter II continues with his moral education, still under the influence of his benign and yet and strong-minded father, and Chapter III is titled "Last Stage of Education, and First of Self-Education."

The fourth chapter describes some of the ways in which he put his education to use in promoting utilitarianism and political reform. But this work was now his effort to educate others, as he readily admits in the first two words of the title, "Youthful Propagandism."

It is Chapter V that describes the most surprising turn in his education. For many years, from 1821, when he was fifteen, he had so devoted himself to the cause of reform that "My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object." But by "the autumn of 1826," when he was still only twenty, he had reached a "dull state of nerves" in which his life had become joyless and he felt "insipid or indifferent." So he asked himself how he would feel if all the "changes in institutions and opinions" which he was working for were suddenly accomplished. Would that bring "great joy and happiness"? "And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!'" The result was an even greater dejection that he describes as lasting for two years, during which he continued to examine himself and look for other sources of happiness. But he did not begin to recover until the fall of 1828 when he began to read Wordsworth's poetry. He had earlier read Coleridge and Byron and other poets, but Wordsworth restored or gave birth to his "feelings." And thus began a further education that his father had not given him. He began to read romantic poets and philosophers and to see relationships between history and political institutions that he had seen before and to see errors in his father's philosophy.

He goes on to describe his friendship with Harriet Taylor that began in 1830. She was married, and remained married until her husband's death twenty-one years later, but they enjoyed a platonic relationship all that time. She united feeling and intellect and helped Mill to do so too and thus had a powerful influence on his later writing. He acknowledges this not only in the *Autobiography* but in his great essay, *On Liberty* (1859), which is famous for its advocacy of free trade and laissez-faire economics, but which also argues for the rights of the individual by saying that society as a whole profits from the freedom and diversity of all its members. Although he was already an advocate of women's rights, she was also an obvious influence on his *The Subjection of Women* (1869), another essay for which he is still famous. He protested that a woman's subjection to her husband made her legally no better than a slave, and as a member of parliament, Mill supported women's suffrage. He even wanted the word "man" replaced with the word "person" in the Reform Bill of 1867.

Thus Mill's reputation as a political philosopher and feminist continues to be very strong. But he also holds a very important place in the history of autobiography. He secularized it and emphasized the writer's education and intellectual history more than fame and works. Born in 1806, he looked back to Wordsworth (born in 1770) and looks ahead to Edmund Gosse (1849), who would also write a story of education and the influence of a very strong father.

Questions for Further Study:

1. Mill and Newman were almost exact contemporaries, and both wrote intellectual autobiographies, although otherwise very different ones. Which do you find more interesting and compelling. Why?

2. In describing his depression in the fall of 1821 (Ch. V), Mill compares it to “the state...in which converts to Methodism usually are, when smitten by their first ‘conviction of sin.’” This suggests that his *Autobiography*, even though secular, is also a conversion narrative, like Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*. Compare the two books.

3. In *The Education of Henry Adams* (note the title), Adams refers to Mill a number of times and even describes arguing with him one night at a party in London over the advantages of protectionism vs. free trade. But he also describes Mill as “timid,” adding that “timidity...is high wisdom in philosophy.” This is an interesting comment, and Mill was a philosopher. Is his *Autobiography* timid? In what ways—style, argument, presentation of self, or some other feature?

Edmund Gosse

Although Edmund Gosse was a prolific author of biography and literary and dramatic criticism, *Father and Son* (1907) is his most engaging book and the book for which today he is best known. It has also been called the first psychological autobiography.

Gosse’s father, Philip Gosse, was once a very prominent zoologist, as Edmund shows in the first part of the book. A contemporary of Charles Darwin and the geologist Charles Lyell, he was highly respected for his detailed descriptions of sea anemones and the other life in tidal pools. But he was also a stern evangelical Christian who refused to believe in evolution and doggedly defended the Biblical account of creation. His argument was that God had created the world, Adam and Eve, and all the plants and animals in just six days but with all the evidence in it of an older evolution, such as fossils and geological strata. He expounded this theory in 1857 in his book *Omphalos* – named for the argument that Adam and Eve had navels. But the book was ridiculed (“defined by a hasty press as being this—that God hid the fossils in the rocks in order to tempt geologists into infidelity,” says Edmund, pp. 77-8), and it was rejected by all sides. In the same year Gosse’s wife, Edmund’s mother, died of breast cancer.

As a result of these crushing blows and losses, Philip took Edmund and a nurse-housekeeper to live in a seaside village in Devon, where he became a minister to the Plymouth Brethren, his Puritan sect. The remainder of *Father and Son* describes Edmund’s education by his father, who wished to raise him as a perfect embodiment of Christian virtue. His father led him in long prayer sessions. He was forbidden to read anything but the Bible and religious tracts. He did not go to the theater or look at art. And his father baptized him and had him admitted as an adult member of his father’s church when he was only ten.

Gradually Edmund rebelled. But the rebellion was painful to both father and son, and Edmund describes it with careful reconstructions of the feelings and behaviors of both. Edmund’s admission into the church, for instance, was orchestrated by his father so as not to antagonize the adult members. Edmund sensed this and behaved with great piety, intelligence, and restraint. However, once admitted he did become proud and acted very childish sometimes, even to sticking out his tongue at other boys who were not yet baptized. In another scene Edmund wants to go to a party that his father does not want him to. So they pray together, with his father expecting that he will hear the voice of God telling him not to go, and with Edmund silently becoming resolved to rebel and to go. When the praying is over and he says, “The Lord says I may go to the Browns,” his father has no answer. “He was caught in his own trap,” writes Gosse, “and though he was certain that the Lord had said nothing of the kind, there was no road open for him but just sheer retreat.” (pp. 173-4; ch. XI)

Edmund gains an ally when his father marries an attractive, educated, and cultivated Quaker, Eliza Brightwen. She introduces poetry and even the fiction of Charles Dickens into Edmund’s education, using her Quaker tact and gentleness to overcome Philip Gosse’s rigidity. She even gains Edmund the right to look at books of art and classic statuary.

The psychological subtlety with which Gosse describes and comments on each character and incident is what keeps the reader engaged. It also raises the book far above many other accounts of a child’s conflict with a stern parent. Gosse seems anxious to respect all parties. He exposes his father, but he is ready, too, to expose and criticize himself. “At this time I was a mixture of childishness and priggishness, of curious knowledge and dense ignorance,” he says of himself at another point. (p. 185, ch. XI)

Still, one can wonder about his fairness. His “priggishness” and “dense ignorance” always seem finally to derive from his father’s character and the prejudices and limitations of the education his father

has forced upon him. Is the book primarily a biography of the father or an autobiography of the son? One answer comes towards the end when Gosse passes quickly over his experiences at a boarding school that he later was sent to, writing, "But this is not an autobiography, and with the cold and shrouded details of my uninteresting school life I will not fatigue the reader." (p. 192, ch. 12) Yet neither is it only the biography of his father, of whom he actually had written a biography shortly before. So the best answer is that it is both. It is *Father and Son*.

Questions for Further Study:

1. Compare the childhoods and educations of John Stuart Mill and Edmund Gosse. Which father is more likeable? Which is presented more sympathetically? How do the sons reflect the character of the fathers?
2. Near the end of the Epilogue Gosse writes, "what a charming companion, what a delightful parent, what a courteous and engaging friend, my Father would have been, would pre-eminently have been to me, if it had not for the stringent piety which ruined it all." (p. 223) Is this possible? If his father had been all these things, would Gosse have written the book?
3. Read the last paragraph of the book, ending with "he [Edmund] took a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself." Do all human beings really have this "privilege," or is it only in societies where people can break with their families, clans, social classes, and traditions? Is there autobiography without an "inner life"?

Paper

1. Using Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Mill's *Autobiography* as your examples, what is the difference between a romantic and a Victorian education? It is often said that it was the romantic poets (particularly Wordsworth) who "discovered childhood"—that is, recognized the importance of childhood to a person's later development and character. So consider the two men's different childhoods and teachers.
2. One of the major features of Victorian culture was its earnestness. People were expected to be hard-working and serious, and there was little time for play and joy. Is this what Newman, Mill, and Gosse have in common? If so, why was each man so earnest? What does their earnestness have to do with their all writing autobiographies?
3. Compare the meaning and importance of women in the lives and autobiographies of Mill and Gosse.