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## Renderings of the Self: The Inception of Autobiographical Writing in Robinson, Wollstonecraft, and Wordsworth

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Renderings of the Self: The Inception of Autobiographical Writing in Robinson, Wollstonecraft,  
and Wordsworth

by

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## **Abstract**

This paper covers the origination of British autobiography and investigates why authors began to write autobiographically through the analysis of three pioneering autobiographical works: *The Prelude* by William Wordsworth, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* by Mary Wollstonecraft, and *Memoirs of Mary Robinson, "Perdita,"* by Mary Robinson. In each section of this paper, I examine these stories and authors individually and attempt to unearth what pushed each author toward autobiographical writing in relation to what drove them to publish their work. I argue that autobiography is centered around rendering oneself, and that self-renderings these authors created point to their purposes for writing, publishing, and showing themselves autobiographically, as well as the lack of individuality present in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that these works were founded in.

## Introduction

The autobiography was an anomaly in the literary world when it first came to light in Britain. Literature, at its core, is almost always a version of self-expression, and one genre that expresses this more than any other is the genre of autobiography.

The concept of writing about oneself existed well before true autobiography became popular—the first record of secular autobiography is widely considered to be Rousseau's *Confessions*, published in 1782, written in 1770. Early writers of the autobiography have distinct commonalities with each other in connection to the *Confessions*—the formats follow their lives from childhood to adulthood in a linear fashion. However, before this, Michel de Montaigne began the tradition of essay, which, though it is not directly related to autobiography, was highly influential in the development of long form prose writing. His essays, originally not intended for publishing, were essentially a collection of experimental musings written almost daily by Montaigne, each with their own topics (or lack of one) and assayical development. Montaigne's purpose was not to reach conclusions or take definitive stances about his topics, but rather was to simply compare and weigh ideas. Their lack of hard purpose was also accompanied by a lack of focus—provisionality being a marked characteristic of Montaignian writing—as the essays, constantly wander from one topic to another and another, and rarely keep to the constraints of their titles. His assaying in his essays was interpreted by Sarah Bakewell to be Montaigne's attempts at determining how to live a life well, an idea explored extensively in her book *How to Live: Or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*.

The works that followed—such as William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden Norway, and Denmark*, and Mary Robinson’s *Memoirs of Mary Robinson, “Perdita”*—whether influenced directly by Rousseau and Montaigne or not, slowly began to give form to such writing. As there was no societal groundwork for self-discovery or self-writing, we can see much of Montaigne in early autobiography—the weighing and assaying of a life in comparison to others, with the addition of the attempt to come to a conclusion about how differences in experience and ideas constitute an individual self. Though many eventually followed in the footsteps of these autobiographical texts due to the popularity of them and public hunger for the style, writing about oneself before that point was not looked upon favorably. Self-writing in non-religious contexts was initially viewed as a conceited and uninteresting topic, as the cultural need to discover one’s “personal” identity was essentially nonexistent in Britain before the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

So, what was the pull to this type of writing that made serious, even popular authors write and publish such atypical content? Each of these three authors felt a pull toward autobiography—Wordsworth’s egotism paired with a desire to teach, Wollstonecraft’s calculated vulnerability showing her emotional bravery, Robinson’s need to exert control over her story. These reasons were what supported their steps toward writing autobiographically, but why they presented it to the world and thus pushed autobiography from the Romantic Age into the spotlight of early Victorian English literature. The creation and dictation of such personal stories, the development of this new genre, communicates a need for self-expression that was not present in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and not yet present in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Initially, autobiography was seen as vain, giving way to selfish desires, and therefore unchristian. In such a Christian-centric, reserved culture as that of Britain during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, modesty and propriety were foremost in societal behavior standards. One's reputation was much more significant then, as society at the time was highly judgmental and exclusive; one had to meet all the standards to be allowed participation, especially for women. If one's reputation was ruined or frowned upon, finding work even became a much more difficult endeavor. Even those on the outskirts of high society, like writers, had to be careful. If a writer wanted to be published or establish a name for themselves, they needed to be careful with what they put out so that it might be reviewed well and received well by the public.

Contentious works—those that may have spoken out about radical politics or with severe views on issues of social justice—could be popular, even in demand in some social circles, but works still needed to have enough support to be successful, and because of this contentious writing was chancy. If authors remained in good public opinion, their books might begin to sell themselves due to the name attached to them. The opposite could be said for those who did not have reputational backing. Mary Wollstonecraft was known for balancing between contention and blasphemy, being extremely outspoken in topics of social justice such as the rights of women and the impoverished, but in a way that often sparked argument and rebuttal rather than complete outrage.

Before the late 1790s, there were no recognized terms for the autobiographical works of the period, much less a genre for the work. There was no specific mode or style of writing attributed to them, as they were not seriously grouped together as like works—there was no asserted form for them, which is what made the early writers and their works so monumental

and outrageous to the public, even to the writers themselves, and why the technical impetus of the genre is so hard to pinpoint. James Treadwell has worked to collect and organize information about how the genre became popular, how it was received by the public, and possible links between works, exploring the more vague and ambiguous areas of Romantic British autobiography in his book *Autobiographical Writing and British Literature 1783-1834*. In his book, Treadwell discusses a critic named Isaac D'Israeli, who was one of the first to review autobiographical works in 1796. He expresses sentiments of disapproval and skepticism toward them, as many, including D'Israeli, worried that the publishing of these works would affect literary standard, threatening to lower the idea of "literature" in the eyes of the public should they become popular and well-liked. Treadwell also brings up William Taylor, the first person to use the word "autobiography" in their writing (in an article in *The Monthly Review*), though he referred to the term and the works it described as "pedantic." Although the sentiments toward these types of works began to improve somewhat as they became more frequent and more well-known authors broached the task, there was no genre for them to fit into, making the conception of them as "literature" tenuous and unpopular.

After around 1812, however, the demand for and quantity of autobiographies skyrocketed, making them extremely popular. Through 1834 they gained peak popularity in Britain. They became so popular that some critics even circled back around to disapproval, believing them overdone. Treadwell explains this rise as being "the gathering force of a particular pressure on the literary field," seeing as this explosion was what initiated the genre's existence, and states that "Its increasingly obtrusive presence generates among literary institutions a series of reflections on the translation of selves into texts" (Treadwell 7).

Autobiography has become a tool of self-knowledge, a way in which people can realize themselves. With the increase in the popularity of autobiography, though, has also come the new cultural demand of *knowing* oneself, knowing which thoughts and details of a life make it different from all the others, which make them all similar, and what that means for the future. These questions require confrontation and answers at all times today in such an independent, individuality-driven society as ours, and autobiography in one channel through which millions have elected to find those answers. Autobiography can involve personal discomfort as well as inspire inner peace and connection, but however it is rendered, it will reflect its subject. The questions that are so demanding in today's society, though, were only just being posed by those writers who began this tradition. Without a framework for how to think of oneself or decipher an individual, their course of action became to render themselves in words, see themselves reflected back at them, and discovered not only who their "self" was, but who they *believed* it was, and put that rendering out into the world to approve or dispute.

## **Wordsworth's *The Prelude***

Though the "original" version was published posthumously in 1850, Wordsworth's *Prelude* is considered one of the most influential autobiographical texts of the Romantic period (the poetry being very much a product of the period, despite its late publishing date). There are three versions of the text, two of which were not found or published until the 20<sup>th</sup> century—a 1799 version, an 1805 version, and the first-published 1850 version. The edition from 1799 only contains a version of the first two books of the poem, but the 1805 version contains thirteen books and most of the same information as the 1850 edition. The 1850 version was published with fourteen books, but Wordsworth did so by breaking up the thirteenth book of the 1805

version into two parts, so the information is very similar. There has been debate as to whether the 1805 or the 1850 version should be considered the “real” *Prelude*, as the 1805 version is much more poetic and true to the lyrical beauty attributed to Wordsworth’s writing, but the 1850 version was, for so long, the only version released to the public. However, the 1850 edition is ruthlessly and, some would say, overly edited, so the 1805 has been the most widely recognized and acknowledged version of *The Prelude* by scholars in recent years. Though the 1850 is technically the final version, the 1805 version seems to best represent what he wanted to say in the writing style that felt most natural and true to himself. It had much more poeticism and flourish to it, and because of that trueness I believe that it is also the version in which we can see Wordsworth most clearly, not just in his words but in his craft and style.

This work is the latest published of the three we are examining, but it became an iconic example of Romantic autobiography, with its roots in the natural and emotional as well as the reflective and personal. This personal look at Wordsworth has great similarities to Rousseau and his *Confessions*. Looking at the historical map of the autobiography, it is clear that Rousseau’s *Confessions* were instrumental in jump-starting the autobiographic genre. The style of autobiography that he introduced relates differently to each of the approaches of the English authors we will discuss, but I would say the most closely related of the three would be *The Prelude*. This is not simply due to the fact that these are both male writers, though gender does seem to have an effect on how they present themselves in their self-writing, but due to the strongly confessional, confident, honest feelings both the works exude.

The circumstances in which *The Prelude* was born are no less complicated. The work was a long functioning side project of Wordsworth’s from 1798 through the rest of his life and never

truly his main objective. The text essentially consists of scrapped bits and pieces from his other work, *The Recluse*, because they were deemed too personal and autobiographical to make it into the final work. *The Recluse* was meant to be only semi-autobiographical, but Wordsworth's thoughts often became diverted by reflection and musings about his past rather than focusing on the narrative he was attempting to construct, so he eventually relented and let these musings have their own separate text. Despite his constant revision, he never saw fit to publish either work himself, and was unable to finish *The Recluse* before his death in 1850. The 1805 version seems to be the most artful and emotional one of the three—and indeed it was intimately written since it was addressed to his dear friend and colleague Samuel Taylor Coleridge—but Wordsworth's priorities changed with the text after he finished 1805. In the preface of the Norton Critical Edition of *The Prelude*, consisting of all three versions of the work, editors Jonathon Wordsworth, Steven Gill, and M.H. Abrams state that the idea of publishing entered his horizons after the completion of the 1805, and that he then worked with the idea that, “[*The Prelude*] would not be released during his lifetime unless it could take its intended place as a part of *The Recluse*” (xi).

According to W. J. T. Mitchell, there is no firm proof of Wordsworth having read *Confessions*, nor are there necessarily distinct signs in his writing that he was influenced directly by Rousseau. Even so, the groundwork that Rousseau provided all autobiographers in that time is indisputable. *The Confessions* was writing for the sake of a story. It did not necessarily need to be told, but to Rousseau it evidently did. The tone and embarrassing honesty of the story suggests a desire for understanding and connection without truly seeking absolution. This basis is surely built on by Wordsworth, though it would be tough to say it was directly founded in it.

Wordsworth seems to take Rousseau's underlying desire for connection and amplify it, putting other aspects like brutal honesty aside. His honesty lay in some part in his emotional and ideological vulnerability, even in *The Prelude's* existence itself.

His writing contradicts Rousseau's style in this way; Rousseau's honesty is so spread out and unabashed that his reasons for writing as he did lean toward justification as well as understanding, and possibly even simply to illicit a reaction from people, connecting to his readers in the sense of sharing secrets and dark thoughts. Wordsworth elevates himself through his writing, using honesty in other areas in an attempt to emotionally connect with his reader, gaining trust through openness and thereby softening them to his idealistic theory of his own connection to divinity through nature. He is most seemingly honest when he talks about his experiences with nature, and speaks of them as if he were pulling back a curtain, showing the reader a fantastic world that had yet to be discovered:

...I was most rich,  
 I had a world around me—'twas my own,  
 I made it; for it only lived to me,  
 And to the God who looked into my mind....  
 Some called it madness; such indeed it was...  
 If steady moods of thoughtfulness matured  
 To inspiration, sort with such a name;  
 If prophesy be madness; if things viewed  
 By poets of old time, and higher up  
 By the first men, earth's first inhabitants,

May in these tutored days no more be seen

With undisturbed sight. (*Prelude* 3.141-155)

With this mixture of honest inner thought and personal elevation, it is understandable that many scholars see a distinct difference between Wordsworth and his perception of himself that he writes about, the self of Wordsworth extricated from his label of “chosen son.” Mitchell discusses the argument of Margery Sabin regarding the relationship of the two works, highlighting her idea of the “two parallel cultural continuities, a French “tradition” of ironic, skeptical self-analysis, and an English movement (called “Romanticism”) that transforms self-analysis into a heroic quest-romance” (Mitchell 646). Despite the statements of humility and embarrassment in each work, both authors also approach their work as having something laudable. Rousseau famously said of his enterprise, writing *Confessions*, that he had “resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent and which, once complete, will have no imitator.” This certainly fits the frame of an ironically skeptical analysis, though the sharp double-sidedness of it opposes Wordsworth’s tactics. For Wordsworth, his two sides—his crafted self and his true self—are seemingly blended. *The Prelude* is the epitome of both Romanticism and heroic romance, Wordsworth crafting himself in the role of the hero, or “chosen son,” and the analysis of his life as a romantic adventure. This is how he is able to gain the good will of the reader, almost tricking them into believing there is only one side of him, the side he presents, rather than seeing the earthly aspect of him alongside it.

Wordsworth also branches out from Rousseau in his delivery of his work. Though both authors finally published their works after their deaths, Rousseau was much more open and unashamed of his book; he read sections to the public on multiple occasions. Wordsworth,

however, made clear that he did not want *The Prelude* to be published before his death unless he finished *The Recluse* first due to fear of backlash.

In his article, Mitchell references Hazlitt's perspective on each work, quoting, "Rousseau, in a word, interests you in certain objects by interesting you in himself; Mr. Wordsworth would persuade you that the most insignificant objects are interesting in themselves, because he is interested in them" (646). Sharing his emotions and inner thoughts is something he does passionately, and this shows through not only in the words of *The Prelude*, but also within the process of its writing. Wordsworth kept finding himself drawn back to the subject of himself, his writing pulling him away from other ideas and pushing him to express his self when nature would send him a "corresponding mild creative breeze" (*Prelude* 1.43). Because of this his words are charged with energy, a zeal for nature and connection.

This emotional honesty, I believe, shows the root of his reason for writing *The Prelude*. Though it is in part used to his advantage, it shows Wordsworth's desire for connection. his writing exemplifies how his gift lends itself to his trademark idea of inspiration and meditation:

Wisdom and spirit of the universe,  
 Thou soul that art the eternity of thought,  
 That giv'st to forms and images a breath  
 And everlasting motion –  
 ...thus from my first dawn  
 Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me  
 The passions that built up our human soul,  
 Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,

But with high objects, with enduring things,  
 With life and nature, purifying thus  
 The elements of feeling and of thought,  
 And sanctifying by such discipline  
 Both pain and fear, until we recognise  
 A grandeur in the beatings of the heart. (*Prelude* 1.427-441)

Though he writes in a calm and reserved tone, there is an excitement that bubbles under the surface. These writings took control of him, forced their way out, showing his passion for investigating and recording his life even though he believed his great work to be *The Recluse*.

The desire for connection comes in with his desire to publish *The Prelude*. After all, it is one thing to simply write for oneself; writing to publish is something else entirely. *The Prelude* went through many drafts, multiple that were even considered complete until they went back under revision (the 1799, 1805, and 1850 versions). Wordsworth wanted his work to be perfect because he wanted it to be seen, and not simply by Coleridge. This amount of revision, the years spent devising and rethinking and editing, is not prompted by the idea of judgment—in this case, public judgment.

However, the truth of Wordsworth's publishing goes farther than personal connection or even displaying his love of Coleridge. The baseline of what Wordsworth writes about lies in who he believes himself to be in the deepest part of himself. Wordsworth saw himself as "a chosen son" of Nature, selected to discern the moods and wisdom she had to offer him and the world (*Prelude* 3.82). By submersing himself in Nature, sitting and being with it as he does for

much of *The Prelude*, he gains wisdom about life, more specifically how to live. Much like his predecessor Montaigne, recording these discoveries was his way of creating a guideline on how to live a fulfilling life. The life he lived through Nature was meaningful, emotional, and purpose-filled, though at times exaggerated. Many times within *The Prelude*, he states that his life in the city was diverting and wholesome, enjoyable on a social and intellectual level, but also that when he disconnected himself from society and found himself again in Nature, he felt more fulfilled and clear-minded than he ever did in London, as if going a long while before going to church and then feeling reconnected to God: "I was only then / Contented when with bliss ineffable / I felt the sentiment of being spread / O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still..." (*Prelude* 2.418-421). The lens through which he views life has a great impact on how he views himself in relation to others; he saw his connection to nature not as a way of seeing things, but rather as a gift that had been bestowed upon him, one that elevated him above others.

He writes this sense of purpose and fulfillment into every word of *The Prelude*, recollecting his passion and recording in beautiful verse. He loves this lifestyle, and because of this, he believes it worth sharing with the world. He is convinced of his correctness as well as (and because of) his chosenness, and therefore wants to share this good news, the way to supreme connection, with others. He states outright in Book Third that his divine purpose is, "To apprehend all passions and all moods / Which time, and place, and seasons do impress / Upon the visible universe, and work / Like changes there by force of my own mind" (*Prelude* 3.85-88). He sees it as his duty to think and discern through Nature, either letting the feelings alone overcome him and flow through his, or to consider the divine thoughts he received and work them over, determine their meaning, and apply it to his life.

In Book First of the 1805 edition, Wordsworth is at his most ponderous and reflective in that he records thoughts on why he is writing this work. He discusses his mindset, how he sees himself, how his ideas come to him, and how he works through his thoughts and tries to connect his previous ideas to current inspiration. He states in lines 1.172-175 that he searches himself for “little band[s] of yet remembered names / Whom I, in perfect confidence, might hope / To summon back from lonesome banishment / And make them inmates in the hearts of men” (*Prelude*). He wanted to give people something to mull over, to think about and to search their hearts about.

The word *inmates* calls to mind a sense of captivity. This connotation refers not only to how the information and ideas Wordsworth wishes to impart is to rest in the minds of others, but also to how it rests in his own mind. These are thoughts that Wordsworth cannot seem to escape, that Nature chooses to convey to him and thereby make him a captive of. He believes these thoughts and ideas to be divine, and because of that believes that he must live his life in service to and in contemplation of them. Their divinity captivates him, literally and figuratively, and his sharing of them is his way of sharing how he believes one can live their best lives: “I yearn toward some philosophic song / Of truth that cherishes our daily life” (*Prelude* 1.230-231). The ideas become inmates within the hearts of others, considered and debated in their minds on and off, sometimes agreed to and other times given.

Though at times he does become preachy and overconfident, I argue that he does want this way of life to infect other people, to become an “inmate” of their souls as it is in his, so that they may live well as he does. Publishing *The Prelude* was as much to improve people’s lives as it was due to his inflated ego longing to be more inflated in his rightness, longing for proof of

his chosen self through making their lives better as they are like his. Much of Book Second is dedicated to telling the day-to-day events of his young life, his morning walks to his evening hikes and most things in between. All of the details of this life he sees himself leading are a demonstration of the model of life he wants to impart to his readers. As he describes discerning how to get the most out of his life, he also shares what others can (and should) do to find more meaning in their lives.

Wordsworth, if he did not respect it, at least considered the beauty of people, all people, in the eyes of Nature. As a somewhat well-to-do man living in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is surprising that this view developed in him. Not many writers were discussing these subjects, and if they did, certainly not from a standpoint of looking to gain ideas from them or to revere them as beautiful creations of Nature in any way. This is another point toward why Wordsworth may have wanted to publish this, another slice of his vision for a meaningful life. Wordsworth did see himself as elevated above others, but because of this connection with nature he also was able to sometimes take a step back and realize that he was not the one in control, Nature was.

In a passage from Book Eight, Wordsworth discusses the lives of peasants, something very few authors did. Authors were supposed to turn beauty into words, capture life in letters, but beauty and life in that era belonged to the upper class, sometimes the middle, but never the lower. A shift toward other sources of beauty, though, becomes more present through Romantic literature, in part due to Wordsworth and his other writing, which is the age in which the writing of *The Prelude* is truly situated. But Wordsworth takes a moment, first to describe tillers and farmers that he sees, perhaps in his town or on his walks through the countryside.

Even before this, he rhetorically asks, “Why should I speak of tillers of the soil?” acknowledging the voice in many of his readers’ minds (*Prelude* 8.498). But through this acknowledgement, he flows into his true realization:

There came among these shaped of human life  
 A wilfulness of fancy and conceit  
 Which gave them new importance to the mind—  
 And Nature and her objects beautified  
 These fictions, as, in some sort, in their turn  
 They burnished her. (*Prelude* 8.520-525)

He sees these people, whom others write off or ignore completely, as not only parts of Nature, but beautiful parts of nature. Through this acknowledgement, he imbues them with importance, enough of which that he considers studying them as he does the rest of nature to see what wisdom or meaning he might gain from them and their lives: “From the touch of this new power / Nothing was safe” (*Prelude* 8.525-526).

Despite this inclusion, he most likely did not decide to publish *The Prelude* for peasants like these, for they most likely could not read it. But this addition is not only an observation, but a statement. This is exemplified in his decision to cut those descriptive lines in 1832, before the completion of the 1850 version—the first published version, the “completed” works. With the knowledge of his probable audience, this deletion shows an intent to publish, and though not an intent to share the real truth of his thoughts, perhaps a need to craft a posthumous image of himself as well.

Amidst Wordsworth's claims of humility, he thinks himself elevated from the general public. He writes so explicitly in *The Prelude*. But does this insinuate that *The Prelude*, then, is simply Wordsworth bragging about his spiritual beliefs? No. His publishing *The Prelude*, in a way, allowed him a constructive outlet for his belief in his "chosenness": teaching. Initially, this work was a kind of letter, an experiment, to Coleridge, and though that form stays the same, the motivation behind writing and the one behind publishing are different. Wordsworth had a persistent inner desire when he wrote this, something he desperately needed to release from his mind, so much so that these ramblings and extraneous thoughts turned into a book, a private confession. However, his thoughts toward publishing had to have been different—writing *The Prelude* was almost a requirement for him, but publishing it came with its own requirements: finish *The Recluse* first or posthumous publication.

While it is true that Wordsworth wrote *The Prelude* because he felt drawn to it repeatedly, part of that draw was connection and emotional conversation. The book being published after his death does not discount this, but in fact shows that he didn't feel that it was necessary for him to be in the conversation; *The Prelude* was his way of saying his piece, and letting the world read, recognize and, hopefully, understand it was the true intention.

The motivation to expose this side of himself, his sensibility, to the public came from his wish to teach. As he wrote, he saw his thoughts on paper—he could trace his thoughts from within him and saw his passion, his joy, reflected back to him from the page. I think this longing to share his knowledge stems from a root of being lost, not knowing who he is or how to go about deciphering himself, which comes off at times as humility. It may not mean that he is not inherently arrogant or thinks himself better than others, but longing to share what you love

with others to perhaps make their lives better is in some small part a work of kindness. In Book Thirteenth of the 1805 edition, Wordsworth brings this up:

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak  
 A lasting inspiration, sanctified  
 By reason and by truth; what we have loved  
 Others will love, and we may teach them how:  
 Instruct them how the mind of man becomes  
 A thousand times more beautiful than the earth  
 On which he dwells... (*Prelude* 13.442-448)

Wordsworth puts himself on the same level as other “prophets of Nature” in this excerpt, and together places them above regular folk, giving them and himself the authority to “instruct” others in how a relationship with nature can enhance their minds and their lives. This teaching is a form of connection and relationship that he wants to establish with readers, but it is an uneven connection, one in which he will have the upper hand. Through exposing himself, his inner thoughts and his life, to the outside world, he slowly crafts his persona to allow him to assume that authority, or at least make it so that this assumption doesn’t immediately put readers off. He blends it in, as if it were something to take for granted.

*The Prelude* was something Wordsworth kept close to the chest. He avoided it for years, and addressed it, confesses his life as he sees it, to his closest and most trusted friend. This confessional aspect is very closely related to the writing of Rousseau in his *Confessions*, mentioned earlier as the first recognized secular autobiography. Despite any elements of arrogance or pride, he believes in what he preaches, including wanting to share his view of

nature. His admissions in this work began to record the exact feelings, sentiments, and ideas that he wished others would see, and so this side show work became the perfect vessel to express them to the world. This section was even kept in the ruthlessly revised 1850 version of the work—he meant for it to be there, and, as he crept closer to death, maintained this point, knowing that the time for publishing was closer and closer.

Wordsworth's rendering of himself and the pull he felt to publish his wisdom work hand in hand in *The Prelude*. The process of writing himself and seeing himself within his words caused the image of the "chosen son" becomes more and more clear as the work continues, creating an authority within him to impart his model of how to live well. His chosenness bolsters his ability to instruct others, increases the belief that his model can to improve lives, and is possibly what he originally saw in himself that made him write autobiographically. His work created a new framework for self-writing in which honesty and vanity are delicately balanced in the rendering and creation of the crafted self, the vanity dispersed in pieces of the continual thread of honesty and thereby disguised as honesty. The story of his life becomes intertwined with lofty beliefs, his higher power to connect with nature placed as an equal with, or above, all his earthly experiences and their part in shaping his self.

Despite the sense of informality and honesty that *The Prelude* engenders, it is a wholly curated depiction of a life and a being, and yet, through this lens, still an accurate glimpse at the true Wordsworth. With an understanding of autobiographical gaps, a new self becomes clear, one that combines what is said and what can be inferred. Wordsworth's humility was true to a degree, as was his honesty. But this sense of ego, this honesty that becomes pride through the detailed descriptions of his chosenness, leads the reader to an image of

Wordsworth whose timidity to share is deeply inspired by societal politeness, whose impassioned writing is inspired by his self-importance, and whose autobiography is a product of both.

## **Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark***

*Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* has a complicated history as well. The work was originally a set of letters from Mary Wollstonecraft to her lover, an American by the name of Gilbert Imlay, while she was on a business trip in his stead in Scandinavia. Though they were not married, they had a child together, with whom Wollstonecraft was travelling as she wrote these letters, and despite her caring and intimate addresses to him, the trip was something of a desperate favor, as Imlay had been distancing himself from Wollstonecraft and was preparing to leave her. Because of this, Wollstonecraft's mood was quite low for the duration of the trip, and it is likely she was suffering from a bout of depression, something which she had grappled with in the past as well.

The context in which she wrote these letters puts into perspective some of the more personal revelations within the collection. The majority of the writing is formatted similarly to a travel journal, but there are fragments in which Wollstonecraft goes into a more intimate and confessional mode, bringing up personal insecurities, worries, and passions that would usually stay out of published works. This is what gives the piece its autobiographical identity. Though her self-rendering is originally accidental, her decision to publish her work without editing those pieces gives her rendering a much more authentic and honest quality.

Both the wisdom-seeking and idea-testing aspects of her writing contribute to the familiarity and colloquiality of Wollstonecraft's writing. They invite the reader into the thought process of the writer, allowing the reader to see how she thinks in her own, relatively unfiltered, words. This experience is unique in *Letters* due to the original nature of the collection and the minimal editing that occurred before it was published for the purpose of maintaining the honest and sincere quality of the letters. Because of the personal sentiment and revelation that occurs within *Letters*, it is considered one of the pioneering works of essayical British autobiography.

Wollstonecraft's *Letters* falls into the category of "essayical autobiography" due to its polemical and journalistic natures, as well as how the work is made up of short, focused pieces, or essays. The true form of "essay" is hard to define; however, these attributes are certainly aspects of many essays, and can be used to link the features of *Letters* to that genre.

Wollstonecraft is inspired by what is around her in these letters: people, cultures, landscapes, housing, and everything else she sees. The autobiographical sections exist as pockets of honesty and emotional vulnerability within these letters, present due to the intimate relationship of the addressee, and thus have a tendency of turning the more intimate letters into little autobiographical essays. These pockets have something of a pattern, often arising from polemical arguments inspired by her surroundings.

Wollstonecraft's polemical arguments are framed by her journalism. Similarly to Michel de Montaigne, the creator of the essayical genre, her primary focuses are the ideas and information she is conveying, and she therefore writes her letters to have journalistic quality, not only due to her numerous descriptions of her surroundings as if she were a journalist, but

also in that her writing is colloquial and intimate, as if she were writing in a journal. However, in this essay, journalistic writing will refer to reportorial or relatively impersonal writing.

For Wollstonecraft, what first seems like conversational writing is actually more confessional, the confessional set apart due to the revelation of personal information. Her use of the journalistic style is a frame, a sort of through line used throughout the entire book, connecting autobiographical spots to each other. Description becomes a lead-in to her arguments or opinions about what she is seeing, quickly making the arguments and opinions the deeper subject of the letter. In a way, these personal arguments become autobiographical in the sense that they show the reader what she truly believes and why she feels what she feels. This relationship, the journalist opening for opinion, conveys a sense of drifting or digression from the main topic, and therefore makes her opinions feel more confessional, especially when paired with her colloquial voice. An example of this occurs in letter one when she is first arriving in Scandinavia:

The view was sterile; still little patches of earth of most exquisite verdure, enamelled with the sweetest wild flowers, seemed to promise the goats and a few straggling cows luxurious herbage. How silent and peaceful was the scene. I gazed around with rapture, and felt more of that spontaneous pleasure which gives credibility to our expectation of happiness, than I had for a long, long time before. I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France, which had cast a gloom over all nature, and suffering the enthusiasm of my character, too often, gracious God! damped by the tears of disappointed affection, to be lighted up afresh, care took wing while simple fellow feeling expanded my heart.

(Wollstonecraft 57)

Beginning with more journalistic writing, she briefly slips into opinion (though it is not as firm or substantial as the previous quote) with the topic of the “goats” and “stragglers” and how the peacefulness of the scene inspired “spontaneous pleasure” within her. Quickly after this, she drops into specific autobiographical content: her time in France during the French Revolution and how those images still haunt her emotionally. Then she goes further, talking about her belief that the “enthusiasm of [her] character” hurts her in relationships—she gets too attached too quickly—specifically in the context of her current relationship.

She then goes into the situations of the servants in the country on the next page of letter three, something that she vehemently disagrees with: “They are not termed slaves; yet a man may strike a man with impunity because he pays him wages; though these wages are so low, that necessity must teach them to pilfer, whilst servility renders them false and boorish. Still the men stand up for the dignity of man, by oppressing the women. The most menial, and even laborious of offices, are therefore left to these poor drudges” (Wollstonecraft 65).

This is an example of how her polemical voice most visibly starts to jump out—using what she is experiencing culturally or what she is seeing as an opportunity to provide her own commentary, and how this commentary reveals her deeply-rooted values. Her outrage generates a level of informality, such powerful emotions giving the reader a sense that her passion connotes honesty—the honesty embedded in Wollstonecraft’s rendering of herself.

This level of informality is not present in either *The Prelude* or Robinson’s *Memoirs*, but it becomes the passage through which the autobiographical elements of *Letters* are formed. This intimacy between Wollstonecraft and the reader and the polemical or opinionated moments it creates spearhead certain pockets of autobiography by opening a gateway into the

mind of Wollstonecraft. They allow the reader into her headspace and give them access to her emotions, giving her opportunities to deepen her level of vulnerability and reveal more about herself. This is fundamentally different from the purposeful exposure in the writing of Wordsworth and Robinson. The autobiography present in these letters is not centered around the specific events of her life and how they shaped her, but is instead centered around tracing out her emotions beliefs, which comes out through confessions to her readers.

Though her opinions are something that seeps through into the essay in a sense, Wollstonecraft often takes firm polemical stances such as this, and especially in this letter. She states these opinions in ways that do not invite counter argument or opposition, as if no other conclusion could, or should, be reached, her beliefs being anchored heavily in her definition of morality. Morality is at the center for her and is a driving force in Wollstonecraft's writing, and part of what sends her into these autobiographical ramblings that shift this work into autobiography is how she grapples with morality, which is why her opinions and polemical arguments so often accompany her personal thoughts and dilemmas.

In "Mood, Provisionality, and Planetarity in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*," Enit Steiner affirms the autobiographical nature of Wollstonecraft's piece through a study on mood, specifically how fluid and provisional it is throughout the letters. Mood as a concept and how it appears in the letters is thoroughly investigated by Steiner through the ideas of multiple authors, and is made out to be something unintentional and controlling, though not uncontrollable.

Martin Heidegger, a prominent philosopher and one of the authors Steiner introduces, argues mood lies deep with the self, by which he means it originates neither from inside or

outside influence. This belief is tied to the unsolicited nature of moods; though we can suppress mood, we cannot prevent the initiation or “rising up” of it. This produces a sense of “thrownness” within people, which contributes to the rapid shifts in subject and mood that occur throughout *Letters*. In Steiner’s words, “mood is not a veil, a coloring, or an addition to the self or the world but the constituent that makes the world intelligible” (32). The essay argues that the letters use provisionality as a mood in itself, and that it is the way through which Wollstonecraft is able to introduce and teach planetary thought, inviting readers to accept and be open to “the other.” The provisionality of Wollstonecraft’s letters is prominent—she jumps from topic to topic quickly, with many digressions before she arrives back to the descriptions of her surroundings. These digressions—her arguments, opinions, and revelations—are the way in which Wollstonecraft comes to confide in her readers and confess her emotions, making her provisional thoughts integral to the conception of this work as autobiography.

Steiner argues that mood is also what attaches Wollstonecraft to the world, as her mood both draws her into herself and places her in the context of a group or “whole.” Steiner gives an example of this from *Letters*:

What are these imperious sympathies? How frequently has melancholy and even misanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me, and friends have proven unkind. I have then considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind;—I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion like the attraction of adhesion made me feel that I still was a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself. (Wollstonecraft 70)

Wollstonecraft questions her moods—her provisional writing and the emotional results of it—and the sympathy they demand within her, revealing bits of her own personality and inner thoughts. I believe this is how Wollstonecraft’s idea-weighing, wisdom-seeking, and polemicism meet. Wollstonecraft’s polemic voice is not only argumentative, but also a product of inadvertent vulnerability. Her polemicism is part of her personality, as is seeking wisdom, and through the divergences her polemics take her on, these two characteristics meet here, as she weighs the ideas that exist within herself. This is what makes *Letters* autobiographical and confessional; Wollstonecraft is giving the reader the sense that “we really are seeing into her thoughts as they happen,” an inside, honest look at what she thinks and how she feels about herself, which is debatably one of the most vulnerable subjects someone can consider (Chaney 198). This honesty that Wollstonecraft’s rendering of herself is steeped in is what makes her curation braver than either Robinson’s or Wordsworth’s as well. Her rendering is rooted in bravery and boldness because of its unedited nature and the true vulnerability of its contents—leading her to assay her worth and self before the public, unashamedly, in these letters.

In his essay “Death in the Face of Nature: Self, Society and Body in Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*,” John Whale states that “*Letters* highlights the provisionality of the self in writing, a self that will not be resolved with a single revolutionary revision, but one which must be constantly struggled for and re-invented. *Letters* is a complexly combined text which mixes sensibility and sublimity and which alternates between enthusiasm and dejection. It is as interested in surface as it is in depth, in the moment as much as in the historical progress of civilization” (306). Wollstonecraft’s depth of thought and character can be seen many times over in her letters, revealed through her moments of

personal revelation and confession. Many people tend to focus on the existence of these moments, these cracks through the armor, alone, but Whale is more focused on investigating the content of these musings and how they exemplify her self. Wollstonecraft's meditations and her descriptions of her mental state play a key part in understanding the aspect of connection in her reasons for publishing her work, the ability to find possible solidarity or reveal similarities between her and her readers—something that will be elaborated on later.

He argues later in his article that her description of her letters as *desultory* exhibits a “disarming naivety” on her part. Though her writing is often disarming, the word naïve is inaccurate. Wollstonecraft was a very intelligent, logic-based thinker, and that kind of mind can tend to float above the problems and social cues of everyday life. She is an optimist as well, something Whale also acknowledges. Her relationships with men show this, as they progressed very quickly in some cases, and once they seemed committed, she was highly devoted to the relationship. These signs, in addition to her youth and resistance to authority, would cause many scholars, including Whale, to say they constitute proof on the part of her naïve genius, as her intellect and polemics are concrete and undeniable when her written career is analyzed.

However, this is not the case for Wollstonecraft. In spite of this, she is not ignorant of the world—in fact she acknowledges more of it than many others of her time. She is very intelligent, but also very well acquainted with the problems and emotions of the real world, as shown through her fight for social justice and opinions on the poor and downtrodden. Multiple times in her letters she speaks out about issues and benefits regarding the state of those that are regularly oppressed and debates how they could improve.

These arguments display her tendency toward optimism and the belief that she can change things, and this optimism can be disarming, as it is framed by writing that is more journalistic and impersonal—the report of her physical and cultural surroundings. Through her record it becomes obvious that her writing is part of who she is, deeply connected to her morality. It is also clear that she cares about her subjects. The people she saw mattered to her; many of her unplanned diversions into her emotional and mental states began when something within the surrounding culture struck her, matters of justice in particular. This does not exhibit naivete. Though it is only one word in his multi-page essay, Whale's word-choice in this instance is important. It conveys an assumption of youth and, coming from a man, also smells slightly of misogyny.

Whale's use of *helplessness* is more debatable. Wollstonecraft did not originally intend to publish these letters, but when she did, her editing had to consider the personal and intimate voice and details she spoke of in them, which were not typical of the time and certainly not typical of her in regards to her insecurities and doubts and worries about her daughter, her love, and how she lived. Her allowance of them, therefore, was significant, as she recalls in her prelude: "I tried to correct this fault, if it be one, for [the letters] were designed for publication; but in proportion as I arranged my thoughts, my letter, I found, became stiff and affected: I, therefore, determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained" (Wollstonecraft 51).

There was definitely a missing element of planning with these personal moments, and in that a degree of helplessness, seeing as she kept them in because they were so intertwined with her actual information and message that she felt she couldn't extricate them without

robbing her letters of their meaning. However, I would argue that her helplessness is specific, different from Wordsworth's helplessness in writing *The Prelude*, for example. Wordsworth attempted time and again to direct his writing toward finishing *The Recluse*, but the influence of reflection and memory was too strong, similar to Wollstonecraft's incidental emotional honesty. However, *The Prelude* was borne relatively shamefully by Wordsworth, with his refusal to publish without some kind of buffer between him and the public. Wordsworth's verses presented a humble, unsure helplessness while his tone was prideful and thought himself elevated, having such expansive dialogue with his "inner self."

Wollstonecraft, though her original intent was not publishing, does not bear her story shamefully or pridefully, but more defiantly. The intermixed nature of her personal thoughts and her informational recounting of the cultures and scenery she is surrounded by did not make it impossible to edit out the emotional parts of her letters. She chose to keep them in, not in a prideful move of anticipating the rise of autobiography, nor in a way that was fearful and self-conscious, at least not as Wordsworth was. The view readers get of Wollstonecraft in *Letters* was rendered through a sort of helplessness, but her decision to include her autobiographical writing in was extremely purposeful, a curatorial move that was in no way naively done.

Mary Wollstonecraft's emotion in *Letters* is a curious thing. Her writing voice is one of a cold analytic, but we can tell from her multiple revelations and emotional confessions that this is not entirely the case. She is a very intelligent, logically-minded woman that feels connection and loss deeply. We see that in how she addresses the person she is writing to, but also in her revolutionary spirit. Her acknowledgement and admonishment of the treatment of maids and

workwomen in Sweden, mentioned previously, also pointed to this; her outrage at the men who would also mistreat the maids is not only fueled by anger, but by compassion as well. Susan Civale mentions what Amy Culley has said about *Letters*, that it “allows Wollstonecraft ‘to assert her continuing faith in revolutionary progress, social connection, and personal relationship in the aftermath of the Terror’” (87, qtd. in Civale). Her optimism and desire for personal connection, through shared emotional experience or ideals, are two influential forces behind her publication of *Letters*, and her opinions on the possibility of progress and revolution are where these forces are exhibited in her writing.

She not only witnessed the Terror in France, but was wronged in relationships that seemed permanent, and was treated quite harshly in her childhood. Her emotions were battered by life, but all the while her emotions remained irrevocable and intense. She was passionate in every aspect of life, though she did not always believe that she could recover from its absence. Her admissions in letters were inspired, undoubtedly, but it is also clear, once her life has been examined in this way, why her spirit of revolution and freedom would not be repressed. She could see evidence of the world needing her ideas, her passion, perhaps in more ways than she mentioned. Wollstonecraft wrote this to be not just heard, but understood. She wanted the social connection, despite what it had done to her in the past, because she felt the importance of her passions, the solidarity in sharing insecurities and doubts, and the gravity it gave her work.

At the time Wollstonecraft published *Letters*, she was already established in intellectual circles, the crafting of her works making her respected and part of the conversation, which allowed her to write more for herself. But publishing without extricating such intense and

honest emotions, had different roots. Despite her reputation, this kind of work was not what was generally expected of her by her readers. Those revolutionary sentiments, her liberal politics and everything accompanying, rather than being the basis of her work, are instead rooted in the emotion she expresses in *Letters*. She stated that her arguments would not be what she wished, would not make sense, without the autobiography, and though she acknowledged that this may be a fault within her work, she nonetheless invited readers to “shut the book, if they do not wish to become better acquainted with me” (Wollstonecraft 51).

However, Wollstonecraft’s decision to publish these letters required some thoughtful consideration. The work was much more personal than anything she had previously published, and this autobiographical journaling was an original endeavor, if not outlandish. Mostly, *Letters* covers the subjects in the cultures she experiences, and the environments she sees. There may have been a public draw due to the popularity of travel journals and the like in certain societal circles. But what in hers inspired her to share, since she published despite the emotionality of the work, not because of it.

Wollstonecraft took a risk publishing a work with so much personal reflection and aggressive ideological confession, but through this risk she was able to develop a new vein of communication between author and reader, having the courage to reveal her soul to the public in the hope that they would either see something of themselves in it or respect her authorial decisions in choosing to leave her work so subjective. Her subjectivity is what gives us such close glimpses of her morality and her opinions, the triggers (and sources) of her autobiographical drifts, out of which she fashions the depressed and defeated, yet optimistic and firmly moral woman she sees herself as on this trip. The minimal editing style necessitates

a minimally edited rendering of herself. This was the woman she saw, and by publishing, she allowed others to see that view of her as well.

Wollstonecraft's *Letters* is not primarily concerned with the autobiographical details of her life, but this fact is the very thing that gives it such influence in the rise of the autobiography. The authenticity, vulnerability, and honesty embedded in these initially personal letters are due to the incidental nature of them, and in her publication of the letters she invited her readers into that vulnerable space with her, fostering a line of intimate connection through her emotional self-rendering. The unedited nature of these autobiographical moments turns her musings and rambling into confessions, confessions she deemed integral enough to her collection to threaten its coherency if removed, and influential enough to inspire readers to want to know her in this way. Wollstonecraft's vulnerability was the key to the component of personal connection with her readers—her grueling experiences in the previous few years made her turn to her reader for social connection and, once *Letters* became popular, she gained that.

### **Robinson's *Memoirs of Mary Robinson, "Perdita"***

*Memoirs of Mary Robinson* was a straightforward, intentional account of the life of Mary Robinson, making it the most modern-seeming autobiography out of these three works—it was written in prose, and had the initial purpose of telling the story of Robinson's life, with few elements of self-discovery or wandering through the events. Published posthumously in 1801 by Mary's daughter, Maria, it followed a relatively successful literary career by Robinson, though not with the status of the other authors. Unlike Wordsworth, Robinson had no qualms about publishing her memoir before she died, but it was not meant to be. She passed before it

could be finished, due to age and long-declining health, and subsequently it was finished by her daughter in her stead. Robinson speaks of her death often in the work, knowing that time was of the essence as to the completion of her memoir. Robinson's memoir has a unique place within these works due to her societal standing and reputation. Her acting career and young, poorly matched marriage poised her on the edge of scandal, as they left her very vulnerable and exposed to the public. At the time, one's societal and public standing was closely tied to one's livelihood. One's reputation was quite precarious, as well as very restrictive for women specifically. Exposure through writing would be chancy, and exposure through acting very risky for a young girl's reputation.

She came from a respectable family, but this tended to heighten her infamy, people seeing the potential of a young well-off girl falling from grace. Once she was married, she had to leave acting for a stretch of a few years out of respect for her husband—theater was still considered perilous and improper for women of the time—but returned to it some years later after Mr. Robinson had turned to gambling. However, this choice began her life's turn toward gossip and disgrace as, soon after her acting career was renewed, she began a relationship with the Prince of Wales and was known widely as his mistress. A few years after this, he left her, and her health began to fail soon after, as she fell ill and became paralyzed. With little else to turn to for financial support, Robinson decided to make writing her new career. She began to write in earnest, publishing poems and even books, and at some level of success, though they were not considered to be of as a high quality as more famous works.

Though her life was full of intrigue and drama, the height of her fame occurred when she was still very young. She mostly left public society when she was paralyzed, occurring when

she was only twenty-three. Susan Luther considers Robinson and her writing through the lens of Samuel Coleridge's affection toward her in her article "A Stranger Minstrel: Coleridge's Mrs. Robinson," and states that he believed that "she 'was in her latter life a blameless Woman'" (Luther 393). Coleridge had an intimate personal and intellectual relationship with Robinson due to her writing career. According to Luther, she was a "the most prolific contributor to the *Morning Post's* 'Poetical Department,'" which was managed by Coleridge (392). He saw that her sins did not make her up, and defended Robinson and her daughter in the public eye even after Robinson's death. Though some of her books and poems did well, they were not regarded as masterpieces or works of genius by the public. Much of her writing involves gothic and dark undertones, much like her autobiography and her life. Her writing is very much reflective of her life, circumstances, and moods, and was full of inoffensive, societally appropriate works that could help bolster her reputation while perhaps making her some money and providing her with an outlet for her melancholy.

Mary Robinson's *Memoirs* is the least known of these works; yet her writing finds a vein in an area that Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth do not, making it influential in its own right. Her life of fame and misfortune was constantly speculated about by the society of the time, which puts her memoir in a unique position of potential demand. Both Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft published their autobiographical works with the knowledge that they were different from what people usually expected from them. The same is true of Robinson, but the traits of curiosity and a new tendency toward celebrity voyeurism, of a group of people that would be willing to or would even want to know the details of a celebrity's personal life was something that the drama of Robinson's life gave her memoir. In *Women's Life Writing* by

Susan Civale, she states that one of the reasons that autobiography became so popular was the voyeuristic nature of the work for the public. This certainly could have played a role in how the memoir was received once it was published, and also may have also influenced her writing and publishing a memoir. I argue, though, that she did not write it to fulfill that desire or publish it to try and save face; her reasons were more personal, and rooted in a desire for freedom and control.

Robinson was a well-educated, well-spoken woman, evidenced in the smoothness and ease of her writing that is not carried through by her daughter. She takes to writing when she has no other option for her life, being paralyzed and ostracized by the public. Her writing is respected in some circles, especially by Coleridge, though some say it was not deserving such high praise. Susan Luther cites a quote by E.L. Griggs that states that he believed Coleridge “uncritically but chivalrously overestimated ‘Perdita’s’ work” (Luther 394). Even so, this shift to writing and poetry comes after a huge emotional shock, something that devastated her, especially at such a young age and having experienced such tragedy in her youth, with her father leaving and her husband and lovers all disappointing her. Perhaps Maria, her daughter, was what finally inspired her to try and right herself to the public. Her words would outlive her; even if no one bothered to understand her life, what she did and how she felt.

Mary Robinson did want to share, like Wordsworth, but her sense of melancholy, suffering, and bitterness is clear, a sharp contrast to Wordsworth’s spiritual joy. A powerful line about her birth in her first chapter reads: “on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November, 1758, I first opened my eyes to this world of duplicity and sorrow” (Robinson 3). Her writing does not shy away from personal feeling, and because of that it exposes her true sadness at her unfair life in full effect.

However, she does address the good things in her life; she simply lists them as few and far between which, in fairness, they were. Robinson was ignored or dismissed often in her life. Mr. Robinson hardly came home according to her memoir, as he was busy spending their money at gambling tables, on prostitutes, or on even more debasing activities. Her mother was a source of comfort and love, and in the memoir Robinson states that “She devoted herself to her children,” but even she sometimes placed her own desires ahead of Mary’s—with whom Robinson married in particular, which was a monumental area. From the time she was a teenager on the stage, the details of her life were gossiped about and assumed, while she had no way of correcting any falsities that circulated. All of this culminates in this work into something of a plea—seeking people that would listen to her, see her and understand her, not try to change her or use her. This memoir was a way in which she might gain such connection with her readers with honesty and hope for understanding in the shared experiences of others, similar to Wollstonecraft, while still allowing herself uninterrupted control of her image.

This differs from both Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft. With both these authors, there was a level of caution in publishing their work due to some fear about its reception. For Robinson, though, this was an act of autonomy long in the making. Nothing about this work was accidental, and the primary concern was not the reactions of others. It was her personal liberation. For Robinson, the draw to autobiography is the opportunity to render herself in words, the ability to finally craft her image as she sees it within her and use written words to influence the image of herself others had created. This is the innovative trait of *Memoirs*—it fostered the development of a purposeful, intentional way of writing autobiography, centered around crafting an image to be seen by the world. Though many today have used this mode of

autobiography to sway public opinion or invent a persona for themselves that doesn't exist, I argue that Robinson's rendering was brought about by a longing to control her own story in a way that was removed from outside influence, to say her piece without being afflicted by the opinions of others.

Throughout her life, Robinson managed to find some sympathy and understanding within her intellectual relationships and friendships that she made through acting. Her fame and alleged beauty must have initially gained her a degree of gravity and immediate respect, but this didn't last long. One of her more ardent admirers, Coleridge, loved her poetry and writing, and they had an intellectual and personal correspondence for many years. Even with these relationships, though, there must have been a lingering feeling of and apprehension toward being used. In the Introduction of her memoir, it says that, "One [moral] at least is sufficiently obvious, and it will be found in the cold-hearted of neglect which a woman of the most fascinating mental and personal attractions may encounter from those whose homage is merely sensual, and whose admiration is but a snare" (Robinson vi). Susan Civale, in the introduction to her book *Romantic Women's Life Writing: Reputation and After Life*, speaks in depth on the idea of crafting an autobiographical persona for the benefit of societal image:

The standards by which women in their work were judged, and the ways in which this work influenced its subjects' reputations, were complicated in ways different from, or at least more pronounced than, those governing men's life writing of the period. Debates about the moral respectability and literary merit of autobiography were intensified and complicated by the issue of gender. Women's sexual lives were held to different standards than men's, and they faced the added pressures of balancing literary labor

with the cultural expectations of femininity. Moreover, personal attacks could be especially damaging to women whose dependent economic positions left them heavily reliant on literary work for their livelihoods. (Civale 6)

This double standard for how people were supposed to live hindered Robinson constantly—her romantic and sexual life was constantly subject to judgement, and her livelihood was entirely dependent on her writing, with no other option for a paralyzed woman like herself to turn to for income, all the while trapped in an unstable marriage to a gambling whoremonger. Her whole life, Robinson watched as people decided her future for her. Once she finally took her control, much of it coming from “scandalous” relationships with powerful men, destiny robbed her of that as well, confining her to a bed or chair, the ability to walk stripped from her.

This is all to say that this memoir was her last word, not only a way to set the record straight but a way to take power back over her life, to render herself in her own image (as she saw it) separate from public opinion. Robinson’s image as a strumpet and adulteress were not going to vanish no matter what she did, and she knew that. The work is not wholly a lamentation or cry for pity, and neither is it attempting to be a righteous justification of her character, which is why Civale suggests that her *Memoirs* take a different stance in autobiography:

Robinson’s *Memoirs* and its afterlife suggest that a reputation is not something merely to be ‘damaged’ or ‘salvaged’ but something to be shaped. Women have long been appraised according to what Katherine Kitteridge calls ‘the good woman / bad woman dichotomy’, and yet one of Robinson’s most troubling and appealing features is that she

embodies such oppositions.... Behind the coquettish actress is the heroine of sensibility and behind the heroine of sensibility, the coquettish actress. (Civale 191)

Robinson may have written for an audience, but she did not form herself *to* the audience. She shaped her image with her omissions and tragic background so that she could speak her truth without further condemning herself and ruining the remnants of her reputation, not to pretend she could save face after the exposed life she led.

Unlike Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft, Robinson does not offer any real intimate glimpses at her reason for writing this piece. Her reason, I argue, is present in the general tone, feeling, and voice of the collective work, out in the open but humming quietly in the background. This work gives her the liberty to define herself and give an uninterrupted account of herself and her life. Her melancholy and despair are clear, and yet there is a great amount of freedom in her writing. It is honest, at least to her own mind, and that gives the writing a liberated edge, something in the word choice and sarcasm and cynicism that hints at her freedom despite all her sadness and heartbreak. Because this freedom is both the reason for Robinson's writing and publication, *Memoirs* differs from *Letters* and *The Prelude* yet again, no disguises or confusion being involved in it.

Her sorrows began at an early age, according to Robinson. After her father moved to America and left her mother, she shares that other families reached out to her mother: "It was during this period of trial that my mother was enabled to prove, by that of unerring touchstone, adversity, who were her real and disinterested friends. Many, with affected commiseration, dropped a tear—or rather seemed to drop one—on the disappointments of our family" (Robinson 18). This phrase drips with caustic bitterness and annoyance, but with the dashes,

the dependent clause of “or rather seemed to drop one,” it presents a voice that finds bitter humor in the situation. It shows someone accustomed to fake people, shaky promises, and emotional pain, and something innately funny in how her low expectations prove themselves to be accurate.

Robinson’s melancholy is emphasized by the way in which she speaks of those she loves and respects. Though her bitterness toward life is clear from the opening, she has a great amount of kindness in her, and shines an amorous and warm light on those she favors, not likely to waver despite their actions. Her mother is referred to with the utmost affection, gratitude, and praise, despite the fact that her mother influenced her into a marriage full of debt and unhappiness. She speaks of her father very forgivingly as well, saying that his, “deviation from domestic faith was the only dark shade that marked my father’s character. He possessed a soul brave, liberal, enlightened and ingenious. He felt the impropriety of his conduct” (Robinson 21). Her father ran off to America, leaving not only his wife but Mary and all her siblings as well, perhaps never to see them again, and yet she speaks highly of him despite it. This may be a sign of the tired, forgiving musings of someone on their deathbed, but evidence of her kind heart is sprinkled throughout her memoir, pieces of her repeated deep affection for friends and family showing themselves as integral parts of her character. This softness is perhaps what led her to the possibility of writing a memoir, what prompted her to believe that she could gain some kind of control over her story at the end of her life.

Her bitterness and suppression also leads her to find solace in putting the words of her heart out into the world, but her softness and forgiving nature hints at her motivation in writing this, lingering hope. If she were simply a bitter woman who had an unfortunate and tragic life,

would she truly care what others thought of her anymore? She was so publicly ridiculed for so many years, and at such a young age, to the length of having a parody-comedy play written about her life by a stranger. With declining health that rarely let her leave her own house, she should have had little hope that her image could be redeemed or that people would care enough about her to hear her life from her perspective. Perhaps she relied on the fame and drama that surrounded her in the public eye to create some intrigue, a draw for readers to want to read her story, but that would not have been enough incentive for her to write—what would make people believe her?

If she were truly just sad and bitter, she would not have cared to write and publish this at all. Her dark mirth is full of sarcasm and contempt, but her hopefulness is still present in the dampening of her spirits out of necessity, since optimism has always let her down but she cannot help but think that way.

Robinson's memoir is the work least focused on craft of this grouping. It is written with a professional level of word choice and grammar—words that seem to be commonly used today but in more formal social situations—but which style was customary for the time: "Probably these pages will be read when the hand that writes them moulders in the grave, when that God that judges all hearts will know how innocent I was of the smallest conjugal infidelity...at this early period of my existence" (Robinson 83). The play with placing the adverb "probably" ahead of the verb and the noun, and the dramatic repetition of "when," are both characteristic of this era, as is the stylistic level of the word choice. She does not seem to have labored over words or punctuation (or line breaks), but simply written it as a record, straightforward and from the heart, relying on her previously developed writing skills to carry the

formality of a published work. Her lack of heightened vocabulary and grammatical embellishment do not show a lack of attention to detail, but do connote a disinterest in impressing or pleasing people with her sentences. This is not a work she intended to be widely renowned or highly respected—her being a writer of poetry and prose, her craft respected by Coleridge himself, this points even more toward an emphasis on honesty and understanding than to a fabricated sob-story.

Her betrayals, though, were most likely not the sole reason for her endeavor of writing a memoir. Her fame and beauty, described by others and herself, led to a sense of importance and self-inflation. Though she had a difficult life, her pampering by her mother and others during her period of fame in the theatre could have been catalysts for a development of her ego. She may have wanted other people to hear the story of her life from her perspective, but she also may have had a desire to play the victim, if only slightly. Her writing does not come off as embellished—her voice has a gravity to it that gives it a feeling of candor—but there are certainly parts of her life that she omits, apparently to save herself some face or victimize herself and her situation.

*Memoirs of Mary Robinson* was a delicate masterpiece to craft. With her life so engrained and invested in her public image, if there was any hope of having the image she wanted, it would have to be salvaged, or corrected, through autobiographical self-rendering. With her memoir, Robinson had long been versed in propriety and exposure, and knew that her final work would be about the truth of herself and her image. Robinson may not have cared if this would be widely renowned or read by someone one hundred years after her death or perhaps she did, but her purpose, her call to write, surrounded the verification, the truth, of her

life. Her truth needed to be in the world, available, solid and unalterable, and within autobiography she saw an opportunity to create her image on her own terms.

However, to right oneself in public image and to share the truth of one's life cannot always go hand in hand. This was a delicate web to weave, and needed to be crafted as such. Robinson referred to her sense of vindication regarding society's conceptions of her. In the specific passage, she said "the world has mistaken the character of my mind; I have ever been the reverse of volatile and dissipated" (Robinson 53). This points to her memoir as vindication, but takes a turn away from legacy, from "eulogy" as she says. She is not focused on what happens to her life and her name after she dies. Her purpose is solely for her. As a woman, especially one of fame and scandal, her own word was probably constantly spoken over by gossipers or those who saw her unfavorably: those who did not respect the word of a woman. People had opinions, so many opinions, on what a woman should do and who a woman should be that when those lines were crossed, so were women's good opinion and respect.

Truth mattered to Robinson, but it is also true that this memoir does not mention many discretions of her life that people judge her for. She talks about her relationship with the Prince of Wales, but there are no details about intimacy or relationship; the language is delicate, selected, just like the information given.

This is an interesting choice. Though distinct detail may have caused Robinson to fall into more disgrace, some inside information may have drawn readers to her book. But that was not the case. Her romantic relationships are handled carefully, with little personal description or details of the other person, how they got along, what they did, or anything along those lines. She sacrificed publicity and popularity—opportunities for people to read and understand her

life—for personal respect, seeing that her relationships had had enough influence on her image, and were not what made her character. Her truth was about her, and her choice was calculated, as everything else in the memoir, to be exactly what she desired. Her whole reason for writing was to set the record straight in a way in which no one could speak over her. Her selling out, her giving in to the gossips and fanatics would only have distracted from what she really wanted to say, the story she really wanted to tell.

Mary Robinson's memoir may not have made such shockwaves as the work of Wordsworth or Wollstonecraft, but it performed the highly influential work of normalizing the use of autobiographical writing for the specific purpose of crafting an image, whether it be truthful or fictional, and sharing a story, which is the primary purpose of autobiography as it exists today. Autobiography became Robinson's means through which she could tell the story of her life without interruption and exert control over her narrative before she died. Though her writing was less concerned with legacy than with her ability to speak for herself, her honesty, optimism, and dark mirth created an image of her that people were able to relate to and sympathize with—her rendering, though lacking some detail, was that of a real person with real shortcomings, strengths, emotions, and issues. The betrayal and pain she experienced in her life were finally overcome, in a way, with the publication of this piece and the influence it gave her. With autobiography, her words became permanent, solid, and fixed, and with them so did her life—in her own image.

## **Conclusion**

Self-rendering and the opportunity afforded by autobiography to craft one's own image affected the writing, publication, and reception of each of these influential works. The core of

autobiography is the ability to discover and make sense of one's identity, a thought that accompanies the ideas of individualism and personal identity that begin to rise with these autobiographies. The core of self-rendering, though, is the opportunity to curate an image or identity to fit how one sees themselves, a product of the new consciousness surrounding the "self" that people use to understand and define one another.

Wordsworth and Robinson both actively saw and curated the selves they wished to render in their writing, though Wordsworth did so more covertly than Robinson, while Wollstonecraft's renderings occurred after the initial writing, if at all. However, both Wollstonecraft's and Wordsworth's works were autobiographically focused on the journey of self-discovery and discernment, whereas Robinson was more attached to the idea of *conveying* her life and her self as she believed them to be. Each of these authors approached autobiography for varying societal and emotional reasons, and published them with no knowledge surrounding what impact their "identities" would have on their literary careers and the public's reception of self-writing. Their honesty, to whatever degree, and contemplation of selfhood connected their stories to the lives of others, thereby inspiring more authors to write autobiographically—whether to provide a possible model for a good life, to inspire connection and solidarity, or to share the truth of a life independently.

Autobiography is a process of asking questions and gaining answers about oneself through writing—it allows the mind to comprehend oneself by making its experiences, beliefs, insecurities, and desires concrete. Through autobiography, Wordsworth was able to answer the question, "What does my idea of life mean in the context of the world?" Wollstonecraft confronted "What part do my emotions play in who I am, and how do they relate to the

feelings of others?” Robinson saw the conflicting narratives around her and thought “Is it possible to define myself and see myself rendered in a way I believe to be true?” And through each rendering of these answers, the subject that is written reflects the individual that exists to others, regardless of integrity or sincerity.

Wordsworth, Wollstonecraft, and Robinson pioneered the idea of the image of the self, rendered by themselves, and all of these opened a different specific vein of autobiography, influencing and inspiring others to use that same vein or a variation of it to discover themselves and render that image. These works pushed encountering the “self” as a personal individual, one that could exist deeply and complexly within someone and to someone, potentially unseen by the world. This was the inception of the current autobiographical framework, and the origination of the ability to self-render and self-define, an idea that has become one of the highest concerns of modern western society.

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## **Appendix**

### Relationship Between Faith and Autobiography

Lostness and uncertainty have been defining features of both my academic and my faith journeys. For most of my life, I have struggled with discerning my vocation, calling out to God and anyone else that could help me find what I was meant to do. I tried new activities, inserting myself into interesting disciplines, asking teachers and other authority figures about their careers, but each of these only seemed to move me an inch here or there, never giving me the moment of truth that made everything about me fall into place. Without any idea of who I wanted to be, it was difficult for me to find where I belonged in the church as well. I grew sporadically in the church, having the foundations of Christian elementary schooling, but the deficit of never attending regular church with my family. For many years even the inklings of Christianity or religion in a conversation made uncomfortable enough to leave the room—my beliefs were utterly blurred, conflicted, underinformed, and unresolved.

However, this constant dig into who I would want to be helped me discover who I already was. I never realized that so much of my confusion was due to the fact that I had such a passive, mergeable personality, and that I never knew it. My identity had become wrapped up entirely in what everyone believed I was and who everyone around me was, allowing my true self to hide underneath the surface. But by attempting to sort out my past in order to define myself, I became invested in the loose form of the autobiographical process. I realized the importance not only knowing your attributes and characteristics, but seeing where they

stemmed from, what experiences caused them to develop within you. It all centers around the question of “why?” When examining myself, it was simple to pluck out my surface qualities, my quirks and personality traits, but every time someone asked me “why” that was so, every time they continued to ask it, my answers switched from “I don’t know” to “maybe because,” and through this interrogation of my past and my self, I found so much more truth about what truly mattered to me.

With this new knowledge about myself, I became much more emotionally secure with my personality, something that gave me courage—enough courage to enter back into my faith. College has been an especially influential time period in this way, allowing me to grow independently and discover how to manage the tension between my newly-realized need for comfort and stability and the tugs on heart that urged my forward in my faith. This knowledge of myself made me self-aware, which meant I now knew the difference between caution and cowardice in myself. My re-initiation into my faith was much more powerful than it had been when I was a child because it was full of my own decisions, actions and progress that I alone could own, and my new self-possession allowed me to see much more clearly how I could let myself be guided—both by God and leaders in my church—into an area of the church where I felt at home serving, something I had never experienced before.

Before long, I was placed with a connections team—people that were the face of the church, working to welcome new faces, inform first-time guests and hopeful returners, and be a first connection for them to have in the church. I felt happy there, comfortable, because I knew the discomfort and uncertainty that many of the new people I was meeting were feeling. I had felt it, for years, until I was able to overcome it by become surer of myself and more secure in

my knowledge of myself. I knew the road to accepting a life in the church would look different to everyone, with different setbacks and concerns and insecurities, but if I hadn't gone through the work of figuring myself out, I never would have even attended church by myself, much less voluntarily served on a team to help others struggling with their faith. This process of self-discovery is exactly what these early autobiographical writers approached with no guidance, standards, or predecessors to show them how to explore ideas of selfhood or individuality. These authors made a conscious decision to look into themselves and record, using their vocation of writing to determine what composed their selves. And through the examination of their use of vocation to investigate themselves, I found mine.