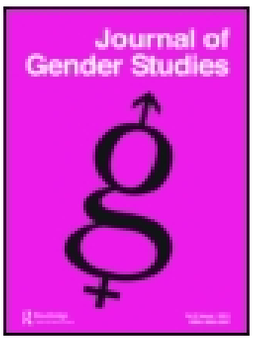

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Signs of life

Treva Broughton

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'embrace feminist ideology and goals of equality as *right* choices for their lives' (p. 276).

Given the wide range of materials covered, and the high level of critical analysis, I cannot imagine anybody so well-informed as not to learn a great deal in the course of reading *Engendering Men* from cover to cover, whatever misgivings some readers may have about what they perceive as political dubieties in such an enterprise.

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Signs of Life

TREVA BROUGHTON

Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom, *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography and Gender.* Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990. £

Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920.* New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. £30.

Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987. £6.75.

When I began to teach courses on women's autobiography and life-writing in the mid-eighties, I was aware of only one book devoted to the subject. Estelle Jelinek's *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington: 1980), and that had been out of print for some time. A single copy limped around the British inter-library network. It probably still does. Undeterred, my students and I made the course up as we went along, gamely rummaging through journals of anthropology and social history, taping our own oral histories, roping in confessional poets and lyricists, collecting self-portraits, and occasionally even finding diaries in attics. We spent a lot of time at the photocopier.

Much has changed. Gripping, culturally diverse autobiographies by brilliant twentieth-century women are readily available in bookshops, and, shored up by a wealth of secondary material, they

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yield connecting themes and recurrent questions aplenty. The reading list steadily expands, preparation takes less time, and life on the course is much less of a scramble. And yet, I can't help missing the muddle.

Of the multitude of tomes to have appeared on the subject, the one I have put off reading longest is Sidonie Smith's. With so many pithily punning titles around, the unappetizing *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* has remained on the shelf.

Overcoming my prejudice at last, I find it is undeniably a useful book for anyone interested in feminist theories of autobiography. A thorough account of the theological, epistemological and discursive constructions of woman as 'other' in the West prepares the way for Smith's 'theoretical considerations'. The reader may then conscientiously plough through post-structuralist and psychoanalytic formulations of the self, the author, the reader and the text before arriving, exhausted, at the promised 'poetics' of women's autobiography. This is perhaps the most disappointing section, consisting mainly of the argument that until recently women have had to write their stories as a male-identified fictions ('formal' autobiography), or within the fiction of the 'good woman'; and that the authority upon which both these discourses rest derives from 'the erasure of female sexuality' (p. 55). Smith's subsequent readings of individual autobiographers - Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, Charlotte Charke, Harriet Martineau, Maxine Hong Kingston - are elegant and scholarly, though given Smith's earlier work, black women's writing is a glaring absence. She celebrates her texts according to the success with which they deal with the double-bind of her poetics, reserving her greatest admiration for Maxine Hong Kingston's wonderful *The Woman Warrior.*

Within this framework, as more recent theorists have begun to argue, 'formal autobiography', the province of men, takes on the role of primary signifier, the phallic text around which women perform a stately and chaste, or frantic and disreputable dance. According to this logic, it is only when offered the self-reflexivity of modernism, the ironies of postmodernism and the confidence of the twentieth-century women's movement, that women can turn their back on the maypole, deconstructing its dichotomies and defusing its power. This progressive view of literary history gives me pause. Is it necessary to concede so much power, prestige and authority to 'male' autobiography? What if the definition of formal autobiography has always been contested? These questions find a wistful echo in Smith's 'wish ... for someone to offer an exploration of the relationship of men

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to autobiography that would reread the male tradition with attention to the repression of women and the ideology of individualism' (p. 43).

My impression is that our attempt to formulate a poetics of women's autobiography is gradually running out of steam. Artificially isolated from the kindred genres of fiction and biography, and from its active engagement with men's life-writing, women's autobiography, slimmed down to canonical purity, seems to collapse in on itself, losing all contact with the 'life' to which it owes boths its existence and (surely?) our interest in it.

A book which attempts to revive this flagging relationship with the '*bios*' by rediscovering some of the lost contexts is Bell and Yalom's *Revealing Lives*. This ramshackle book restores vitality to feminist autobiographical studies by making two important new moves: insisting on the many points of connection between autobiography and biography, and 'turning the camera back upon men' (p. 8). Annie Thackeray Ritchie's oblique self-portrait in her reminiscences of her father, Adele Hugo's ditto of her husband, John Stuart Mill's writing about his wife, Hubert H. Bancroft's collection of the testimonies of dispossessed Californians, German sons' and daughters' stories of Nazi fathers, Charles and Mary Lamb's 'shared' identity - all prise open familiar poetics of both genre and gender, reminding us also of the multiplicity of selves still collecting dust, still not available in paperback. The sheer range of the materials examined in this book is challenging: from Nadezhda Durova's brazenly self-important account of life as a cross-dressing soldier in the Russian cavalry during the Napoleonic Wars, to Jewish refugee Charlotte Salomon's sequence of autobiographical watercolours *Life? or Theater?*. (Mary Lowenthal Felstiner's poignant essay on Salomon sends me straight off to the library to find the pictures.)

The book is a bit provisional and conference-papery, with a few lapses of acumen and rigour. (The lone male contributor, John Felstiner, in a moving piece on poet Paul Celan's elegiac relationship with his 'mother-tongue', judges Celan's longed-for mother to be 'a comely, soft-featured, warm-spirited person' - from a photograph. Oh yes? I ask, wondering to whom the longing belongs.) But winces apart, *Revealing Lives* opens up new possibilities for feminist scholarship in an otherwise hypnotically Self-obsessed discipline.

Another of the essayists in *Revealing Lives* has taken the editors' comparativist recommendations even further in her new work *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920*. Regenia Gagnier's book advances a hitherto mainly British tradition of socio-historical enquiry into working-class autobiography, though her ambitious project also encompasses the middle-class 'canon',

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suffragette texts, public school memoirs by both men and women, novels of working-class life and fictionalized autobiographies. The sheer scale of the study is dizzying, as when Gagnier apologizes for only having read six hundred primary texts for her chapter on working-class autobiography.

Gagnier's methodology is impressively diverse, drawing on a Cultural Studies skepticism about the 'literary'; a Critical Legal Studies pragmatism about the democratizing potential of passionate human relationships; a patiently structuralist approach to variations in working-class narrative; Bourdieu's theorization of aesthetic value; and a refreshing open-mindedness about what 'subjectivity' might mean to different subjects. But her central argument is that 'literary' subjectivity, (constituted when a narrative of genderization, familialism and self-awareness through writing leads towards the liberal ideals of autonomy, individualism, and rationality) is the figure with which all nineteenth-century British autobiographers (feminist, working-class, and so on) must engage. Literary subjectivity, associated with but not reducible to bourgeois identity, thus takes the place usually occupied by the 'male canon' in feminist accounts of the genre.

In a sense, the book tries to do too much at once. Three projects - defining literary subjectivity *vis-à-vis* other subjectivities, bourgeois versus working-class narratives, and politically effective as opposed to conservative aesthetics - compete for attention; and though they coincide at many points, there is divergence and hazardous slippage between them at others. The equation of the 'literary' with the 'bourgeois' and the 'politically *in*effective' often seems overschematic and rigid, taking little account of the multiple ways readers transform texts, and resulting in odd allocations. Between those who *won't* accede to all aspects of literary subjectivity (the politically radical, the feminists, etc.), those who *can't* (most women, most working-class authors), and those who simply *don't* (public school conformists incapable of self-reflexivity), it's hard to keep track of who *does* produce 'literary' autobiography. Gagnier cites Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, *The Way of All Flesh* and *David Copperfield*, all of which, it seems to me, are novels rather than autobiographies. Conversely, Ruskin may be politically radical according to Gagnier's criteria, but can we really call him non-literary? The phenomenon of the self-emptying canon, while very postmodern and all that, is rather confusing.

The role of gender in Gagnier's argument is equally problematic. Nowhere does Gagnier adequately address the problem of the gendering of social class: of men's and women's differential class alignments, their different access to radical politics, the place of

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women's reproductive work in the Marxist model of production, women's downward occupational spiral, and so on. Nor does she have a firm grip on the drift of many of her key terms - literary, working-class, middle-class, imagination, and so on - towards the masculine. And the historical proscription of women as narrators of their own stories, the card Sidonie Smith overplays as the 'silent plot' of gender, tends to drop out of sight altogether when Gagnier wants to make claims about the dominance of middle-class discourse. Defining gender as a 'narrative' to which, theoretically at least, middle-class women and men have ready access, Gagnier claims that 'Middle-class women wrote of early life with fathers and afterlife with husbands' (p. 44). But this is precisely what middle-class Victorian women did not write: think of widow Margaret Oliphant, separated wife Annie Besant, spinsters Harriet Martineau and Frances Power Cobbe. Whom does she have in mind?

But perhaps the real victims of Gagnier's over-extended project are her six hundred working-class autobiographies. Between time spent fending off the colonizing force of bourgeois aesthetics and bourgeois fictions, and time spent redeeming 'non-literary' middle-class subjectivities for their theories of oppression (Henry Mayhew, Florence Nightingale, Engels, Ruskin), the working-class autobiographies themselves get short shrift. For me, Gagnier is at her best when most daring. Her reading of Co-operative women's accounts of pregnancy as active reformulations of subjectivity as agency makes much-needed sense of these uncanny stories. But the bleak, determinist universe of many of these working-class texts still resists our critical language. Tellingly, Gagnier contrasts two narratives: the literary critical ascription of the 'autobiographical moment' to the development of the Venetian mirror, and Alexander Somerville's account of his migrant family carting round a single window from one rented hovel to another. What she does not say, is that this very comparison of the leisured with the struggling, the reflexive with the transparent, the metaphorical with the referential, is itself luxuriantly metaphorical. We still need to create a critical space between number-crunching and metaphor munching, as Gagnier's book eloquently illustrates. Ironically it is the middle-class reformer Henry Mayhew, rather than his working-class subjects, who emerges as the hero of the piece.

Cumulatively, then, these books suggest three new impulses in the study of autobiography. The first is a desire to find ways of reclaiming the 'bios' - the historical and hence socio-political resonance of autobiography - from the tyranny of post-structuralist obsession with textuality and post-romantic idealizations of the self. The second is the need to relocate autobiography within a range of cultural productions, including biography and oral testimony and

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fiction. The third, and most drastic, is the questioning, *à la* Spivak, of 'literary' subjectivity as an effective source of political resistance, and the beginnings of a new, unintimidated and fluidly comparative look at men's autobiographies, including those canonized by literary history. Most of all, though, these books persuade me that there is still much to do.

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Book Reviews

LISTING

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