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# Self Impression

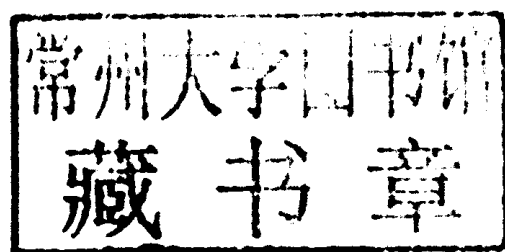
Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, & the Forms of Modern Literature

MAX SAUNDERS



Self Impression:  
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Autobiografiction, and  
the Forms of Modern  
Literature

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## SELF IMPRESSION

'I am aware that, once my pen intervenes, I can make whatever I like out of what I was.' Paul Valéry, *Moi*.

Modernism is often characterized as a movement of impersonality; a rejection of auto/biography. But most of the major works of European modernism and postmodernism engage in very profound and central ways with questions about life-writing. Max Saunders explores the ways in which modern writers from the 1870s to the 1930s experimented with forms of life-writing—biography, autobiography, memoir, diary, journal—increasingly for the purposes of fiction. He identifies a wave of new hybrid forms from the late nineteenth century and uses the term 'autobiografiction'—discovered in a surprisingly early essay of 1906—to provide a fresh perspective on turn-of-the-century literature, and to propose a radically new literary history of Modernism.

Saunders offers a taxonomy of the extraordinary variety of experiments with life-writing, demonstrating how they arose in the nineteenth century as the pressures of secularization and psychological theory disturbed the categories of biography and autobiography, in works by authors such as Pater, Ruskin, Proust, 'Mark Rutherford', George Gissing, and A. C. Benson. He goes on to look at writers experimenting further with autobiografiction as Impressionism turns into Modernism, juxtaposing detailed and vivacious readings of key Modernist texts by Joyce, Stein, Pound, and Woolf, with explorations of the work of other authors—including H. G. Wells, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, and Wyndham Lewis—whose experiments with life-writing forms are no less striking. The book concludes with a consideration of the afterlife of these fascinating experiments in the postmodern literature of Nabokov, Lessing, and Byatt.

*Self Impression* sheds light on a number of significant but under-theorized issues; the meanings of the term 'autobiographical', the generic implications of literary autobiography, and the intriguing relation between autobiography and fiction in the period.

MAX SAUNDERS is Director of the Arts and Humanities Research Institute, Professor of English and Co-Director of the Centre for Life-Writing Research at King's College London, where he teaches modern English, European, and American literature. He studied at the universities of Cambridge and Harvard, and was a Research Fellow and then College Lecturer at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He is also the author of *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1996), and has edited five volumes of Ford's writing, including an annotated critical edition of *Some Do Not . . .*, the first volume of *Parade's End* (Carcanet, 2010) and the new Oxford World's Classics edition of *The Good Soldier* (OUP 2012). He has published essays on Life-writing, on Impressionism, and on Ford, Conrad, James, Forster, Eliot, Joyce, Rosamond Lehmann, Richard Aldington, May Sinclair, Lawrence, Freud, Pound, Ruskin, Anthony Burgess and others.

## Praise for *Self Impression*

‘Saunders’s account . . . is the most important recent contribution to the genealogy of modern literature . . . The paradox of autobiografiction never disorients him; rather, it inspires plentiful pithy wisdom in a book that seems to end every paragraph aphoristically. Theory and history, history and form get their due recognition, and the book as a whole is an apt and exciting tribute to its subject, capable of everything necessary to prove that life-writing has meant everything to literary modernity.’

Jesse Matz, *Modern Language Quarterly*

‘a remarkable achievement, laying the foundation for future studies of life-writing genres and their relationship to fiction; it provides us with the critical tools and methodologies that will diversify our understanding of life-writing genres and their evolving place in literary history.’

*Journal of Victorian Culture*

‘a hugely impressive enterprise, in which Saunders wears his formidable erudition and theoretical expertise gracefully and wittily’

Andrew Radford, *Year’s Work in English Studies*

‘a very important intervention into a number of arenas . . . a very welcome contribution to the fields of auto/biographical, late nineteenth-century and modernist studies . . . opens up new ways of thinking about life-writing and, in particular, the relationship between autobiography and fiction . . . a very rich and rewarding study . . . It engages very productively with autobiographical theory, arguing extremely convincingly for more flexible models of generic identity . . . subtle, informed and persuasive’

Laura Marcus, Goldsmith’s Professor of English Literature, University of Oxford

‘This is a captivating study . . . the range of the book is . . . breathtaking; it is a work of great scholarship and subtle erudition . . . a work of strikingly new perspectives on modernism . . . Saunders’s work is ambitious in scope, depth and conceptualisation, while the sophistication of his theoretical analyses are couched in a readable style . . . It will make an extremely important and original contribution to the fields of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary criticism and is a welcome and much needed addition to recent theorisations of life-writing.’

Dr Susan Jones, English Fellow, St Hilda’s College, University of Oxford

‘Qui saura me lire lira une autobiographie, dans la forme.’

(Paul Valéry)

To Alby,  
For whom 'autobiografiction' is just the work of a lie-lie man.

## Acknowledgements

It is the acknowledgements in a book that are often the purest examples of 'autobiografiction'. 'Many people' are customarily thanked for their collaboration in the very work over which the author has just asserted his or her sole moral right. Other names are invoked to give credibility to a work whose existence might well surprise them.

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Earlier versions of a few parts of this book have appeared in print. The versions appearing here are so different as scarcely to constitute republication; but I am grateful—and not only for the legalistically minded—to the editors and publishers for permission to republish any material from the following essays:

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# *Contents*

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xi
Introduction	1

## PART I: MODERN IRONIZATIONS OF AUTO/ BIOGRAPHY AND THE EMERGENCE OF AUTOBIOGRAFICTION: VICTORIAN AND *FIN DE SIÈCLE* PRECURSORS

1. Im/personality: The Imaginary Portraits of Walter Pater	29
2. Aesthetic Auto/biography: Ruskin and Proust	71
3. Pseudonymity, Third-personality, and Anonymity as Disturbances in <i>fin de siècle</i> Auto/biography: 'Mark Rutherford', George Gissing, Edmund Gosse and Others	108
4. Autobiografiction: Stephen Reynolds and A. C. Benson	165
5. Auto/biografiction: Counterfeit Lives: A Taxonomy of Displacements of Fiction towards Life-Writing	208
6. Literary Impressionism and Impressionist Autobiographies: Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Ford Madox Ford	260

## PART II: MODERNIST AUTO/BIOGRAFICTION

7. Heteronymity I: Imaginary Authorship and Imaginary Autobiography: Pessoa, Joyce, Svevo	291
8. Heteronymity II: Taxonomies of Fictional Creativity: Joyce (continued) and Stein	337
9. Auto/biographese and Auto/biografiction in Verse: Ezra Pound and <i>Hugh Selwyn Mauberley</i>	371
10. Satirical Auto/biografiction: Wyndham Lewis and Richard Aldington	420
11. Woolf, Bloomsbury, the 'New Biography', and the New Auto/ biografiction	438

12. After-Lives: Postmodern Experiments in Meta-Auto/biografiction: Sartre, Nabokov, Lessing, Byatt	484
Conclusion	500
<i>Bibliography</i>	529
<i>Index</i>	555

## *List of Illustrations*

1. Sir John Herschel with Cap, 1867. Photograph by Julia Margaret Cameron. 64
2. William Hale White / 'Mark Rutherford', by Arthur Hughes, 1887.  
Crayon, 38.2 × 32.7. Cecil Higgins Art Gallery (Bedford Borough Council),  
Bedford, England. 111
3. Philip and Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son* frontispiece. 151
4. 'Stephen Reynolds, Fisherman'. Reynolds, *Letters* ed. Wright (1934). 168
5. A. C. Benson. Photograph by A. H. Fry, 1899. Published in *The Diary  
of Arthur Christopher Benson*, edited by Percy Lubbock (London:  
Hutchinson, [1926]). 180
6. Two pages from *What a Life!* by E. V. Lucas and George Morrow (1911). 230–1
7. Composite Photograph by Francis Galton. Lantern slide of family  
composite photograph. Comprises photos of a father, mother, 2 sons &  
2 daughters. Galton Collection, UCL. 83mm × 83mm. 235
8. Vortograph of Ezra Pound by Alvin Langdon Coburn, 1917. Gelatin  
silver print, 20.2 × 15.5 cm. 373
9. Two illustrations from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. 'Orlando as Ambassador'  
(Lionel Sackville, 7th Earl & 1st Duke of Dorset, by Sir Godfrey Kneller,  
in the Sackville Collection.) Reproduced by permission of the  
Sackville Collection. 'Orlando Back in England' (Vita Sackville-West  
photographed by Lenare, 2 November 1927). Reproduced by permission  
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# Introduction

‘every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.’<sup>1</sup>

‘I am convinced of the phenomenalism of the *inner* world also: everything that reaches our consciousness is utterly and completely adjusted, simplified, schematised, interpreted—the *actual* process of inner ‘perception’, the *relation of causes* between thoughts, feelings, desires, between subject and object, is absolutely concealed from us, and may be purely imaginary.’<sup>2</sup>

‘*The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography.*’<sup>3</sup> When Wilde put this paradox in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* it was to preempt, or at least to mock, a low form of criticism. Beastliness is in the eye of the beholder, it implies. Anyone finding his book depraved is merely betraying a depraved mind. Part of the comedy of his remark comes from its suave version of childish name-calling: ‘immoral yourself!’ But his returning of his accusers’ condemnations on their own heads is both more significant than that, and also (as this book hopes to show) deeply representative of its time. In posing the book as mirror of the critic’s mind—or portrait, perhaps, of the reader’s soul—Wilde is also placing the autobiographical at the heart of any act of reading or criticizing. ‘*It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.*’<sup>4</sup> Wilde imagines his critic reading his fiction biographically, condemning the author on the basis of a work of art. He parries by threatening to read the criticism biographically. If his novella reveals him autobiographically, then the imaginary critic’s perceiving of obscenity reveals *him* or *her* just as much. This study is primarily concerned with the ways in which these categories of autobiography, biography, fiction, and criticism begin to interact, combining and disrupting each other in new ways, from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth. It investigates experiments in literary portraiture from impressionism to modernism, arguing that new relationships emerge between autobiography, biography, and fiction which enable a new account of modern literature to be told.

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Michael Patrick Gillespie (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, Nov. 1887–March 1888, *Will to Power*, Book 3, in *Complete Works*, vol. 15, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1910), no. 477; p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

From one point of view Wilde's aestheticism is the end-point of Romanticism. This remark about autobiography can be seen as extending the core Romantic concept of expression from something the writer does to something the reader does too. From another point of view, though, his aestheticism is something other than Romanticism. The paradox about criticism as autobiography can also be read as a rejection, or the beginning of a rejection, of Romanticism, a negation of Romanticism's attempt to tie literary works to the personality of their author. According to this view, instead of saying that the work doesn't just express me, but it expresses you just as much, he would instead be saying that the work doesn't express me; it expresses you instead. Rather than late Romanticism, this would be early modernism—the beginning of the claim for the impersonality of the work of art; for the art-work seen as an autonomous object, not explicable by or reducible to or even meaningfully connectable to its author; Art for Art's Sake, not for the sake of self-expression. The paradox is thus genuinely double-edged. It extends the reach of autobiography, to cover genres not normally thought of as autobiographic. But it simultaneously calls the autobiographical into question.

Wilde had, of course, a compelling reason to play such games with the concept of autobiography. It enabled him to write about homosexuality without condemning himself in the eye of the law as a homosexual. But his gesture has wider significance, standing as a riposte to the whole massive nineteenth-century investment in biography. Carlyle had famously written that 'No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men.'<sup>5</sup> The rapid establishing of biography as the quintessential Victorian genre seemed to say that not just history, but art, literature, thought—all human productions—were best accounted for biographically. It was time for a reaction, and the banner of Art for Art's Sake (rather than for the sake of a life) was one facet of it. That it wasn't the only facet is evident from the case of Nietzsche, who wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil* that all philosophy is 'the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious auto-biography.'<sup>6</sup> The strategy is similar to Wilde's, and perhaps even more paradoxical, since it claims that even philosophy—the very discourse that most aspires to transcend the contingency of the human, and attain to pure reason, general truth; the last discourse we tend to read *as* autobiography—nonetheless can be so read. (Nietzsche's own strategy was to make his own philosophy consciously autobiographical.) If discourses of impersonality such as criticism or philosophy can be read as autobiography, then all writing, all art, is equally susceptible. As Gertrude Stein would put it: 'Anything is an autobiography [...].'<sup>7</sup> And again this returns us to Wilde's

<sup>5</sup> Lecture, 'The Hero as Divinity', repr. in *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (London and Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1914), p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 5.

paradox. That no genre can escape the impress of the autobiographic means that no author can say a work isn't autobiographic. This appears to preclude Wilde from arguing that *Dorian Gray* is not autobiography. Indeed, that isn't quite what he says in the Preface. And it certainly isn't what Basil Hallward says to Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when he tells him: 'every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.'<sup>8</sup> Hallward sees art as in a double-bind, arguing that impassioned art cannot but be autobiographical; but critics should not read it as autobiography. He worries that the portrait of Dorian will give him away. 'The reason I will not exhibit the picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul', he says. Because the age cannot be trusted to see the art instead of the autobiography: 'An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty.'<sup>9</sup> Wilde's way of escaping from this double-bind in the Preface is to double it back onto persecutory critics, who thereby put themselves in the *Picture*. It is a small step (though also a great leap) from Wilde's sense of how readers read themselves into a text, to Freud's sense of how each man kills the thing he loves—unconsciously. Thus the paradox is that while every text is autobiography, no reader can know for sure in what way it is, because every reading is itself a species of involuntary and unconscious autobiography, and distorts the features of the writerly autobiographer into those of the readerly one. Wilde's and Nietzsche's strong claim for the autobiographical thus paradoxically turns the nineteenth century's investment in biography against itself. The very gesture that seemed to legitimize interpreting writing in terms of the author's biography simultaneously makes it unreliable.

Though Wilde and Nietzsche were influential in the development of modernism, they have been an even greater source of inspiration for postmodernists. And this universe of undecidable encounters between unconscious autobiographers is a decidedly postmodern one, in its relativism, playful irony, relish for the simulacrum, and its celebration of multiple perspectives instead of grand narratives. Where biography offered the Victorians the promise of a shared social judgement of an individual's life, the hope of objective knowledge and moral certainty, autobiography has become the quintessential postmodern genre (if it is a genre, which postmodernism cannot know) precisely because of its freedom from all these things. There has been a veritable surge of critical interest in autobiography since the 1980s: not only because more and more writers are exploring it, including writers who might have been expected to be suspicious of it as a form—philosophers, psychoanalysts, materialist critics and historians, and so on—but also because critics have increasingly turned to it as a legitimate field of study. This book is not a study of what I call 'formal' autobiography, or

<sup>8</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 15.

(following Philippe Lejeune) 'contractual' autobiography—in which real author, narrator, and the name on the title-page all coincide, and seek to interpret their own life—though the second chapter and conclusion in particular do discuss it. Instead, my subject is how modern writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found new ways to combine life-writing with fiction.

Life-writing has been an area of major development in literary studies since the 1970s, and many of its key theorists are discussed here. Yet it remains a contentious term, covering a wide range of texts and forms. Indeed, its contentiousness arises at least partly because it seems, to some, to cover too many. As one leading British biographer, Hermione Lee, writes, it is sometimes used 'when different ways of telling a life-story—memoir, autobiography, biography, diary, letters, autobiographical fiction—are being discussed together.'<sup>10</sup> Though, as Lee notes, another main usage is 'when the distinction between biography and autobiography is being deliberately blurred'. These are the main senses in which I shall be using it. The term 'autobiography' was coined as Romanticism took shape towards the end of the eighteenth century. Paradoxically, this is also the period in which the view began to emerge that all writing had an autobiographical dimension. According to this view, which became increasingly consolidated through the nineteenth century, and which is even shared by postmodernism, the distinction between autobiography and other forms such as biography or fiction is thus *always* blurred.

So the term 'autobiography' has a radical ambiguity. It can mean a mode of writing that is separate from other forms (drama, poetry, fiction, and so forth), and that exists purely for telling the story of your own life. Or it can be used to describe something about all those other forms too. The best illustration of this is the way we use the adjective 'autobiographical'. When we speak of an autobiographical novel, say, we are applying the term to something that is not a formal autobiography, but that has some qualities or content of autobiography in it. To talk of an autobiographical autobiography would be to sound tautological and self-contradictory at once.

In his seminal essay 'Autobiography as De-Facement' (1979), Paul De Man theorized the reading of autobiography by arguing that it is not a genre at all but, precisely, a mode of reading. Wordsworth writes a poem—*The Prelude*; we read it as autobiography. But De Man is talking of works which are explicitly autobiographical: in the first person, and where that person is evidently the author. But neither of those things need be true in an autobiographical novel. De Man doesn't register the difference between 'autobiography' and 'autobiographical', and his failure to distinguish them problematizes his argument for the rhetorical importance of the name. He famously advances the figure of *proso-popeia* ('the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity,

<sup>10</sup> Hermione Lee, *Body Parts* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005), p. 100.



which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech'), arguing that 'Prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name [...] is made as intelligible and memorable as a face.'<sup>11</sup> In autobiographical fiction, the protagonist's name is not (or at least isn't usually) 'one's name', but someone else's. This doesn't exactly negate De Man's position that 'It appears, then, that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable', since we cannot decide exactly how much fiction there might be in an autobiography, nor exactly how much autobiography there might be in a fiction.<sup>12</sup> But it does cast doubt on his doubt about autobiography's generic status, in that his scepticism is enabled by a kind of sleight of hand in glossing over the difference that our language-use recognizes, between autobiography and the autobiographical. He invokes Gérard Genette's discussion of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* as readable as both fiction and as autobiographical. But the fact that a modernist author blurs generic boundaries does not invalidate the concept of genre. It may highlight the inevitable overlappings of genres, since genres are not pure entities. Saying an autobiography contains fiction is comparable to saying epics contain history, myth, or indeed fiction. So they do, but that does not mean epic isn't a genre. As Derrida argued in 'The Law of Genre', texts 'participate' in genres to which they cannot 'belong.'<sup>13</sup> So it is with autobiography and with the novel.

Reading something as 'autobiographical', then, is different from reading it as 'autobiography'; its autobiographical dimension can be covert, unconscious, or implicit. A sentence in a biography may purport to refer to its subject—Dr Johnson, say—but we are at liberty to read it as autobiographical: as telling us instead or as well about Boswell. The 'autobiographical' has become something of a blind spot in life-writing theory. This study reconsiders what 'autobiography' and 'autobiographical' mean in this period of the long turn of the century, from the 1870s to the 1930s, and how autobiography relates to other forms, especially biography and fiction.

The two senses of 'life-writing' distinguished by Lee are then not as distinct as they might have seemed. We need the term to hold the varieties of life-writing forms together because individual works tend to combine them anyway; and readers can move across the generic borders as writers can. Our postmodern ways of thinking about biography is much more aware of, and open to, these elements of autobiography and fiction in all life-writing. Such generic blurring is characteristic in another way, though. Life-writing is fundamentally intertextual.

<sup>11</sup> Paul De Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', *Modern Language Notes*, 94:5 (1979), 919–30 (p. 926).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 921.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *Critical Inquiry*, 7:1 (1980), 55–81 (p. 65): 'Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres; yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic, and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the *trait* of participation itself.'