[Review] Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman (2014) Modernism and autobiography

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Modernism and Autobiography, edited by Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 318 pp., £64.99 (hbk)

The modernist era is and always has been synonymous with great instability and change—both on a global and an individual scale. Technological innovations, mass urbanization, and two World Wars complicated—if not obliterated—individuals’ established ways of seeing the world and orienting themselves within it. It precipitated an interrogation of the self and problematized grand narratives of human progress, leading to feelings of isolation and disenchantment; the modernist era, as Gertrude Stein famously noted, was a lost generation—lost due to a diminishing sense of self and purpose.

Modernism and Autobiography examines how these unique conditions triggered a massive reimagining of the autobiographical form during the modernist era. In the book’s introduction, editors Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman identify what they consider distinguishing features of modernist autobiography, which serve to orient the sixteen essays that follow. According to DiBattista and Wittman, modernist writers ‘expanded the scope of autobiographical writings’ to include multiple genres, such as personal essays, travel writing, criticism, letters, and even cookbooks (p. xi). As such, the modernist autobiography tends to ignore the established ‘personal development’ narrative of earlier forms of life-writing, favouring instead a more episodic and honest depiction of what it means to exist in the modern world. This necessitates an ‘assault on traditional notions of what a self [...] is’, in which modernist autobiographers can split, dress up, or even distance themselves from, the ‘I’ (p. xii). The result

is a form of autobiography that refrains from revealing the author's 'true' self—not necessarily because the author wants to conceal it from the reader, but purely because it does not exist.

The collection's sixteen essays unfold variously DiBattista and Wittman's claims, showcasing the myriad forms that modernist autobiography assumes. Although grouped into four distinctly themed parts—*Ancestries*, *Emerging*, *Surviving*, and *Disappearing*—many of the essays resist simple classification and could comfortably fit in any of the aforementioned sections. For example, the collection's opening essay, Francis O'Gorman's 'Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, Modernism, and a History of Nerves', analyzes a work that is not only focused upon ancestral lineage (between father and son, between past and present), but also upon the anxieties invoked when established modes of life disappear and new ones emerge in their place. O'Gorman interrogates the extent to which *Father and Son's* obsession with sickness can be read as an allegory for the transformative shift from the Victorian era to the modern, and in doing so, poses some vital questions: Can autobiography's relevance extend beyond an individual life? Should we even consider autobiography as an individual endeavour? What sort of political agendas are enacted through autobiography? Can we consider autobiographies as reliable sources? While O'Gorman offers some convincing answers (particularly in relation to the dangers of viewing autobiography as metonymy for an entire era), we realize that these answers are mutable and shift dependent on the autobiographer's medium and intentions.

The four remaining essays in *Ancestries* respond to some of the questions set out in O'Gorman's essay by investigating the limitations of autobiography's truth claims and the oft-ignored collaborative elements of autobiographical writing. While Michael Levenson notes autobiography's reliance on the 'transaction between the writer and the public sphere' (p. 33) in his discussion of Joseph Conrad's *Personal Record*, Lee Mitchell explores how autobiographies

of two different people (Henry James and Henry Adams) can (and should) be read in tandem. Mitchell examines how James and Adams, “two of the most influential figures in their respective fields chose to depict themselves as youths inordinately passive, abysmally ineffectual” (43), but in vastly different ways, revealing just how diverse the autobiographical form can be. Yet, *Ancestries* is desperately lacking in diversity. Its first four essays focus exclusively on white male writers—only in its last essay, Elizabeth Abel’s ‘Spaces of Time: Virginia Woolf’s Life-Writing’, do we find discussion of a more diverse autobiographical subject (although Woolf—who stands as perhaps the most celebrated female writer in modernism—hardly constitutes a marginalized autobiographical voice).

Parts Two and Three—*Emerging* and *Surviving*—compensate for this lack of diversity, however, by featuring essays on how sexuality, race, and illiteracy critically impact and shape modernist autobiography. Barbara Will’s ‘Queer Autobiographical Masquerade: Stein, Toklas, and Others’, for instance, analyzes how Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and Toklas’s *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* use queering strategies (such as transcending generic boundaries and doubling the authorial ‘I’) to produce a form of autobiography that upends the reader’s expectations, unsettling the notion of a stable and honest autobiographical subject and situating seemingly non-autobiographical texts like recipes as a viable means for self-representation. Meanwhile, Marc C. Conner’s ““Leaving the Territory”: Ralph Ellison’s Backward Glance’ examines how Ellison’s status as a black man with an integrationist agenda forced him to cultivate a multiplied self in his life writing. Santanu Das’s ‘Touching Semiliterate Lives: Indian Soldiers, the Great War, and Life-“Writing”’, on the other hand, offers a bracing critique of white (male) understandings of autobiography; it is the only essay in the collection to address the colonial bias in privileging the written autobiographical form, which serves to silence

and marginalize the often illiterate colonial subject. As such, the essay stands out against the collection's overwhelming focus on the written word, in that it uses audio recordings as a way into the lives of those who have been robbed of the means—education, wealth, status—to make themselves heard and known.

The collection's final section—which is fittingly titled *Disappearing*—focuses primarily on the modernist autobiography's obsession with impersonality and non-traditional narrative structures. Wittman convincingly examines the fatalistic narrative (as opposed to optimistic development) behind Jean Rhys's life writing, while Robert L. Caserio provides a general overview of how modernist autobiographies 'sometimes court, and value, their own dissolution' (p. 197); the modernist autobiographer writes in such a way as to distance his or her self from the 'I', transforming it into an abstract and even non-existent entity. Michael Wood's 'Name after Name: Beckett's Secret Autobiography' serves as a solid, albeit somewhat confusingly written, conclusion to the collection. In analyzing the self-referentiality and the seemingly unintentional autobiographical impulse inherent to Beckett's writing, Wood elucidates many of the traits that make modernist autobiography unique, including: an anxious subject that wishes to distance himself from the 'I'; a reliance on fiction to relate elements of truth; and, an unwillingness to follow established generic conventions. The essay encourages us to read autobiography in fiction—to examine how authors insert themselves unintentionally into their literary works—and in doing so, completely undermines conventional understanding of what autobiography is and can be.

Modernism and Autobiography thus serves as a useful starting point for establishing the myriad forms that modernist—albeit, mostly canonical—autobiography can take. In establishing the groundwork of modernist autobiography studies, it paves the way for scholars to now

investigate more niche aspects of that era's life-writing, such as how the autobiographical strategies of less prolific modernist writers differed in comparison to their more established contemporaries.

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