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Aristocratic Lives: Life-Writing, Class and Authority

Although this is an autobiography, and consequently I, it is nevertheless not Me.

Rosina Bulwer Lytton, 
_Miriam Sedley_ (1851) I. 1

In this chapter, I consider the ways in which aristocratic women’s life-writing seeks cross-class cultural authority from the narration of elite lives. It commences with an examination of the generic traditions of autobiography and biography as the Victorians constructed them. The modes of the spiritual, domestic and scandalous memoir take on distinctive connotations in the context of upper-class social status. I then move onto autobiographical fiction, using three generations of aristocratic women writers to trace the changing representation of personal experience between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Models of Victorian aristocratic authorship gradually emerge that prioritise committed literary engagement with religious and moral values. At the same time, potential pitfalls remain in the writing of lives whose primary appeal to a reading public lies in the possibility of contravention of such values, given long-standing tropes of upper-class immorality. The women whose work I examine must balance a subtle dialectic of revelation and discretion to address a Reform-era readership.

Discussions of autobiography over the nineteenth century, says Laura Marcus, reveal a contradiction ‘between the pursuit of “general laws” and the desire to restrict the writing of autobiography to the “better” sort of person’.¹ A similar contradiction was central to the Reform debates of the 1830s and 1860s, preoccupied with balancing concepts of

M. O’Cinneide, _Aristocratic Women and the Literary Nation, 1832–1867_ 
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the franchise as a common right with the franchise as a select privilege. In both eras, women remained excluded from possession of the vote. Likewise, women tended to experience autobiography in more marginal, fragmentary ways than did men, set apart from narrating the Great Life even as they were set aside from the (official) governing of the nation. If, as Marcus contends, ‘literacy, interiority, and the self as property are closely allied formations’, then Victorian accounts of female interiority must to some extent experience ownership of selfhood at a remove. Felicity Nussbaum’s study of eighteenth-century women’s autobiographical writing concludes that by the century’s end, as ‘autobiography becomes conceptualized as a narrative that requires making the accumulated details cohere in the recognizable ideological codes of class- and gender-identified character, to be a “woman” is to relinquish authority even over one’s own limited and stationary sphere’. We can see aristocratic women writers as necessarily involved in this relinquishment, yet in other ways, to be an ‘aristocrat’ as well as a ‘woman’ opens up other forms of authority, over spheres not necessarily either limited or stationary. Such women possessed access to literacy, to traditions of writing, and, above all, to an awareness of privilege, of being on one level part of Marcus’s circle of the ‘better’ sort of person, even if on other levels (such as the franchise) their position was no different from any other woman. Their writing therefore mediates between experiences of inclusion and exclusion in seeking to construct definitive narratives of aristocratic lives.

**Spiritual autobiography**

Nussbaum argues that we must view the ‘self’ of the autobiographical text as ‘less an essence than an ensemble of social and political relations’, while Alison Booth terms life-writing ‘a complex social interaction’ between narrator, protagonist and audience. Linda Peterson’s discussion of Victorian women’s autobiography usefully cautions against critical assumptions of a unified ‘women’s tradition’, arguing instead for a range of possibilities open to Victorian autobiographers. She places three forms at the heart of Victorian (re)constructions of an autobiographical tradition: the spiritual autobiography, the domestic memoir, and the scandalous memoir. All three of these forms take on particular significance for aristocratic women, a significance which in turn reflects upon the importance of women’s sense of class identity to their writing of their lives.