Bedford, Ronald, Lloyd David and Philippa Kelly (eds.). *Early Modern Autobiography: Theories, Genres, Practices*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 2006 (reprinted 2009).336 pp. ISBN 0-472-06928-4. £26.95 or €89.11 (Hardcover) or €23.15 (Paperback).

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This collection of sixteen essays on autobiographical writing, a topic that has never failed to spark interest but which seems to have gained unprecedented popularity in recent years, covers a wide and impressive assortment of texts, ranging from memoirs, diaries, travelogues, letters, poems and authorial apologetics to marginalia, theatrical performances, legal notebooks, prison narratives, and household account books. Structured in three sections ("Self Theories," "Life Genres," and "Self Practices"), the study focuses on the English literature of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, examined in a broader socio-cultural, political and religious context that shaped the very form and substance of "self-writing." It addresses and, more often than not, debates and redefines such controversial issues as the composite nature of "selfhood," personal experience against a complex historical background, perception and memory as self-subversive constituents of ego-texts, the development of self-representation, and the nature of autobiographical writing and authorship (autobiography as a cultural construct), while also investigating the relational network of diverse autobiographical forms and genres.

As it seeks to "convey the density" (p. 2) of private and social, mundane and spiritual life of both canonical figures (Chaucer, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Browne, Milton) and much less known, indeed all but forgotten (at least as far as the history of literature is concerned) diarists and autobiographers (such as the clergyman Samuel Ward, the antiquary, politician and, among others, astrologer Elias Ashmole, the architect Inigo Jones, several lawyers, among whom John Savile, James Whitelocke, Roger North, and William Blackstone, to name just a random few), *Early Modern Autobiography* is premised on the notion of an autobiographical "I" as "a nexus of spiritual and secular understandings that inflected the most ordinary activities and experiences" (p. 3). For example, eating immoderately is retrospectively perceived as a sin, signifying greed or gluttony, and diarists often use the occasion of recounting an incident to "make penance before God" (p. 4).

The first section of the book opens with Lloyd Davis's essay "Critical Debates and Early Modern Autobiography," which anatomizes the mixed critical responses to this genre, from Herder and Goethe's enthusiastic praise of autobiography as circumscribed to "the great process of the liberation of human personality" (p. 19) to Schlegel's famous denunciation: "Pure autobiographies

are written either by neurotics who are fascinated by their own ego, as in Rousseau's case; or by authors of a robust artistic or adventuresome self-love, Benvenuto Cellini; (…) or by women who also coquette with posterity; or by pedantic minds who want to bring even the most minute things in order before they die and cannot let themselves leave the world without commentaries" (pp. 19-20). Davis sees the notion of *quality*, which has long been at the heart of the polemics on autobiography, as a hybrid concept, in that it refers to both "life value" and "textual value" (p. 21), essentially raising questions about the autobiographical canon, the shifting identitarian paradigms, and the critical bias and "protocols" (p. 29) in the reception of self-representational texts.

In "Specifying the Subject in Early Modern Autobiography," the second essay in this collection, Conal Condren contends that, as part of a manuscript and not a print culture, autobiographies necessarily presented an idea of *self* which is, by and large, incompatible with modern sensibilities or (mis)conceptions on discursive practices, hence the current criticism's tendency to de-contextualize, misrepresent and misinterpret or, as the author phrases it, "to create or inject modern selves into the premodern past" (p. 36). Consequently, Condren argues, it would be a mistake to speak about the *subject* of autobiographical writing; following Samuel Pufendorf's notion of *entia moralia*; a more suitable approach would be to consider the *auto* in *autobiography* as standing for a number of *personae* appropriate to given offices (p. 36). To illustrate this point, Condren discusses the case of Thomas Hobbes, whose public image or persona of "libertine atheist, often with no clear distinction being made between the alleged implications of his arguments and his conduct" (p. 38), effectively prevented him from becoming a member of the Royal Society, while also rendering him fair game for accusations of profanity, blasphemy, and heresy. Another telling example is that of Margaret Cavendish, who "rushed breathlessly between related personae in a persistently defensive fashion: dutiful daughter, loving wife, loyal subject, and philosopher" (p. 43). Condren's conclusion is that modern critics must be very cautious in untangling the forces and ideologies at work in the shaping of the early modern intricate idea of selfhood and not succumb to the temptation of indiscriminately applying contemporary theory to fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth century texts.

The notions of personhood and identity in relation to early modern autobiography also come under close scrutiny in Ronald Bedford's "*On Being a Person*: Elizabethan Acting & the Art of Self-Representation." The essay is conceived as a complex answer to this initial question: "… if early modern audiences saw actors onstage as offering recognizable versions of themselves– however exaggerated– … what might such recognition tell us about early modern notions of identity and selfhood?" (p. 50). Bedford suggests that all that representation entailed, acting included, was understood in connection with multiple theories of *mimesis*, with the baroque notion of *theatrum mundi* and,

since religion permeated every aspect of the daily life and every layer of discourse at that time, with the dominant orthodox views on the Divine Personhood of the Trinity. Drawing on what Gurr termed as "the Elizabethan norm" (p. 53), which is lifelike, natural acting, playing a part "to the life" (p. 53), Bedford comments on the implications of theatrical records and contemporary claims about one of the best known Elizabethan actors, Richard Burbage. The extent to which imitation of "real life" was involved and what was meant by representation may be very dissimilar, if not altogether alien, to contemporary definitions and, Bedford stresses, in order to better understand the conventions of Elizabethan theatrical performance, we must reexamine meta-dramatic references in the Elizabethan plays themselves. Thus, the scholar argues, it is highly significant that "the metaphorical language that Hamlet uses to describe this traffic between outward expressiveness and inward authenticity is that of theatrical performance" (p. 60), when he refers to the "trappings and the suits," the playing of a part.

A different angle of approaching the contentious issues of selfhood, individuality and identity is proposed by Philippa Kelly in "Dialogues of Self-Reflection: Early Modern Mirrors." As the glass mirror industry began to expand, the reflection of one's physical image triggered new psychological and philosophical processes, awakening a "feeling of selfhood" (p. 71), stimulating introspection and creating a need for emendation or refashioning of one's residual self-image. Since the pre-eminent religious view was that human beings were created in God's image, the mirror became "a form of spiritual soliloquy, a way of talking with God" (p. 68), a point of "convergence of the physical and the iconic, the emblematic and the instructive" (p. 72). Although she discusses the findings of two established researchers in the field, Deborah Shuger and Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, praising their ability in "using the mirror to negotiate the meaning of early modern selfhood" (p. 72), Kelly's own emphasis is on the linguistic and literary dimensions of mirrors and reflection (the mirror as a trope or a motif), in the sense of facilitating the development of self-reflexivity and practices of self-representation.

The second section of this collection, "Life Genres," comprises six essays that propose an in-depth analysis of a variety of late medieval and early modern life writing. In "Thomas Hoccleve's Selves Apart" Anne M. Scott examines the critical perspectives on Hoccleve as an autobiographical poet. While some critics, such as Derek Pearsall, noted Hoccleve's adoption of a Chaucerian vernacular style and narrative persona, as well as a sense of irony, others focused on Hoccleve's penchant for autobiographical detail, his striking vocabulary when he intimates about his period of insanity, and his uncommon propensity for self-disclosure but, Scott maintains, it is precisely this susceptibility to conflicting interpretations that individualizes Hoccleve's poetry. She focuses on the relation between self-representation, self-reflection, and

poetic expression in works like *The Regement of Princes* and *Complaint*, arguing that Hoccleve is one of the first writers to describe "a dislocation within himself" and that "he appears to use the term self as an entity on which he can independently reflect" (p. 94). Whether Hoccleve's lyrical alter ego is based on a set of conventions or it is an organic constituent of his identity is a matter open to debate. Scott's thesis, nonetheless, is premised on an implicit relation between the poet's life and his creative output, in that "the textual creation of the fictive Hoccleve is also the psychological self-creation of the poet" (p. 101).

In "The Author in the Study: Self-Representation as Reader and Writer in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods" Peter Goodall underlines a perceptual and epistemological shift in the relationship between the act of reading a text and addressing the self. The scholar sets out to "differentiate the voice of the author from that of the narrator or, more broadly, the voice of the author/narrator from the text itself" (p. 104) in self-representational pieces such as Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, Peter Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum*, Dante's *Vita Nuova*, Petrarch's *De Vita Solitaria*, and Chaucer's *Prologue* to *The Man of Law's Tale*. Goodall shows how the appearance of the study, where laymen could read and write relatively undisturbed, created a physical place for introspection, a site of "commerce with the self and others" (p. 113). The first major literary figure who successfully completes such a transaction is, in Goodall's view, Saint Augustine, in that he correlates "bookish-ness," whether as writer or reader, with the emergence of subjectivity, despite the medieval predilection for separating them.

A radical type of seclusion, inducing soul-searching and playing an unusual part in the construction of subjectivity, is confinement in a penal institution, a *place maudite* brought to the forefront by Dosia Reichardt in "The Constitution of Narrative Identity in Seventeenth-Century Prison Writing." Reichardt dissects the strategies of dissimulation and the motivational framework revealed in a miscellaneous repertory of detention literature by the "tension between the dynamic of a desired reunification with a group identity beyond prison and the impetus toward the expression of individuality and interiority through the use of the lyrical *I*" (p. 115). This repertory includes petitions, confessions, meditations, apologetics, poems, correspondence, journals, translations, travelogues, and political and religious manifestos that signal the emergence of a self-conscious, albeit frail, narrative identity.

Exile, yet another form of severance, though by no means a "private or individual condition" (p. 140) proves a fertile space for autobiography, as Helen Wilcox argues in "Selves in Strange Lands: Autobiography and Exile in the Mid-Seventeenth Century." Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, is one of the case studies here. The prolific author of the autobiographical memoir *A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life* (1656), whose "imagination could fill an empty room with company" (p. 137) experienced exile as a Maid of

Honour to Queen Henrietta Maria, who was compelled to seek refuge in France in 1644. Cavendish's tribulations in a "strange land" illustrate, in Wilcox's view, what Edward Said called a "rift between the self and its true home" (p. 138), but a positive effect of displacement and homelessness is heightened self-awareness and a sharp focus on one's own individuality. Somewhat vague, Wilcox's definition of exile accommodates such diverse characters as Margaret Cavendish, Henry Vaughan (excluded from his community by the Civil War), Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers (two Quaker missionaries), John Bunyan (imprisoned for his preaching in Bedford Gaol), and Lady Anne Clifford (who voluntarily went through the "psychological exile" (p. 147) of marriage).

In "The Visual Autobiographic: Van Dyck's Portrait of Sir John Suckling," Belinda Tieffen contends that the painting constitutes an irrefutable proof of Suckling's self-fashioning and self-representation (the scholar draws on Harry Berger's distinction between these two terms). Highlighting the irony of Suckling's choice of making "the clearest statement of his literary values in a visual, rather than a textual, medium" (p. 167), Tieffen concedes that an analysis of "visual autobiography" is to some degree encumbered by the painter, who insinuates his idiosyncrasies into his or her work, but she dwells insufficiently on the implications of this.

The last essay in this section, R. S. White's "Where Is Shakespeare's Autobiography?," examines four different biographical records of Shakespeare's life and presents us with an interesting dilemma: in the absence of an autobiography, could posterity find enough relevant material in biographies, historical documents, the author's literary corpus and tantalizing bits of information, and other writers' notes, memoirs, and scattered observations, in order to fill in the blanks of a life account, or even to infer or conflate a fictional autobiography? Taking his cue from Foucault, White proposes that, if we "re-theorize biography and autobiography as constructions of subjectivity, rather than individuality" (p. 195) and if "we accord a truth status to any linguistic act, we can … move right across a spectrum linking autobiography, biography, and fictional autobiography to fiction pure and simple" (p. 176).

The third part of this collection, entitled "Self Practices," opens with Helen Fulton's "Autobiography and the Discourse of Urban Subjectivity: The Paston Letters." Fulton examines the Paston Letters (written mainly between 1425 and 1495 by members of four generations of the Paston family) in terms of self-construction and the expression of subjectivity in an urban commercial context in which status, occupation, and display of wealth mark a transition from land-based feudalism to early capitalism, instantly recognizable in the mercantile, commodified, and fluid metropolitan society. She maintains that the Paston correspondence is "autobiographical" in the sense that the letters disclose a peculiar type of subjectivity that arises from competing discourses, at the point

of intersection between feudal, devotional Christian and proto-capitalist notions of selfhood.

Identity and self-representation, albeit more self-conscious, against a backdrop of rapid urbanization is the focus of Jean E. Howard's essay "Textualizing an Urban Life: The Case of Isabella Whitney." Howard singles out Whitney as an outstanding "early modern subject who composed in verse an *autobiographical* account of a female life in primarily secular terms" (p. 218). In her original, clever, playful, and incisive poem *Wyll and Testament* (1573), addressed to the city of London, which is personified as an uncharitable, callous, and rapacious friend, Whitney mimics the sobriety and idiom of actual wills "only to play fast and loose with their basic assumptions" (p. 225). The "autobiographical persona" (p. 220) Whitney wittily devises in her verses is a peculiar blending of a variety of personal, cultural, economic, and social ingredients. She projects her different subject positions (female, household servant, city dweller, jilted lover, pauper, unemployed citizen, piercing social critic and, above all, writer) onto the complex urban setting of England's capital.

In "Accounting for a Life: The Household Accounts of Lady Anne Clifford" Nancy E. Wright peruses Anne Clifford's legal documents, financial records, account books annotated in her own hand, and the diary she kept from 1603 through 1613, analyzing how she textually represented herself and her life as head of an aristocratic family to others. Through her active and self-conscious involvement in all legal and financial matters (including the supervision of expenditures, as well as accounting and collection of jointure rents) concerning her household, Lady Anne Clifford, Wright asserts, "exercises her role as a woman of property in a manner that anticipates Locke's concept of *property in the person* which, as Jeremy Waldron explains, concerns 'property in the moral person, in one's self, one's power of agency'" (p. 248). Nevertheless, it is the paratext, consisting largely of entries and marginal comments she added in her own hand and offering a valuable clue to the multiple registers and forms in which selfhood may be recorded. Wright proposes that we turn to the margins as a significant textual space in which early modern selfhood is inscribed.

Marginalia are also the subject of Liam E. Semler's essay "Designs on the Self: Inigo Jones, Marginal Writing, and Renaissance Self-Assembly." The first major British architect of the modern period, who left his mark on such London buildings as the Banqueting House, Whitehall, the Queen's House in Greenwich, the Wilton House, and in the area design for Covent Garden Square, Inigo Jones, as he is known to the public, is, as Semler maintains, a literary creation "born of marginal annotation" (p. 12). Although he seems to have exhibited little interest in writing for the print, Jones was undoubtedly a prolific writer when it came to copious marginal notes on the books he owned. Semler's contention is that the King's Surveyor rewrote his "incoherent and inadequate" (p. 12) past in these marginalia, filling out the lacunae in his education, forging a

new self, a new background and designing a desired identity that would match the lofty office of architect "he was determined to embody" (p. 12).

In a similar vein, Adrian Mitchell's "William Dampier's Unaccepted Life" probes the collusion and collision of annotations and the body proper of the autobiographical narrative of a man who was both an explorer and a privateer. The draft copy of Dampier's *New Voyage Round the World* (which came to be published in 1697) is replete with annotations, predominantly in the first person, in the author's own hand, offering a glimpse into the writer's mind at work, "the incremental layers of composition" (p. 13), and representing an incipient, although eventually repressed, form of autobiography. These marginal notes, edited out from the subsequent printed version, tell a livelier, more detailed, opinionated and more personal story about Dampier, painting a rather different portrait of the man who certainly did not conform to the prototype of the new scientific traveler. The censored autobiography that emerges from Dampier's annotations seems to support Mitchell's opinion that "Dampier is his book" (p. 277). One could argue, though, that the marginalia, despite their revelatory and perhaps more intimate nature, sketch only another version/persona, possibly more believable, of the man Dampier was.

The last essay in this section, Wilfrid Prest's "Legal Autobiography in Early Modern England," is an analysis of several examples of autobiographical writing by English common lawyers of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, with an emphasis on the interplay between professional and private selves. The memoirs of people connected with the justice system serve both a historical/documentary function, providing information about the mindset, working conditions and private lives, and moral dilemmas of their authors, as well as about the criminality rate, legal disputes, and political issues, and a literary function, as cultural artifacts in their own right.

The notion that in early modern English literature self-description signified positioning oneself "*within* a wider frame" and individuality "was marked less by how one stood *out* than by how effectively one fitted *in*" (p. 14) underlies this valuable interdisciplinary collection of essays. Written by reputed scholars from a variety of fields, the articles selected in this study bring fresh insights into a still very much disputed issue in contemporary criticism and theory, the concept of selfhood. Notwithstanding the academic rigour, the ample illustrative contexts, and the diversity of critical frameworks, what is missing from this book is an adequate and unambiguous definition of autobiography. As such, it emerges as a rather loose concept, perhaps too elastic at times, accommodating both existing and nonexistent texts (such as an "*auto*biography" inferred from a portrait painted by someone else, however keen an observant he might have been), both real and deduced or surmised.