



Egotism and Immorality: The reception of the Romantic confessional

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‘Disgusting. [A] disgraceful specimen of rhapsodical nonsense’.¹

‘A performance without any intellectual drift or design...expressing nothing, and resembling nothing’.²

‘a warning to thofe [*sic*] who fancy themfelves at liberty to difpenfe with the laws of propriety and decency’.³

Today, amidst an endless conveyor-belt of politicians, intellectuals, and celebrities busy with their ‘commentaries *de bello Gallico*’,⁴ Georg Misch’s statement that ‘men must reveal their souls...the only question is how to do it’⁵ appears not only true, but widely agreed upon by society as a whole. Carlyle’s semi-satirical reference to ‘these autobiographical times of ours’⁶ seems equally apt now, as it ever was. And confession, now ‘addressed to the public rather than to God’,⁷ forms the *sine qua non* of these works, a method of understanding human experience yet to be ‘transcended’.⁸ However, the epigraphical critiques above, contemporary reviews of Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris* (abbr. *Liber*),⁹ De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (abbr. CEOE),¹⁰ and Godwin’s *Memoirs of the Author of ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Woman’* (abbr. *Memoirs*),¹¹ suggest that existential imperative is not enough to spare authors intense and often prolonged animadversion, should their revelations offend the contemporary ‘laws of propriety and decency’.¹² For Godwin, Hazlitt, and De Quincey, writing amidst the redrafting of ‘boundaries between the public sphere and private life’,¹³ the problem was acute, and compounded by growing literary secularisation. Despite the near two centuries that have passed, and the tectonic shifts in societal mores and morality, these works still prove controversial. However, it is difficult to know whether this is due to their nature, or the fact

¹ Anon. (1823). ‘Liber Amoris’, *New European Magazine*. (11 June), [518-21], in *William Hazlitt: A Reference Guide*. ed. James A. Houck (1977). Boston: G.K. Hall. p. 44.

² Taylor and Hessey. (1822). ‘Confessions of an English Opium-Eater’. *The British Review, and London Critical Journal*, Vol. XX. p. 474.

³ Anon. (1798). ‘Godwin’. *The London Review and Literary Journal*, Vol. 33. p. 251.

⁴ J. G. Lockhart. (1827). ‘Autobiography’. *The Quarterly Review*, Vol. XXXV. p. 149.

⁵ Georg Misch. (1950). *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*. Translated by E. W. Dicks. 2 vols. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 2:575.

⁶ T. Carlyle, K. McSweeney and P. Sabor. (1999). *Sartor resartus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 73.

⁷ Susanna Egan. (1984). *Patterns Of Experience In Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. p. 178.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹ William Hazlitt. (1992). *Liber Amoris, Or, The New Pygmalion*. Oxford: Woodstock Books.

¹⁰ Thomas De Quincey and Barry Milligan. (2003). *Confessions Of An English Opium-Eater And Other Writings*. London: Penguin Books.

¹¹ William Godwin and Richard Holmes. (2005). *Godwin On Wollstonecraft*. London: New York.

¹² Anon. *London Review*. p. 251.

¹³ Nicholas Roe. (2005). *Romanticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 449.

that current ideas about self-revelation frequently remain ‘cultural assumptions inherited from the Romantic period’.¹⁴ In an attempt to answer this question, and combat the problematization of our critical distance, this essay will examine the reception of *Liber*, *CEO*, and *Memoirs* within a wide temporal range of critical frameworks. Focusing on their contemporary reception, and critical legacies, it will also touch on criticism of the literary confessional genre, from the mid-eighteenth century to the present day.

Beginning with St. Augustine’s *Confessions* in 398AD, the purpose of the literary confessional was not ‘to vaunt the gifts or achievements of the writer’,¹⁵ but rather ‘to demonstrate his or her need for God’s grace’.¹⁶ However, by the eighteenth century, following the publication of Rousseau’s seminal *Confessions*, the genre was in a state of flux, undergoing a secularisation arguably of the Romantics’ own creation, ‘characteristic concepts and patterns of Romantic philosophy and literature’,¹⁷ forming ‘a displaced and reconstituted theology.’ With this loss of formal religious structure, the central purpose of confession collapsed, leaving no clear reason for it being an accepted form in which to say ‘things about oneself that one would not normally say’.¹⁸ With the publication of Freud’s *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895, and thus the beginnings of psychoanalysis, still many decades away, the potential value of examining the internal thoughts of an author, for any other reason than to find a moral role model, was foreign and condemnable. Hazlitt, Godwin, and De Quincey were writing for a public and critical readership predisposed to see the ‘urgent need to explore and express...the unique and...universal qualities of individual human nature’,¹⁹ as ‘antireligious, and essentially self-centred’,²⁰ ‘imbecility, quackery, and vice’,²¹ In this light, the public and critical antipathy triggered by the ‘unprecedented frankness’²² of works like Godwin’s *Memoirs* becomes less surprising.

Johnson wrote that it is ‘not eafy [*sic*]...to give us an intereft in happinefs or mifery, which we think ourfelves never likely to feel’.²³ Looking at reactions like Robinson’s, ‘Nauseous and revolting. It ought to exclude the author from all decent company’,²⁴ it would appear that in *Liber*, Hazlitt was unsuccessful. Although readers might have been used to the literary hyperbole of love, the extent of Hazlitt’s relentless self-degradation, ‘is it possible that the wretch who writes this could ever have been so blessed!’²⁵ appears to have disgusted them. Their response was ferocious, ‘[a] cockney’s stupidity and folly’,²⁶ ‘[a] record of nastiness and vulgarity’.²⁷ So adverse was *Liber*’s reception, that its publication may only be explained by a belief in the veracity of Hazlitt’s love, ‘I would die; but...my love of her — ought not to die’.²⁸ It was his close friend Benjamin Haydon’s opinion that ‘he will sink into idiotcy if he does not get rid of it’.²⁹ Egan attempts to draw an elusive line between confessions that are filled with ‘praise-worthy honesty’³⁰ and those that are ‘compulsive and self-gratifying’. However, *Liber* seems to cross this divide, an example of honesty, driven by a compulsive and unwittingly self-gratifying, near masochistic need to lay one’s heart open

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 445.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 453.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ M. H. Abrams. (1973). *Natural Supernaturalism*. New York: Norton. p. 65.

¹⁸ Egan, p. 174.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 193.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 178.

²¹ Lockhart, *Quarterly Review*. p. 149.

²² Roe, p. 449

²³ Samuel Johnson. (1750). ‘No. LX, Saturday, Oct 13’, *The Rambler*, Vol. I. p. 138.

²⁴ Crabb Robinson. *Diary*, 23 June 1823; quoted in Hazlitt. *Liber Amoris*. n.p.

²⁵ Hazlitt. *Liber*. p. 38.

²⁶ Anon. (1823). ‘Liber Amoris’, *John Bull*. (15 June), [189], in Houck. p. 43.

²⁷ Anon. (1823). ‘Liber Amoris’, *Literary Register*. (17 May), [305-308], in Houck. p. 43.

²⁸ Hazlitt. *Liber*. p. 75.

²⁹ Ibid. n.p.

³⁰ Egan, p. 188.

before the public, ‘as to Heaven’.³¹ Hazlitt’s unedited display of self, amplified by his decision not to exclude S.W.’s replies, places the focus firmly on him, and removes the possibility of any contextual explanation for his behaviour. However, while most critics lamented *Liber* as a ‘disgusting mass of profligacy and dullness’,³² others recognised the value of an ‘able delineation’³³ of a man ‘under the influence of a degrading infatuation.’

The degree of *Liber*’s ‘able delineation’ seems in many ways a result of its epistolary form. The fact that it is made of Hazlitt’s genuine correspondence contributes to the sense of Hazlitt being ‘completely without reticence’.³⁴ This is seen in statements like, ‘I thought to have dried up my tears for ever...but as I write this, they stream again’,³⁵ which lend an uncomfortable rawness and magnetic veracity to the work. *Liber* places us inside Hazlitt’s infatuated psyche, and by extension ‘unusually close to a Romantic ideal of spontaneity’.³⁶ Ironically it is this closeness, which may be one of the central reasons for its unsympathetic reception. There are brief moments when Hazlitt shows an awareness of his obsession, and even *Liber*’s possible reception, ‘I am not mad, but my heart is so’,³⁷ ‘I will make an end to this story; there is something in it discordant to honest ears’.³⁸ However, Hazlitt is hemmed in by his epistolary form. Rousseau, whose *Confessions* also show him in a position of weakness, ‘to fall at the feet of an imperious mistress, obey her mandates...were for me the most exquisite enjoyments’,³⁹ crucially allows distance and reflection upon what has occurred. Rousseau exonerates ‘personal guilt by displaying himself as he has been’.⁴⁰ In contrast, Hazlitt’s letters trap him in a present tense of the past. Paradoxically, while readers are brought within Hazlitt’s past consciousness, they remain entirely isolated from his present one, rendering it impossible to witness his reformation. As a result *Liber* cannot exist as a ‘conversion narrative’,⁴¹ and readers, unable to sympathise with Hazlitt’s ‘terrible impulses of self-will’,⁴² must condemn him as foolish, egotistical and immoral, precluding him from their absolution. Despite this, less than three years after the publication of *Liber*, he married,⁴³ and wrote arguably his greatest work, *The Spirit of the Age*. In this way, *Liber* stands as proof that it is ‘the confession, not the priest [or public] that gives us absolution’,⁴⁴ for ‘when we blame ourselves, we feel that no one else has a right to blame us.’

In stark contrast to the malevolent reception of *Liber*, De Quincey’s CEOE was lauded upon its initial, serialised publication in *London Magazine*, and its subsequent book release in 1822 remained in nearly continuous print for the rest of century.⁴⁵ Taylor and Hessey described it as having an ‘exactness...found only in one or two prominent geniuses of our day’.⁴⁶ Its success continues today. Derrida went so far as to say that the literary concept of ‘toxicomanie’⁴⁷ originates from its publication. This generally positive reception — it was still attacked for being ‘steeped in egotism’⁴⁸ — is initially surprising given its controversial subject matter. One reason for it can arguably be found in De Quincey’s clever adherence to

³¹ J. Rousseau. (1861). *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. London: Reeves and Turner. p. 153.

³² Anon. (1823). ‘Liber Amoris’, *Museum*. (31 May), [338-39], in Houck. p. 43.

³³ Anon. (1823). ‘Liber Amoris’, *Times*. (30 May), [3], in Houck. p. 44.

³⁴ Hazlitt. *Liber*. n.p.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, n.p.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³⁹ Rousseau. *Confessions*. p. 12.

⁴⁰ Egan, p. 177.

⁴¹ Roe, p. 453.

⁴² Anon. *Times*. [3], in Houck. p. 44.

⁴³ Jonathan Bate, ‘Hazlitt, William (1778–1830)’, *Oxford DNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn., May 2010 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12805>, accessed 15 May 2014].

⁴⁴ Wilde, quoted in J. Rousseau. *The Confessions*. trans. J. M. Cohen. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953. p. xxiv.

⁴⁵ De Quincey. *Confessions*. p. xvii.

⁴⁶ Taylor and Hessey. (1823). ‘CEOE’. *The Monthly Review*. Vol. C. pp. 288-89.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida. (2003). ‘The Rhetoric of Drugs’. *High Culture: Reflections on Addiction and Modernity*. Ed. Anna Alexander and Mark S. Roberts. State University of New York Press. p. 27.

⁴⁸ De Quincey, *Confessions*. p. xxiv.

traditional forms, and the desires of his readership. He professed a determination to be ‘useful and instructive’,⁴⁹ sharing his experiences in order to alleviate the opium pains of others. This desire, regardless of its veracity, gave a reason for CEOE’s publication beyond egotism, and thus helped satisfy readers’ classical expectations of the confessional. The honour of De Quincey’s purpose outweighed the immorality of his addiction. Since CEOE ‘aspires to the character of a medical document’⁵⁰ — something it in fact became⁵¹ — readers felt unable to ‘altogether pass it over’, despite ‘so much that is objectionable’. On top of this, unlike *Liber*, CEOE is a successful ‘conversion narrative’. De Quincey writes at the end of his ‘journey’,⁵² post-addiction. And he makes sure to convince readers of his fair and reflective state of mind via simultaneously earnest and playful direct addresses, ‘Courteous, and I hope, indulgent reader...’,⁵³ thus gaining him their sympathies. He manages to make us complicit in his confession by asking questions on our behalf, ‘how do I find my health after all this opium-eating?...Why, pretty well, I thank you, reader’.⁵⁴ The effectiveness of this technique is clearly seen in how critics warmed to him personally, believing CEOE showed ‘a great kindness of disposition, and of what we should call good-heartedness’.⁵⁵ This again stands in contrast to the reception of *Liber*, whose readers were informed of the author’s personality exclusively by letters, which unsurprisingly, did not ‘always show him in an attractive light’;⁵⁶ ‘I am jealous of all eyes but my own’.⁵⁷ It should be noted that many in the magazine establishment were already less than Hazlitt’s fans, partly due to his status as a Cockney. Blackwoods spuriously dubbed him ‘pimplly Hazlitt’,⁵⁸ ‘though his cheek was pale as alabaster’.

Despite the advantages of De Quincey’s literary tactics in terms of reception, they also appear defensive, a conscious effort to minimise the risk of looking egotistical or immoral. His need to qualify the value of his confessional thoughts undermines the extent to which CEOE can be seen as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’,⁵⁹ and thus a truly progressive, Romantic confession. CEOE is undoubtedly a personal and original work, standing as ‘the only acknowledged description of opium visions’⁶⁰ from the era. However, its frequently technical style, ‘crude opium, I affirm peremptorily, is incapable of producing any state of body...resembling that...produced by alcohol’,⁶¹ gives a sense that De Quincey is not fully baring himself. And his natural candour — highlighted by his friendly and colloquial direct addresses — which ought to reveal most about him, instead feel as Eaton suggested, like a ‘protective colouring’.⁶² Lockhart wrote that few authors depicted the ‘secret workings of their own mind’⁶³ in non-fictional forms, unless they are ‘tinged...with insanity’, and at no point does De Quincey, writing twenty years after the events in question, seem close to madness. Unlike with Hazlitt, or as we will shortly see with Godwin, De Quincey gives little sense of being a confessor ‘compelled to tell their story’,⁶⁴ either to gain absolution, or provide explanation. This sense is reinforced by the absence of the events of CEOE in his own diary of 1803. In the end, CEOE’s immediate, as well as long-term success,

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁰ Anon. (1823). ‘Confessions’. *The Eclectic Review*. Vol. XIX. p. 366.

⁵¹ De Quincey, *Confessions*. p. xxiv.

⁵² Egan, p. 195.

⁵³ De Quincey. *Confessions*. p. 56.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

⁵⁵ Taylor. *British Review*. p. 475.

⁵⁶ Virginia Woolf. (1965). *The Common Reader*. London: The Hogarth Press. n.p.

⁵⁷ Hazlitt, p. 9.

⁵⁸ Woolf, p. 174.

⁵⁹ W. Wordsworth, S. Coleridge, R. Brett and A. Jones. (2005). *Wordsworth and Coleridge*. London: Routledge. p. 291.

⁶⁰ Abrams, M. H. (1971). *The Milk Of Paradise*. New York: Octagon Books. p.6.

⁶¹ De Quincey. *Confessions*. p. 45.

⁶² Thomas De Quincey and Horace Ainsworth Eaton. (1927). *A Diary Of Thomas De Quincey, 1803*. London: Noel Douglas. p. 18.

⁶³ Lockhart. *The Quarterly Review*. p. 164.

⁶⁴ Egan, p. 173.

defies Wordsworth's statement that every author, 'as far as he is great'⁶⁵ has had the task of 'creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed'. It then appears to stand as evidence of McGann's view that Romantic scholarship remains 'dominated by a Romantic ideology...an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations'.⁶⁶

One of the most striking aspects of Romantic 'self-representation' is that it existed in a highly fluid state. Autobiography 'refused to be contained within neat boundaries',⁶⁷ and biography merged with 'elements of the personal reminiscence, the memoir, and the critical essay'. In Godwin's *Memoirs* this went one step further, as the two genres collided in a paradoxically second-hand, hybrid form of confessional. *Memoirs* combines a *res gestae* description of Wollstonecraft's life with the 'unprecedented'⁶⁸ intimacy enabled by Godwin's personal knowledge from being Wollstonecraft's widow. It is this latter aspect of the work that arguably moves it beyond biography or even memoir, and into the realm of confession. Godwin believed that Wollstonecraft's 'errors were connected and interwoven with the qualities most characteristic of her genius'.⁶⁹ He was convinced that the more 'we are presented with the picture and story...the more generally shall we feel...sympathy in their excellencies'.⁷⁰ However, it was not his confession to give, and the result, slated for its 'jacobin morality',⁷¹ was arguably one of the most detrimental biographies ever published. Godwin and Wollstonecraft became classed as those 'who endeavour to distinguish [*sic*] themselves by ridiculing every thing that has hitherto appeared sacred and venerable'.⁷² Interestingly, outside of Britain, especially in Germany, the work was better received, 'an exemplary biography...in true philosophic spirit'.⁷³ Overall however, *Memoirs* destroyed Wollstonecraft's reputation, eighty years later she would be described as 'one of the martyrs of society'.⁷⁴ Hazlitt wrote in 1825 of Godwin's descent from shining as a 'sun in the firmament of reputation'⁷⁵ to being 'sunk below the horizon', enjoying 'the serene twilight of a doubtful immortality'. Godwin, fell foul of the same flaw he accused Wollstonecraft, becoming 'the victim of a desire to promote the benefit of others',⁷⁶ in this case the legacy of his wife. However, despite its critical failure, *Memoirs* sold 'briskly'⁷⁷ for the initial years after its release, a second, revised, edition being called for under a year after its first publication. This suggests a possible moral disjoint between critical tastes and the 'filthily prurient'⁷⁸ ear of what Lockhart termed, 'that grand impersonation, "the Reading Public"'.⁷⁹ At the very least, it is indication of the deep-seated human desire to read works that "signally ignored, or even deliberately aimed to provoke, proprieties...especially political and sexual ones".⁸⁰

Shumaker writes that 'the total number of confessional autobiographies [is] not large, for the English mind, when impelled to confess, has usually preferred the safer medium of the novel'.⁸¹ In light of this brief examination of the Romantic critical establishment's frequently combative response to works of confession, the dangers of the genre are clear. The Romantic

⁶⁵ William Wordsworth. (1881). *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, Edinburgh: Gall & Inglis. p. 513.

⁶⁶ J. J. McGann. (1983). *The Romantic Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 1.

⁶⁷ Roe, pp. 452-53.

⁶⁸ Roe, p. 449.

⁶⁹ Godwin, p. xvii.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷¹ Anon. (1798). 'The Reviewers Reviewed'. *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*. Vol. I. p. 94.

⁷² Anon. *London Review*. p. 246.

⁷³ Anon. (1800). 'Neue Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek'. [507-519], in B. R. Pollin. (1967). *Godwin Criticism: A Synoptic Bibliography*. Canada: University of Toronto Press. p. 141.

⁷⁴ M. Wollstonecraft, C. Paul, and G. Imlay. (1879). *Letters to Imlay*. London: C. Kegan Paul & Co. pp. v-vi.

⁷⁵ William Hazlitt. *The Spirit Of The Age: Or Contemporary Portraits*. Henry Colburn: London, 1825. p. 29.

⁷⁶ Godwin, p. 17.

⁷⁷ Godwin, p. xxi.

⁷⁸ Lockhart. *Quarterly Review*. p. 164.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁸⁰ Godwin, p. xxv.

⁸¹ Wayne Shumaker. *English Autobiography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954. p. 84.

confessional, arguably like Romanticism itself, existed in a space between classical and religious literary traditions, and inchoate modernist principles. Authors were caught between their own desires — from the intellectual principles of Godwin, to the emotional compulsion of Hazlitt — and a critical and public readership still caught in past conventions of the genre. Egan writes that ‘confession need have no connection with religion beyond the contribution of religion to the metaphor’.⁸² However, this contribution of religion created an inescapable readerly expectation of religious morality and traditional forms, which in many cases predestined Romantic confessional works to censure for their immorality and self-centred egotism. In this way, the eventual, widespread adoption of the term autobiography, rather than being seen as a mere nominal change, can be seen as a vital reclassification, which allowed the literary expression of self to transcend its religious past. Spengemann believes that the evolution of autobiography was ‘complete a century ago’,⁸³ and it is likely rarer today to find works which truly challenge or progress the genre. However, so long as we are all ‘prompted by the fame [*sic*] motives, all deceived by the fame fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure’,⁸⁴ the stylistic descendants of the Romantic confessional will find their spot in the future, just as Godwin, Hazlitt, and De Quincey fought for its place in the past.

⁸² Egan, p. 170.

⁸³ William C. Spengemann. *The Forms Of Autobiography*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. p. 201.

⁸⁴ Johnson. *Rambler*. p. 139.

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