

Approaches to Victorian Autobiography, George P. Landow, ed. Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio. 1979. 359 pages. \$16.00

Ever since, and well before, the pythoness first squatted over a crevice and inhaled effluvia in order to become amphibologically intoxicated with Apollo's voice; and Legion rushed into the Gadarene swine, and St. Paul put on the new man, Western man has been in doubt as to the nature of selfhood. Twentieth century psychologists, addressing the subject, have perceived the self, inter alia, as a sort of environmental accretion, a superfine vegetal organism, an excreted protective coating, and a numen fraught with static Logistics. If the self is so Protean, is autobiography possible? Approaches undertakes to examine this question. (For convenience's sake, I shall relegate those essays which are of Pre-Raphaelite interest to the latter portion of this review. In the interim, I shall try, briefly, to give the reader some purchase on the other essays.)

Phyllis Grosskurth ("Where Was Rousseau?") tells us that the "pressures and conventions" "of nineteenth century England . . . made it impossible to write an autobiography which would also have been a true confessional." Howard Helsinger ("Credence and Credibility: The Concern for Honesty in Victorian Autobiography") questions several witnesses like the good lawyer he is, among them the perennial habitué of the witness box, Oscar Wilde. "Wilde's defense of lying . . . mocks the autobiographical claim to veracity because all the available truths have become truths of imagination." Luann Walther ("The Invention of Childhood in Victorian Autobiography") cautions us that "memory is . . . creative in that it may 'screen' or 'cancel,' in the Freudian sense." Furthermore, an autobiographer will inevitably have trouble discerning his real childhood from the suggestive aura of the fiction which he has read, admired, and absorbed. We may infer that the fancy is not only a deceiving elf but one deleterious to autobiography.

To complicate matters, ethos (by which I mean the character of the readership) controls and dictates the substance of autobiography. Linda H. Peterson examines this problem in "Audience and the Autobiographer's Art: An Approach to the Autobiography of Mrs. M. O. W. Oliphant." Designed to be read by her son Cecco, Mrs. Oliphant's Autobiography had, upon his death, to be "redirected toward an impersonal and probably unsympathetic public interested only in being amused." Sarah C. Frerichs ("Elizabeth Missing Sewell: Concealment and Revelation in a Victorian Everywoman") shows us the Procrustean writhings of an autobiographer caught in "the Victorian trap of selflessness."

If conventional norms strike us generally as tedious enough,