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James Smith Allen, *Poignant Relations: Three Modern French Women*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xiii + 270 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$42.50 US. ISBN 0-8018-6204-3.

Whitney Walton, *Eve's Proud Descendants: Four Women Writers and Republican Politics in Nineteenth-Century France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. 308 pp. Notes, selected bibliography and index. \$49.50 US. ISBN 0-8047-3754-1.

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Biographies, whether of a single individual or of a group, have always had a place in historical writing, and yet until recently they had fallen out of fashion among academic historians. The strong influence of the Annales paradigm, with its focus on the *longue durée*, along with the long-standing predominance of social history, which privileged the study of social groups and large-scale structural change, contributed in part to this lack of interest in biography. Cultural historians, influenced by poststructuralist theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida and by anthropology, focused on culture as an expression of a coherent collective identity, a tool used by one group to dominate/resist another, or a vehicle by which different groups in society could interact to negotiate meaning, and thus power. Focusing on the study of groups and influenced by theorists that called into question the agency and autonomy of the self, many historians did not see biography as a meaningful approach to the study of history. To change slightly the terms of the question posed by Jeremy Popkin in his essay on contemporary French historian-autobiographers, many wondered if biography was “possible in a climate that lacks a firm belief in the coherence of the self.” [1]

In recent years, however, it seems that historians have become more comfortable with the notion that identity can be contested, conflicted, and multiple, that it can be embedded in and the product of social and cultural structures, and yet still exist as a meaningful topic of historical exploration. This has allowed the re-entry of biography into historical scholarship. In her *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*, Natalie Zemon Davis moved away from the tendency to see collective biography as a mirror of group identity, writing of her three subjects that the “variant patterns [of their lives] alert us to mobility, mixture, and contention in European cultures.” [2] Joan Wallach Scott also presented identity as diverse and multiple, exploring the intellectual and ontological paradoxes that feminists struggled with as a group and as individuals. In *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Scott examined individual women as “sites—historical locations or markers—where crucial political and cultural contests are enacted and can be examined in some detail. To figure a person—in this case, a woman—as a place or location is not to deny her humanity; it is rather to recognize the many factors that constitute her agency, the complex and multiple ways in which she is constructed as historical actor.” [3]

The work of such historians has alerted us to the new possibilities for biography. As the recent set of essays published in *French Historical Studies* (many of which also appear in the newly published collection *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France*) indicates, historians are turning to the study of individuals for new perspectives on the “construction of social and psychological identity.” This “New Biography” entails, in the words of Jo Burr Margadant, “an explicit recognition of the constructed nature of identity and of the dependence on contextualization for elucidating an individual’s ‘meaning’ to the self or others.” [4]

The works by James Smith Allen, *Poignant Relations: Three Modern French Women* and Whitney Walton, *Eve’s Proud Descendants: Four Women Writers and Republican Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* offer excellent examples of the way in which collective biography can be used to explore the creation of a self-identity in relation to multiple contexts. Through the lens of collective biography, these authors address issues including the process of self-creation, the relationship between the self and society, and the possibility of transgression through self-creation.

Allen’s book explores the “discursive relations of women to themselves, to others, and to the world” within a context of “subordination, even oppression” (pp. 1, 2). He contends that the act of writing was a means of creating identity and a sense of agency for the three women he studied: Marie-Sophie Leroyer de Chantepie (1800-1888), a novelist, literary critic and correspondent of George Sand and Gustave Flaubert, Geneviève Bréton-Vaudoyer (1849-1918), a diarist and correspondent of Henri Regnault and Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, and Céline Renooz-Muro (1840-1928), a scientist, historian, journalist and polemicist. Influenced by both their life experiences and the texts they read, these women used writing as a means to create and assert a sense of self. Calling them “feminists in all but name,” Allen argues that through their writing these women transgressed the prescribed limits of feminine identity in nineteenth-century France and proposed alternative ways of being female (p. 13).

Walton likewise sees the four women whose lives and writings she explores as feminists due to their unconventional personal choices and their insistence on women’s ability to contribute to society by participating in the public sphere. All four of these women were well-known writers during the July Monarchy: George Sand (1804-1876), Marie d’Agoult (1805-1876), Hortense Allart (1801-1879) and Delphine Gay de Girardin (1804-1855). Calling her work “both a biographical study of the four women and an historical analysis of French literary and political culture,” Walton argues that each of the four women “wrote herself as a republican woman, as a female individual with certain public responsibilities” (pp. 3, 2). These women, Walton contends, “wrote themselves into existence,” and, in the process, they also “rewrote the republican script regarding family relations, positing egalitarian alternatives to the patriarchal family of male republicanism” (pp. 121, 3).

Both Allen and Walton highlight the relational aspect of self-creation. Rather than posit the notion of a coherent, contained self, the authors emphasize the fluid boundaries of the self as expressed in writing, in relation to others, to personal experience, and to society. Allen’s study, heavily informed by feminist and poststructuralist theory, explores the fluid nature of what he calls the feminine “I,” arguing that as a “discursive practice” the “I” “ignores generic boundaries. The text of the female self appears wherever women write as subjects in their own right” (p. 33). Allen demonstrates that no matter in what genre the women chose to express their ideas—and their writings included diaries, letters, novels, travel

literature, scientific tracts and newspaper articles—they consistently wrote of and for themselves. In these literary “assemblages” as he calls them, the women moved back and forth between genres, so consistently incorporating their life story into each text that all of their writings were, in some way, autobiographical. (p.34). Leroyer, for example, wrote novels that drew upon her own experiences, which she also discussed in her correspondence with Sand and Flaubert as well as in her book reviews. Likewise Bréton, in her diaries and letters, as well as in a novel and travelogue, “wrote purposefully, self-consciously,” using these various genres to define her sense of self (p. 114). The women Walton studies also wrote in a variety of genres, producing novels, works of non-fiction, plays, journalistic pieces and autobiographies. For both Allen and Walton, the belief in the fluidity of generic boundaries in the women’s writings, as well as in the omnipresence of the self throughout their texts, shapes their methodological approach. Each author moves back and forth among the different works written by these women, drawing from them indiscriminately as evidence of a process of self-creation.

Just as the women writers pursued the process of self-creation in a variety of texts, they also shaped their sense of self in relation to other texts and other individuals. Renooz’s autobiographical writing perhaps best illustrates the role of other texts in the process of self-creation. Allen asserts, “rusty pins hold in place fragments of Renooz’s childhood journal, letters she received and copies of those she sent, articles clipped from scholarly reviews and various newspapers, and pages torn from her other writings” (p. 141). Allen uses this example of an “assemblage” to highlight the way in which Renooz constructed her sense of herself, as a scientist and prophet, by responding to other texts. Likewise, Walton argues that “individuals construct their lives and their identities out of the culture that surrounds them,” a culture that includes other texts (p. 3). The four women in Walton’s study read and commented upon each others’ work and created themselves in opposition to the texts, and the personalities, of their contemporaries. Sand in particular served as a “foil, as well as a model, to the three other authors,” as she did to Leroyer, who corresponded with her and strongly identified with her novel *Lélia* (Walton, p. 103, Allen, p. 57).

Experience also plays a role in these works, as the authors explore the relationship between the women’s lives and their texts. Both Allen and Walton describe the life experiences of the women they study, discussing their childhood, affective relationships, and family situations, as well as, when relevant, their efforts to play a public role as intellectuals, *salonnières*, and journalists. For Allen, experience functioned as material that had to be reworked through the process of writing before it could become integrated into each woman’s sense of self. He argues this most forcefully in the case of Bréton, stating that writing for her involved “an effort to mediate experience and give it form” (p. 114).

Walton similarly argues that the women’s experiences informed their texts, leading in particular to a feminist reworking of romanticism and republicanism. She raises the possibility, however, that the women understood their experiences without the need to write of them. In her discussion of d’Agoult’s romantic journey to Switzerland with Franz Liszt, for example, Walton explores the way in which d’Agoult used a discussion of nature, in both her autobiography and in her novel *Nélida*, to convey a sense of the sexual awakening she was experiencing. In this passage, Walton moves deftly back and forth between d’Agoult’s experience with Liszt and her textual representation of that experience, but ultimately leaves unresolved the question of whether d’Agoult’s account of her sexual feelings used the metaphor of nature in order to make sense of what she was experiencing for herself or to make it more acceptable to her readers. Walton seems to lean toward the second interpretation when she argues that

women writers had to find a way to “write about sexual transgression while still remaining ‘women’” (p. 51). Although Walton clearly believes that writing was crucial to the creation of a self-identity for these women, she often implies that the self being created was a public self. Allen, in his study of three women far less in the public eye, implies that no distinction existed between a public and a private self.

As this discussion of the private versus the public self indicates, both Allen and Walton argued that the women writers created their identities in relation to the society in which they lived. Although they each provide examples of the way in which the women writers were able to craft lives that suited their personalities and desires, both Allen and Walton characterize the impact of society on the woman in negative terms, emphasizing the way in which social and cultural limitations aimed to circumscribe women’s roles and opportunities. Allen in particular emphasizes these limits, focusing on three women who did not achieve great recognition for their writings or their ideas. While both Allen and Walton present a view of the women writers operating in “a world not of their own making,” they also demonstrate the way in which women were able to draw upon cultural conventions meant to deny women agency and use them for their own purposes (Allen, p. 2). Both authors see the self that the women writers created as an ultimately transgressive self, one able to break beyond the strictures of society and attempt, in so doing, to challenge the rules and norms that place limitations upon it. Allen, studying women who lived in “relative obscurity,” argued that the act of writing was in itself transgressive, a protest against the “patriarchal prohibitions against [an] intellectual life” for women (pp. 9, 3). The act of writing, he argues, established a sense of consciousness, which, in a society that denied women self-conscious individuality, laid the foundations for resisting society’s limits. Following Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault, Allen furthermore argues that the fluid generic boundaries in the diverse texts produced by the women he studied can be seen as a strategy of resistance in their insistence on heterogeneity and a plurality of sites of resistance (pp. 45-6). The lack of boundaries between public and private self, between self and text, between text and experience thus become in Allen’s work evidence of a will to resist that he describes as feminist. The nature of this feminine, transgressive self and the process of its creation are the main foci of Allen’s study.

Walton likewise sees the process of self-creation as transgressive, although her focus is less on practice and heterogeneity than on the way in which women writers were able to transform dominant cultural discourses such as romanticism and republicanism. Here, she argues for a close relationship between experience and text, contending that the women’s experiences in family and sexual relationships, in the world of letters and in politics profoundly affected the way in which they interpreted dominant cultural discourses, thus giving them the material with which to reshape these discourses in a feminist manner. In her discussion of republicanism, for example, Walton suggests that “all four [women writers] to some extent reshaped republicanism by performing and articulating a model of republican womanhood” (pp. 157-8). The notion of a “performative self,” which also ties together the essays in *The New Biography*, privileges the way in which women shaped their lives for the public gaze. In so doing, it implies a gap between the public and private self, appearing to leave the second ultimately unknowable. Likewise, although Walton discusses the private experiences of these women, the lens through which she sees those experiences is that of their public writings, and the purpose of her discussion is to examine how the public self-creation of these women shaped the culture of their time. Walton thus argues that the women’s works and lives “opened up possibilities for a less rigidly gendered republicanism [and] made improvements in women’s status a significant component of their republicanism” (p. 158). In crafting this argument, Walton offers us a new, less exclusionary view of

women's possibilities for participation in the public sphere during the July Monarchy. Walton argues, for example, that studying the "different styles of political engagement of Sand, d'Agoult, Allart, and Girardin suggest[s] that the legal exclusion of women from politics was by no means complete" (p. 155).

The two authors both place their discussion of the process of self-creation within the context of feminism, although each asserts that by many standards the authors they discuss would not be considered feminists. The women in Allen's study never participated in feminist organizations, nor did they particularly identify with feminism. Those studied by Walton likewise refused association with socialist feminists and did not believe, in 1848, that women yet warranted the vote. Yet in each case, the authors see the creation of a transgressive self, whether one destined for the public eye or one that recognized no boundary between public and private, as a feminist act. As Walton puts it, in words with which Allen would agree, "these women writers [...] promoted a feminist project of claiming women's right to and ability for intellectual endeavor" (p. 87). In their writings, they developed and communicated to others an alternative model of the female self, one that broke beyond the boundaries placed upon it by society.

Feminism provides a coherent, and in many cases accurate, means of describing this transgressive self, but it may be a context that is too limiting. Much recent historical writing has tended to see the self as largely determined by forces of society and culture. This is particularly evident in works influenced by Michel Foucault, who argued that the creation of the modern self, no matter how autonomous it might have felt itself to be, was central to the dissemination and deployment of new technologies of power.^[5] Although Allen and Walton contextualize the process of self-creation, seeing it as necessarily linked to existing social and cultural structures, their emphasis on agency and transgression in the process of self-creation is significant. Yet what role does gender play in this process? Allen argues forcefully that women's liminal position in society, along with their predisposition for seeing the world in terms of relationships whose boundaries are fluid, predisposes them to a different sort of writing about, and thus creation of, the self. Although Walton steers clear of arguments concerning women's nature, she also argues that women's experience of being both of and not of the public sphere was crucial to the formation of their public selves. Women may well have had greater insight into the necessary yet difficult process of establishing one's identity as both of and not of society that is integral to the creation of modern selfhood; perhaps this is why that literary genre most associated with the development of modern selfhood, the novel, was, at its origins at least, a prototypically feminine genre. Did this, however, mean that men created different sorts of selves than did women, or that men were less able to create a transgressive self-identity?

In addition to the specifically feminine nature of this process, the works by Allen and Walton raise questions regarding the importance of writing in the process of self-creation. While both authors also acknowledge the role of experience, the process of writing is central to their accounts of self-creation. Allen attributes this to the particularly literary nature of French culture. This raises the intriguing question of what other mechanisms might contribute to self-creation, and whether or not it is accurate to speak in national terms. In other countries, for example, did collective action play a larger role in creating identities, feminist or otherwise, for women? Did participation in philanthropic organizations in England, for example, provide the same mechanism for making sense of experience and negotiating the relationship between self and society that writing did for the women studied by Allen and Walton? Until recently, the large body of literature on the formation of working-class consciousness suggested

that collective action was crucial in the process of self-formation among working-class men. Does gender determine by what process the self is created? Does class? Is it accurate to speak of national differences? Or is it more complex? What other modes, outside of writing, might have provided means of self-creation for women in the nineteenth century? And if other modes did contribute, how do we, as historians who depend on textual analysis for our view of the past, study them? Perhaps by exploring these intriguing questions, we will find our own sense of our professional selves being prodded and pushed in new directions. In this sense, the studies by Allen and Walton can be seen as invitations to embark on a great adventure.

NOTES

[1] Jeremy D. Popkin, "Ego-histoire and Beyond: Contemporary French Historian-Autobiographers," *French Historical Studies* 19:4 (Fall 1996): 1164.

[2] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 212.

[3] Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 16.

[4] Jo Burr Margadant, "Introduction: The New Historical Biography in Historical Practice," *French Historical Studies* 19:4 (Fall 1996): 1057. See also Jo Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[5] These ideas are discussed in, for example, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977) and *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978). Foucault specifically addressed the issue of self-disclosure in "Technologies of the Self" in Luther H. Martin, et al, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988). In an interview contained in this same volume, Foucault implied that the self plays a role in its own creation, but this possibility of agency is not emphasized in most of the work influenced by him. See "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault," conducted by Rux Martin in *Ibid.*, 19.

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