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Henry Crabb Robinson in Germany: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Life Writing

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by Eugene Stelzig

THE OBVIOUS PRECONCEPTION is difficult to avoid: what more than a rather shallow *Study in Nineteenth-Century Life Writing* could a monograph that falls just short of 140 pages contribute to the study of a field that, for over 140 years now, has drawn considerable scholarly attention? At best perhaps, and in that case somewhat disagreeing with the broad subtitle, the exposition of a certain neglected aspect of Henry Crabb Robinson's time in Germany (1800-1805)—but then these years especially have been tackled from a variety of angles, in great depth, and at great length. Apart from Frederick Norman's and David Glass Larg's dismissive accounts dating from 1930 and 1928 respectively, researchers in the field have so far almost unanimously emphasised Robinson's significance as a cultural, literary, and philosophical intermediary and disseminator; we have known for some time now who Henry Crabb Robinson (1775-1867) was, and the question why he mattered seems settled.

The fact that Stelzig's book was awarded the Barricelli Book Prize by the International Conference on Romanticism in 2010, however, should be enough of an incentive to cast aside any such premature reservations, read the book, and judge for oneself. For Stelzig's *Henry Crabb Robinson in Germany* actually voices a timely and concise expression of the paradigm shift that is currently taking place in the appreciation of autobiography in general and Robinson studies in particular, and it does so using the example of those most formative years of Robinson's life and without presuming too great a familiarity with the previous scholarship in the field. Henry Crabb Robinson emerges from Stelzig's book as a writer—'qua autobiographer multiplex' (p. 20)—in his own right, who designated his correspondence 'the echo or shadow of [his] Life, whether it has been passed in Travelling or Reading' (p. 37). Robinson did a vast amount of both these activities, and the delight which the passionate walker took in details of landscape he was passing through, as well as the characteristics of the people he met and befriended, very much matches the attention with which he perused books and magazines. He sent home to his brother Thomas in Bury St. Edmunds 45 densely filled foolscap sheets in the course of his five years on the continent—roughly one every six weeks—and numerous further, albeit largely less frank and more constricted letters to friends. The 'epistolary bildungsroman' that thus ensued vividly portrays how the disenfranchised Englishman, excluded from the universities in his home country because of his Dissenting allegiance and painfully aware of his lack of schooling throughout his life, escaped the monotonous drudgery of his legal clerkship in London, set out on his belated though uniquely serendipitous

Wanderjahre in Germany, and eventually, becoming a freshman at the age of 27, matriculated at the university of Jena (pp. 35, 112). Stelzig's paramount achievement here is his persuasive refusal to acquiesce in Robinson's recurrent, self-depreciative judgements regarding his literary and intellectual inferiority. Robinson may have lacked the skill (or determination) to convey comprehensively the full extent of his philosophical learning, yet his (occasionally public) engagement with the works of Kant, Schelling, the Schlegels, Fries, and the physiognomist Gall, among others, reveals a curious, independent and critical mind that deserves to be credited as such. The quality of the intellectual content of Robinson's life writing stands beyond question.

Moreover, Stelzig's calling Robinson's correspondence from Germany a *Bildungsroman* implies an artistic element in his writing that binds together those disparate pieces of its protagonist's intellectual and moral formation. Such a notion seems difficult to sustain at first glance, since Robinson—again in accordance with his own judgement—is commonly considered to also have lacked the artist's ability to form and shape. Some of his attempts at versification and translation admittedly display a certain clumsiness that creates too great an air of artificiality or hampers overall readability. Yet to think of his *life story* not primarily as a haphazard quest for 'Beauty & Truth' in the philosophy and poetry he read (p. 66), but also as a quasi-poetic activity that gave rise to the work of art embodied in his life writing is both intriguing and justified; after all, as Stelzig fittingly phrases it, his 'undefined youthful discontent and restlessness give us an attenuated English version of the German *Sturm und Drang* of a generation earlier' (p. 30). The astute and sensitive desultoriness of his life contrasts with and complements the meticulous ardour with which he united, in his fragmentary records, the innumerable, multi-faceted experiences he consequently had with the thoughts and feelings these experiences engendered. Thus springs a compelling novelty from Robinson's writings that certainly does comprise an artistic element, and that grants him a strong significance as an autonomous writer.

Stelzig briefly explicates the scope, character, and previous scholarly treatment of Robinson's writings in chapter one. We learn about the editorial and critical achievements of, most significantly, Thomas Sadler (1869, 1871), Edith Morley (1922, 1927, 1929, 1935, 1938), and Hertha Marquardt (1964, 1967), as well as the manuscript sources preserved at Dr. Williams's Library on which they are based: 29 volumes of Robinson's Diary, 30 of his Travel-Journals and Diaries, just over 30 of his correspondence, as well as 4 volumes of his Reminiscences (p. 15).[1] A multitude of miscellaneous, often unclassified items supplements these, and the claim is plausible that this 'veritable manuscript hoard [...] may well be the most extensive life writing collection by a nineteenth-century English individual on record' (p. 15). At the same time, Stelzig's account initiates his definition of the term 'life writing' as well as the construction of the theoretical framework to his *Study*. He cites, justly and

[1] These numbers vary slightly from the records at Dr. Williams's Library, and I fail to understand on what authority Stelzig cites them.

aptly, Anne K. Mellor's call to 'expand "the generic range of autobiography" to "all writing that inscribes subjectivity", including "diaries, journals, memoirs and letters"'. As the relevance to Robinson's fragmented literary legacy of which the Reminiscences represent his 'unfinished' attempt at 'traditional autobiography' thus begins to become evident (p. 16), so does his sense of his own failure, especially in the face of the achievements of his canonically established friend Wordsworth.

Chapter two then ties in with this theoretical starting point as it situates Robinson in the context of the autobiography of his day. Stelzig invokes critics such as Laura Marcus, Linda Peterson, Kay Cook, Felicity Nussbaum, Regenia Gagnier, and Michael Mascuch in order to show how uneasily Robinson, despite having been male and of middle class origin, fits into a genre that is characterised by maleness, 'instability or hybridity', and 'the canonical paradigm of [...] the retrospective narrative of a unitary self' (p. 19). Robinson clearly lacked the Romantic writer's sense of her or his own genius, believing that 'his literary and even professional life was frivolous, undistinguished, unproductive—at best questionable, at worst a complete failure' (p. 21). Furthermore, this 'sense of his marginal status and his life-long conviction of his insignificance align him more with the noncanonical autobiographers and the wider spectrum of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English life writing—including diaries and journals, often female and/or working class'. Yet these very sentiments of *self*-criticism enabled Robinson to provide a true alternative to the 'full-scale retrospective narratives of an autonomous identity representative of the male canonical tradition of modern autobiography'; they allowed him to forestall autobiographical 'inwardness' and self-mythologizing by laying bare the 'constraints of [...] social context' and voicing the presence of those who are all too easily effaced from that tradition, such as the female (p. 22).

As Stelzig, drawing on the terminology of Martin Danahy, goes on to point out that Robinson the writer is accordingly 'closer to the model of "a structured self that is dispersed, multi-focused, fragmented"' (p. 23), his multifarious and disparate life writing emerges emancipated and emancipating. Robinson therein expresses his pursuit of 'Liberality & Toleration' (p. 33): he shares with us, for instance, his apprehension at the "'mortifying & vexatious Restrictions" endured by the "6 & 7000 Jews'" of Frankfurt (p. 38), his concern at everyday anti-Semitism, but also his elation when he is educationally supported by a Jewish stranger and his admiration of Lessing's Enlightenment ethics. The extension of 'our knowledge of the diverse autobiographical forms that nineteenth-century men and women wrote' thus gains strong support, and so does the postulation for the genre's corresponding re-classification under 'the larger category life writing' (p. 19)—now also semantically stripped of the pre-eminence of the *self* communicated by the prefix *auto*. As the miscellaneous, immediate, and intimate forms of life writing thus challenge the genre of autobiography by dissolving the time frame of its composition as well as its designated purpose—the writer 'himself as his own telos' (p. 20)—back

into its many original tributaries, they also 'stabilise' it through conjuring up an 'illusion of oral communication' (p. 24). The focus again settles more strongly than before on the writer's *life* and the various writings that spring directly from it.

Having thus prepared the ground theoretically and methodologically, Stelzig elaborates how Robinson's life writing unites, in a process of *Bildung* as the formation of his unsettled self (p. 35), significant traces of his Enlightenment upbringing and the Empiricist tradition with his 'conversion' to Kantianism, his sociable cosmopolitanism with his lone rambles in nature, science with mysticism, as well as elements of Classicism with Romantic impulses, to name only a few. He places the characteristic misfortunes and windfalls, errors and triumphs of Robinson's German 'epistolary bildungsroman' between the cornerstones of the Republicanism and Godwinism of his 'Early Years' (chapter three), and the 'English Aftermath' of the 'Failed Literator' (chapter eleven) that resulted in his opting for a career at the Bar from 1811. Chapter four then provides a brief, overall assessment of Robinson's time in Germany, explicating how his instantaneous immersion into the foreign culture was to consolidate his adult identity. The 'expertise', as Stelzig appropriately phrases it, Robinson simultaneously 'developed in [Germany's] language, literature, poetry, and philosophy' was 'unmatched by that of any other Englishman of his generation' (p. 35), and only when his informal writing is appreciated more fully can this expertise find the recognition it deserves. Chapters five and six then equally briefly cover the time between April 1800 and June 1801, mainly spent in and around Frankfurt; we learn about his first friends and acquaintances in that area, most notably Sophie de la Roche (whose work Robinson had already been familiar with) and her grandchildren Bettina, Clemens, and Christian Brentano, as well as his initial German reading and journalistic activity. The sisters Charlotte and Pauline Servière are given a whole chapter, and while 'a proto-feminist note can be heard in [Charlotte's] impressive letters' to Robinson (p. 45), another sense of failure in his life surfaces: the mutual attraction between him and Charlotte is evident from their regular exchange of letters (and the purposeful erasure of some too confidential parts of it), but he did not consider himself able to settle and support a family. What was 'tactfully' left 'unsaid' but 'strongly implied' was therefore never proposed, and neither ever married (p. 45).

Whereas none of the first six chapters exceeds the length of seven pages, chapters seven through ten consist of fourteen to twenty pages each. This reflects the increasing complexity of their content: we learn, for instance, how Robinson's vast walking tours with Christian Brentano brought about a lasting admiration of Moravian philanthropy and the open academic exchange he found in some parts of the country, but also elicited his emphatic disapproval of the inaccessibility of education in certain other parts (pp. 52-54). New acquaintances were made with scholars of lesser renown, such as A S Winkelmann and H A Töpfer, with aspiring academic and political heavyweights, as for example the young F C von Savigny and, at the Weimar

Court, the Duchess Anna Amalia, as well as with significant literary figures, such as J G Seume. These encounters precipitated and sometimes guided the development of Robinson's knowledge of Kant, Goethe, Schiller, Wieland, and Herder (the latter four he visited in Weimar on a single day, 20 November 1801) from hearsay and third-party instruction to first-hand experience through the devoted study of their works. Not seldom did Robinson reciprocate such favours by discussing Shakespeare, Pope, or Wordsworth. Even before settling in Jena in October 1802, his progress in the study of Kant had prompted Robinson to contribute what would eventually amount to five essays on Kant (of which only three were actually published at the time), and another five on German literature, to the short-lived *Monthly Register* (pp. 74-75). Moreover, on the grounds of his philosophical expertise and linguistic skill, he was summoned to instruct the exiled Germaine de Staël in the new philosophy, in the process of which he drew up four dissertations on the topic (p. 81). All of these philosophical disquisitions remained neglected or unacknowledged then, yet they are of significant value in the earliest transmission of Kant, as René Wellek first pointed out in his seminal *Immanuel Kant in England* of 1931, as well as Schelling. Their recent and, for the first time, comprehensive publication by James Vigus in an MHRA critical edition emphasises the importance and timeliness of the subject even more strongly. Stelzig's chapters on Robinson's time in Jena therefore offer a series of valuable insights not just into Robinson's philosophical and literary studies, but also into his study of the sciences and the classics.

Even though Robinson subsequently 'failed in his ambitions as a "literator"—a philosophical critic, translator, and man of letters—for which he sought to lay the foundation in Germany as a process of *Bildung*' (p. 124), he nevertheless devoted much of the rest of his life to these penchants, albeit more privately, in his extant Diary from 1811 onwards. And while Stelzig closes his book somewhat sceptically with the words that 'an epic project' would be 'needed to do justice to Robinson as an important nineteenth-century life writer in his own right', namely 'a modern scholarly edition of his various autobiographical writings' (p. 124), this is precisely what is currently being planned under the auspices of the Dr. Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies, London. This editorial enterprise not only highlights the thematic currency of *Henry Crabb Robinson in Germany*—it also enlists as an argument in its own favour what may otherwise be regarded as a scholarly shortcoming on the part of Stelzig: his heavy reliance on the edited and published material of Robinson's life writing. Since especially Sadler 'took liberties that no modern scholarly editor or publisher would countenance' (p. 16), tracing the many unreferenced and editorially altered passages in print back to their respective original manuscripts and citing them accordingly would have placed Stelzig's convincing argument and significant expositions on a more solid empirical footing. However, without a comprehensive scholarly edition of Henry Crabb Robinson's writings such a task is barely surmountable.