QUAKER STUDIES 11/1 (2006) [129-141]
ISSN 1363-013X

REVIEW ARTICLE

BOOY, D., *Personal Disclosures: An Anthology of Self-writing from the Seventeenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. xiii + 456. ISBN 0-7546-0121-8, Hardback, £57.50, $109.95.

BOOY, D., *Autobiographical Writings by Early Quaker Women* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. xviii + 211. ISBN 0-7546-0753-4, Hardback, £47.50, $89.95.

In these two volumes Booy offers us a selection of 'self writings'—a term he chooses to embrace a variety of writings which we might describe as 'autobiographical' although, as he discusses (2002: 1-12), the writings are disparate and no such genre was recognised at the time. In *Personal Disclosures* he anthologises writings on marriage, family life, the body, religious experiences, and travel. In *Autobiographical Writings* the choice of early Quaker women produces a collection of spiritual autobiographies. The writings collected in these two books raise, for the twenty-first century reader, a host of questions about both the nature of the early modern self and the ways in which we are (or are not) able to read that self with any accuracy.

Writing probably in early 1720, Alice Hayes tells her successors:

> My mother died when I was very young, but whilst she lived, she was a tender affectionate one to me; she rather exceeded: one instance of her affection to me was very remarkable; I being one time very weak, and supposed nigh unto death, the exercise thereof was so hard to her, that she fell down upon her knees, and prayed to the Lord to take her, and spare me; which he did, for what end was best known to himself. I continued at home with my father... (Booy 2004: 167).

The lack of narrated affect in this account is shocking to the modern reader. Hayes, knowing she is approaching death, is writing her spiritual autobiography 'for the encouragement of the young in years to faithfulness' (Booy 2004: 167), and recounts, in this matter-of-fact manner, what must surely have been an emotionally formative episode of her young life: how has she lived to age 63 with the belief that her mother's life was taken instead of hers? What impact did this have on her inner life, her understanding of God? After this one sentence, we hear no more of the matter, and there is no account of the birth of her children and the ways in which their arrivals might have rekindled the emotions surrounding her mother's untimely death.

In late modernity in the west, we live with a model of the self where our 'real' self is something interior, or 'deeper', to be contrasted with a social, professional,

or other 'external' self. Together these images constitute a powerful metaphor linking depth, interiority, and childhood: that the 'real truth' about ourselves lies in the past and 'inside'; the further in the past, the deeper inside. Furthest in the past, of course, in this model, is one's own early infancy; and deep inside is one's inner child. In this metaphoric framework, it is in the past that one finds 'real' explanations for present events; and these explanations are based on childhood experiences and on a model of there still being a 'child within' influenced by those past events. We are true believers in the myth pointed out by James Hillman:

> developmental psychology [says]: what happened to you earlier is the cause of what happened to you later... We don't even separate history as a story from history as cause. So you have to go back to childhood to get at why you are the way you are... Only our culture uses that model, that myth (Hillman and Ventura 1992: 17; see also Taylor: 111-14).

In this model, Alice Hayes' reticence about the effect on her of her mother's death must be repression, concealment, or denial. However, Phyllis Mack (1991: 226-27) argues that the seventeenth-century Quakers' conception of the self, and of what was most 'inward', is virtually the inverse of ours, so that our modern psychologised sense of an 'inner self' as the place of the 'inner light' should not be read back into the writings of early Quakers. The key point here about the difference between the 'inward light' and the 'inner light' is that the former phrase is taken to signify something external to the person, part of the godhead, transcendent, which is perceived inwardly; whereas the latter signifies an aspect of the self, an inherent attribute of a human being. The slippage from the earlier terminology to the later occurred during the early years of the twentieth century, in the period when psychological theories of an inner, unconscious, self were beginning to gain currency and popularity in Europe and North America.

And of course, although I have labelled Hayes' writing a 'spiritual autobiography', this was not the term she used; she wanted to leave behind her 'a brief relation concerning the way and manner of the Lord's dealings with me' (Booy 2004: 167). The *OED* gives the first two recorded uses of the term 'autobiography' as 1797 and 1809; clearly the word arose in the wake of 'the hinge' of eighteenth-century cultural change, which was crucial in the history of the modern western self. The antecedents of this trajectory that has led to the modern sense of self lie in the practices of self-monitoring and introspection fostered widely among ordinary people by the seventeenth-century Puritans.

The introspection, which creates in the seventeenth century the first widespread appearance of inward-looking autobiographies, was born out of the need for assurance of salvation. Thus, many of the perhaps expected markers of outward life are absent. Bunyan makes no mention of his mother's death when he was 16, no mention of his father's rapid remarriage; his two wives only appear insomuch as his first wife brings two inherited spiritual books to the marriage and she is later the subject of his prayer in relation to her pregnancy (Stachniewski 1998: xiii). With a late modern sensibility we would expect these intimate others, and the events concerning them (death, marriage), to be a recorded source of

growth and self-awareness but the seventeenth-century focus and sense of priorities was very different.

Booy makes a similar point in relation to travel narratives; experiences of alien cultures or peoples can be observed, from the texts, to

> heighten the sense of self, sometimes because that self was being defined or redefined in contrast to what was being encountered, sometimes because one was in danger and thrown back on inner resources, sometimes because one was forced to examine one's cultural identity, sometimes because that identity had to be consciously or unconsciously foregrounded as part of a strategy of self-preservation (Booy 2002: 372-73).

> Many travel narratives...are given over to detailed descriptions of places, people or events, and where personal notes are struck, they are not usually accompanied by self-reflection. Often personal responses are absent just where the modern reader might most expect them (Booy 2002: 371).

In a modern work one would expect these inner processes to be spelt out—they would become the dominant narrative in an age where both 'truth' and 'self' are located inwardly.

Booy both helps and distracts the reader in the quest to engage with the self of each of these pieces of 'self-writing'. Each volume has a general introduction, and each selection is given its own introduction, contextualising and, where necessary, explaining the text. In both volumes Booy includes some texts available elsewhere together with others not formerly reprinted in modern times, and both books have an excellent bibliography. Taken together, both collections are useful and illuminating, providing an accessible source of varied texts for learning to read early modern self-writings. The specific introductions are thorough and helpful, and the two general introductions are generally useful if approached with caution. I recommend caution for one very particular reason: there are occasional slippages from careful examination of the idea of 'the self' in early modern times, to unthinking use of late modern concepts and understandings of the self, which are confusing and specifically unhelpful in approaching seventeenth century writings.

For instance, in *Autobiographical Writings*:

> What underpinned [the Quakers'] fortitude was the conviction that, in their conversion to Quakerism, they had embraced a new self, one regenerated by the light of God within (2004: 7).

and

> the Quakers' true self was...the presence of Christ within heart and mind... (2004: 8).

are followed by:

> While the inner self was reborn at conversion...a Quaker's outward identity was in some measure preserved (2004: 11).

This last sentence unhelpfully conflates a modern sense of an 'inner self', unquestioned and unproblematised, with the struggle to understand what the early modern experience of 'self' might have been. Similarly, Booy's assertion that

> [u]nderlying all these motivations for writing about personal experience was perhaps the individual's desire to understand the self and to communicate that self to others' (2004: 20).

betrays typical late modern assumptions about understanding and communicating the self. The early Quaker women were, in their terms, understanding and communicating not the self, but the action of God in their lives. As Booy himself puts it only a page later: 'constructing a self-image was not always their main aim, or, indeed, not their aim at all' (Booy 2004: 21).

Such lapses (and similar examples in *Personal Disclosures*) are unfortunate, particularly if these two books are being used to introduce students to the issues involved in reading early modern texts. However, as a teaching point, these slips can be utilised, as they illustrate the sheer difficulty—even for someone as immersed in these texts as Booy obviously is—of attempting to read early modern writings in their own terms. It is akin to listening to early modern music: even if we hear an impeccable edition, played on early instruments by musicians skilled in the art, we still hear it with ears that have been accustomed to Beethoven, Shostakovich, Stravinsky and all the rest. In reading early modern writings we have to be vigilant at every turn for our late modern assumptions about the nature of the self.

The paradox in the phenomenon of these early modern self-writings, and in our attempts to read them, is spelt out by Kate Hodgkin:

> for the writers themselves, the idea of the self as certain and guaranteed is what must be done away with, rather than what the autobiographical narrative is seeking to constitute. The aim is not...that the past should enable you to understand and explain... Self-examination...[is] aimed at the ultimate annihilation of the self, the self that is a barrier between the soul and God, which must be worked on so as to be dismantled, rather than merely transformed... Sion [the place of conversion, as distinct from Sodom, the place of unregeneration] is a place without memory or narrative, so as to be, implicitly, a place without a self. It is a curious paradox that autobiography surges into popularity in order to describe these absences (Hodgkin 2002).

REFERENCES

Hillman, J., and Ventura, M., *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*, San Francisco: Harper, 1992.

Hodgkin, K. 'Losing the Subject: Discontinuities of Self in Early Modern Life-writing', paper given at the 'Early Modern Lives' conference, London, 27–28 June, 2002,.

Mack, P., *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-century England*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Stachniewski, J., 'Introduction', in Stachniewski, J. (ed.), *John Bunyan, Grace Abounding with other Spiritual Autobiographies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. ix-xliii.

Taylor, C., *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Pam Lunn
Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham, England