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Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation

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Carolyn A. Barros. *Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998. 248 pp. ISBN 0-472-10786-0, \$42.50.

In *Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation*, Carolyn A. Barros presents a workmanlike and ultimately enlightening rhetorical study of the narratives that result when someone tells someone else that "something happened to me." To her credit, Barros is one of a growing number of theorists specializing in nonfictional narrative who no longer are content merely to collapse the traditional boundaries of fact and fiction. For much of the past two decades, studies have tended to attack the premise and historicity of life writing—what Barros calls "deconstruct[ing] autobiography out of existence" (2). These scholars, sometimes insightfully, have focused on the many ways that biographical texts resemble fictional texts in their creation and representation (even their erasure) of the self. Yet Barros, an associate professor of English and director of the honors program at the University of Texas at Arlington, remains fascinated about what accounts for the power of biographical and autobiographical writing, those texts that dare to reach outside their boundaries and make claims on the histories of

actual people. She and other recent critics, therefore, seem to be taking a second look at biography, not to fix any permanent generic boundaries around life writing, but to describe as carefully as possible some of the most interesting ways these texts work.

The key to autobiography for Barros, as the title of her study implies, is transformation. "The inscribed *me* of the narrative must come into some kind of conflict with the culture and its values and laws if there is to be a transformation to narrative—a *something happened* worth telling," asserts Barros (6). During the course of her book, Barros reads Victorian-era autobiographical narratives by John Henry Cardinal Newman, John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, and Margaret Oliphant. Her approach is unapologetically functional and rhetorical; she considers the narrative as a transaction between a speaker and a hearer which aims primarily to influence the hearer. In that rhetorical transaction, which she first outlined in a 1992 essay published in this journal, she wants to explain the "who" of the narrative assertion, which she terms the *persona*; the type of transformation, which she calls its *figura*; and the motive for transformation, which she calls its *dynamis*.

As is true of many rhetorical studies, a fair amount of definition and critical apparatus is necessary to play out Barros' treatise. Perhaps the book's least successful chapter is her rather labored definitions of *persona*, *figura*, and *dynamis* against the backdrop of Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. Her clever analysis of why the book is titled *Sartor Resartus* rather than *Sartor Resartiens* or *Sartor Se Resartiens* provides a first-rate insight into the way this fictive protagonist has both remade himself and been remade in Carlyle's text. But Barros is less convincing as to why we should first examine this fictive text—especially while the reader is negotiating a rather complicated rhetorical framework for autobiography—in a study that elsewhere is unapologetically grounded in what Barros calls the "general understanding of a life: a person is born, things happen—minute by minute or year to year—and then the person dies" (15). If this sense is important, and Barros would seem to argue everywhere that it is, why then begin with a study of a book that cannot demonstrate this assertion? Barros explains that she chooses *Sartor Resartus* because it is the acknowledged classic narrative of transformation for Victorian culture, the period that the balance of her book will examine. But the rhetorical transaction in *Sartor Resartus* is simply too complex for Barros to do it justice here, and its complexity (particularly its fictivity) might distract the reader from her primary aim, which is to understand the nature of narrative transformation in autobiography. This problem, thankfully, is largely overcome by Barros' helpful summaries of the concepts of *persona*, *figura*, and *dynamis* at the ends of several of the chapter's sub-sections.

Once Barros turns to the four texts that make up the heart of her study, her demonstration of the importance of persona, figura, and dynamis to autobiographical transformation becomes much more clear. In the case of John Henry Cardinal Newman, Barros shows how a shift from *was* to *is* lies at the heart of the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman's account of his transformation from Evangelical, Noetic, Tractarian, and Lay Anglican to Roman Catholic. The complexity of that shift stems from the recognition that Newman's persona is two-fold: both the "I" that is transformed from Anglican to Catholic and the "myself" that is constituted as a mature Catholic cardinal reflecting on the transformation. Here is an example of Barros' clear and effective analysis:

Has this rhetorical Newman [the "myself"] ever been anything but Catholic then? The answer is not a simple one. The Newman of the *Apologia* has been constituted to defend what seems to many a radical and traitorous change in Newman's religious opinions. Thus, it is necessary for reader and writer to conceive of "Newman" in at least two ways: first, as changing names or identities so as to mark out each new spiritual revelation and, second, as incorporating into each of the identities some aspect of the Catholic persona that will gradually emerge full-blown in the cardinal. We can have it no other way: both Newman and his readers knew (or know) the outcome and "see" Catholic traits in the Anglican, but a narrative of transformation, rhetorically constituted, requires that readers and writers construct personae that convey the notion of transformation through a set of before and after qualities and characteristics. (68-69)

Barros enlists the theological sense of the term "economy"—the notion that God's secret purpose in history is gradually revealed through the development of belief—to explain the figura, or the manner of Newman's transformation. The cardinal's motive, or dynamis, according to Barros, is Newman's "living intelligence," a trait that also empowers his writing with spiritual, rather than logical, signification.

Once Barros has established her method of operations, her book moves rather predictably, but often helpfully, through the next two chapters. The autobiographies of John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin are introduced, and Barros then offers her analysis of the autobiographical personae that emerge from these texts as well as the manner and motive of the autobiographical transformations. Working within the rhetorical tradition, Barros seems not to be afraid to pose what used to be called an "ideal" reading of each autobiography. That is, she normally makes little effort to play against the text or to qualify

her opinions as either singular or culturally produced. And she makes no effort to hide this critical confidence, explaining early in the book that "reading with suspicion, with a 'terror of totalization,' or with undue anxiety over definitions of language and reading may cause us to ignore functional perspectives and miss exciting complexities." By contrast, she wishes to read autobiography "with an exploratory aim rather than from the mode of suspicion" so as to "avoid some of the dead ends and reductive quagmires that attend suspicion and anxiety" (10).

Unabashedly, Barros declares that her method allows both she and her readers "to make sense of [the] many and varied forms" of autobiography (7), a claim that places her in the region of ideal reading. Her resulting confidence leads her to conclude that John Stuart Mill writes a persona that shifts from utilitarianism to social romanticism, that the figura of Mill's autobiography is his reeducation, and that his motive or dynamis is to color his thought with feelings. Similarly, Charles Darwin's transformation traces his persona from beetle collector to disciplined naturalist. Not surprisingly, Darwin chooses the organic figura of evolution as the type of his transformation, and reveals an autobiographical motive in which he "sees the environment as an active agency in a transformation characterized by interdependency and struggle" (141).

Barros' discussion of Scotland-born Margaret Oliphant, the prolific author of the *Chronicles of Carlingford* novel series and many other novels and histories, is far and away the most developed and subtle of her four central case studies. Here she seems willing to allow her analytical system to breathe, to complicate the rather formal categories she has built in the preceding three chapters. It is Oliphant herself who seems to give Barros that permission, because the critic discovers that Oliphant's lifelong struggle with both professional and everyday demands provides a multilayered and sometimes ironic texture to her writing. Oliphant's "life was full; she lived in the thick of things," Barros writes:

When life is full, it is also full of conflicting expectations, and those conflicting expectations are the essence of Oliphant's conception of life and life narrative. They are at the heart of the conflicts, ambivalences, and ironies that dominate her autobiographical discourse. (149)

Barros here seems willing to contest her own notion that any autobiographical transformation might be contained in rather tidy descriptions of persona, figura, and dynamis. Moreover, she traces the autobiography's publication history in a way that opens it to a specific cultural analysis of the way Victorian womanhood was

constructed by Oliphant's contemporary publishers. Or more specifically, "when the culture's demands on the mother and writer are in conflict," Barros asks rhetorically, "will not the construction of the autobiographical persona involve the untangling of these questions?" (151). As proof, she catalogues the many aspects of Oliphant's persona in a more detailed and subtle way than she demonstrated in previous chapters. Oliphant's refusal "to accept easy explanations" causes a nuanced response toward power. Thus, her autobiographical persona is enmeshed in her conflicting roles of mother and writer. The figura becomes the issue of over-production as the widowed Oliphant cranks out books to meet her family's financial needs. And the dynamis or motive of her autobiographical transformation is the conflicting demands of artistic fervor and economic necessity. "Hers is a persona of amplitude rather than certitude," Barros discovers, "and she constructs her narrative around forms that are appropriate to the ordinary life rather than to a myth of progress" (194).

Barros' brief concluding chapter is far more successful in its summary of the importance of autobiography to Victorian literature than in her rather preliminary musings about some of the contributions that autobiographical writing has made to discourse in the age of Roland Barthes and Maxine Hong Kingston. But her central position remains powerful and is a fitting conclusion to this interesting and often profound study. "An autobiography is life discursive, it stands as the universal *word* for human transformation," she contends. "Autobiography is about transformation, and yet *transformation* is a perverse term that will not itself stand still. Autobiography declares that change itself changes" (209).

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