
The Relational Selves of Mary Russell Mitford and Rebecca Harding Davis: A Transatlantic Tradition of Women's Life Writing

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Abstract

In a discussion of Mary Russell Mitford's and Rebecca Harding Davis's autobiographical writing, I illustrate how both highly acclaimed authoresses create selves in relation to places and people. My argument is that both women participate in a transatlantic tradition of female self-writing that by relating themselves to an "other," allows them to write themselves into collective memory and into the literary community. It will also become apparent that they perceive themselves as part of a transatlantic collective with Davis invoking the European roots of her relational others and Mitford including discussion of American authors. In the end, it will emerge how women authors on both sides of the Atlantic shared notions of life writing and wrote themselves across the ocean.

In *Recollections of a Literary Life, Or, Books, Places, and People* (1852), English writer Mary Russell Mitford (1787–1855) claims that "there is far too much of personal gossip and of local scenepainting" to connect it "in the slightest degree to autobiography." When US Southern writer Rebecca Harding Davis (1831–1910) published her memoirs in 1904, she aligned herself with Mitford calling her work *Bits of Gossip*. Both women, geographically divided by the Atlantic, tell their lives through association with places and well-known public personages (mostly literati).

In "Relational Selves, Relational Lives: Autobiography and the Myth of Autonomy," John Eakin maintains that "all identity is relational" (43). In an exploration of the psychology of life writing, he explains how identity is developed collaboratively with others and that, consequently, autobiographers often turn into auto-ethnographers. While Eakin believes that people tend to create identities in relation to others and that this shows up in their life writing, I argue that the nineteenth-century women writers under discussion consciously chose to present themselves via places and predominantly male contemporaries and predecessors in order to write themselves into a transatlantic patriarchal world.

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