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Victorian Studies, Volume 44, Number 3, Spring 2002, pp. 399-422 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



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## ESSAYS

### **Autobiography in Fragments: The Elusive Life of Edith Simcox**

ROSEMARIE BODENHEIMER

The January 1870 issue of the *North British Review* carried a long, learned historical-theoretical essay entitled “Autobiographies.” Though its confident generalizations and Johnsonian syntax hardly seem the work of a literary novice, it marked the writer’s first substantial appearance in print. The essay proposes a three-stage history of autobiography “corresponding roughly to Comte’s three historic periods”: first, the epic story of a heroic life written with “primitive energy”; then, the realistic narrative in which a man stands as a representative of his age; and finally, the more problematic category of post-Romantic autobiography. The modern autobiographer was, it seemed, trapped in an Arnoldian era of “decaying originality” in which the self and the world could come into no satisfactory relation. He was forced “to chronicle thought instead of action, changes of opinion instead of succeeding experience, or else to represent the influences of imaginary circumstances upon a real mind” (“Autobiographies” 530). The irresolute subjectivity of the third phase is clearly rendered as a matter for dismay.<sup>1</sup>

The writer of this apparently magisterial essay was a twenty-five-year-old woman called Edith Jemima Simcox. Born in 1844, she was the youngest of three children and the only girl in an upper-middle-class London family. Her brothers were educated at Oxford; both became Fellows of Queen’s College. The elder, Augustus, developed a reputation as a brilliant classical scholar as well as an eccentric; the younger, William, took orders and served as rector of a College living at Weyhill (McKenzie 1-3). Edith herself belonged to a generation whose daughters, perhaps even younger sisters, could go to women’s colleges; she was writing her review of autobiographies just at the time Girton opened its doors. University would have been a natural step for this

philosophically inclined young woman had she been born a few years later than she was. Instead, she stayed home, kept house for her widowed mother and brothers, read extensively, learned several languages, sprinkled her work with Latin and Greek epigraphs, and began her public life writing as a man and working as a radical socialist reformer. The idealization of ancient men of action in “Autobiographies” marks not only a common trope of decadence or “decline” in mid-Victorian letters, but also a genuine personal dilemma: what was this ambitious young woman to do? What would an adequate life plot look like? She revered action, eschewed marriage, and repeatedly described herself as “half a man” (*Autobiography of a Shirtmaker* [AS] 4), but she was in fact a small, shy, intellectual, self-conscious spinster. There is more than a little self-projection in her description of modern autobiographers who could find no satisfactory connection between the self and the external world. And there is more than a little repressed desire for autobiography in the sentence which ends the essay with an abrupt rejection of “the crowd of inferior littérateurs who, wishing to write a book, take the first worthless subject that comes to hand” (“Autobiographies” 561).

Edith Simcox was all too prone to describe herself as a “worthless subject,” but she was also determined to discover forms of writing that would allow her to express the experience of a woman who both believed and resisted most of the standard autobiographical plots available to a Victorian woman. She is best known as the young woman who loved George Eliot, and who kept a secret journal in which she poured out—in a fashion embarrassing to many of its readers—the pain and passion of her unrequited love.<sup>2</sup> *Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*, as she called the journal, is better read as a struggle with George Eliot, or at least with those normative ideals that George Eliot had fashioned into the overt ethical philosophy of her novels and into the public persona of her final decade. It is my purpose here to treat the journal as a record of that struggle, and as an interrogation of the life plots that would be culturally available to an ambitious young mid-century woman.<sup>3</sup> As her relationship with George Eliot was coming to an end, Simcox published *Episodes in the Lives of Men, Women, and Lovers* (1882), in which she experimented with a series of semi-autobiographical sketches that treated the problems of love, marriage, and vocation in first-person essays told for the most part by male narrators. Read together with *Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*, these sketches clarify Simcox’s ambivalence

about the plots available to her, and continue in a public forum the arguments she mounted against the George Eliot she had constructed as an inner interlocutor.<sup>4</sup>

Simcox came of age in what we might call the decade of the redundant woman. W. R. Greg published his controversial *National Review* article, "Why Are Women Redundant?" in April 1862; he was answered by any number of feminist reformers, beginning with Frances Power Cobbe's "What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?" (*Fraser's Magazine*, November 1862). It was not that the problem was new: women had struggled throughout the century with the financial dependence of both married and unmarried conditions, and with the threats to female ambition posed by Victorian domestic ideology. But the debate about marriage versus female education and work had now become a staple of public discourse. Popular novels of the 1860s increasingly featured characters Dorice Elliott has called "philanthropic heroines," whose ambitions are tamed, disciplined, and met by work in the service of the poor (Elliott, ch. 6). For a theoretically minded woman like Simcox the quickened public debate about acceptable life plots for women was an acutely personal matter—all the more, perhaps, because her family was well enough off so that she was not forced to work in order to support herself and her mother. Even had she wanted to, she could not have represented herself—like another Margaret Oliphant—as a woman whose professional life was undertaken for the sake of supporting her family.<sup>5</sup> In her public life, she followed the model of activist reforming women who did not marry, some of whom—like Frances Power Cobbe—lived in "romantic friendships" with other women. Yet her large intellectual ambition was not satisfied with an expanded version of womanly service; she thought she had a man's mind, and she cherished hopes of becoming an important writer.

Her early essay "Autobiographies" is a map of that ambition: although it never achieves coherence, it addresses practically every question that has exercised theorists of autobiography to this day. It takes up motives for writing, sincerity, deception, and self-deception; it also attempts to categorize and delimit the genre, to fix terms for judgement, and to lay out a historical sequence that ranges from the classical period to the nineteenth century. It is hardly surprising that the essay fails to find stable ideas about any of these topics; to read it is to watch a writer who often takes back with one hand what "he" gives with the other. For it is a decidedly male performance. Simcox used the gender-

neutral pseudonym “H. Lawrenny” in her early journalism, but in her tone and diction she imitated an Oxford don. The only female autobiographer whose name appears in the essay is George Sand, who is noticed only for having written pages about her grandmother. Through all of the young academic posturing one can sense the conflict-ridden writer, whose wish to admire “the true history of a real mind” (“Autobiographies” 560) struggles against her will to disapprove of self-conscious subjectivity.

Ten years after the publication of “Autobiographies,” Simcox was well launched on her own secret *Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*, and struggling to discover some dramatic unity in her own story. “I contend,” she muses in the journal, “that the life which is spent in the service of ideas, upon a rational plan, though it gives no visible unity to the individual career,—such a life is no more scrappy and patchy than those to which births, marriages and deaths give a dramatic air of personal unity of action” (AS 99). Haunted by the conventional story of a woman’s family life, she found it necessary to measure her own inclinations against that standard. Yet the life of the mind was dangerous because of its invisibility: after all, could something that she had earlier disparaged as representing “the influences of imaginary circumstances upon a real mind” be a “life” at all? Veering from one ideal to another, Simcox’s personal writing dramatizes the lived struggle of her quest for a story, affording us a view of a woman—perhaps even a generation of mid-century women—for whom the George Eliot model of sympathetic womanhood was both fatally compelling and deeply flawed.

Simcox’s conflict between the life of action and the life of reflection intersected uneasily with her divided gender identifications. Writing in 1887, she attempted to sort these out: “When a small child (under 12) I remember being rebuked for a not infrequent remark that I ‘liked boys best’ and it was a mild domestic joke to enquire after the ‘three’ boys. My brothers, it may be observed were rather imperfectly boyish and I was certainly in things physical more of a ‘muff’ than many girls now a days who are not called tomboys.” Her envy of the greater freedoms of the late-Victorian girl suggests that she had been made to suffer for her “want of sympathy for girls’ games and talk” (AS 233); even this brief passage attempts to mitigate the boyish qualities for which she was rebuked. But the urgency of her desire not only to play with boys but to be one comes with a special charge. “When I was eight or nine my dreams were of some discovery that should prove me to be

a boy and let me lead forlorn hopes,” she confessed in 1882 (AS 185). Forlorn hopes to be what was impossible—a man, a George Eliot—could drain her actual achievements of significance in her own eyes. Her difficulty was compounded by the way her achievements were gendered: it seems clear that she linked the reflective life with men, while her life of public action—even when she found herself the lone woman among delegations of men—was lived under the sign of the feminine.

Simcox’s identification with her “imperfectly boyish” older brothers took the form of intellectual ambition, which seems to have been nurtured by Augustus. He probably helped her to become a regular reviewer for the newly formed, Oxford-dominated journal *Academy* in 1869 (McKenzie 79); he also read and critiqued her work and supported her political activity. Over the course of her life Simcox published three books, which suggest the range of her interests and the scope of her ambitions. *Natural Law: An Essay in Ethics* (1877), written under the spell of George Eliot and dedicated to her, attempts to find the basis for morality in the structure of human nature (McKenzie 58). Her philosophical bent emerges here; as she was later to say of her intellectual preferences, “I don’t really enjoy anything except generalizations out of my own head” (AS 237). The quasi-autobiographical *Episodes in the Lives of Men, Women, and Lovers* followed in 1882. Not long after the publication of *Natural Law*, Simcox’s interest in socialist theory led her to plan a massive research work on the history of property in the ancient world, covering Assyria, Egypt, China, and Babylon. After many years and many interruptions, *Primitive Civilizations, or Outline of the History of Ownership in Archaic Communities* appeared in 1894.

If Simcox’s intellectual life was encouraged by her brother, her life of action was primarily associated with women. In 1875, she and her friend Mary Hamilton founded a women’s cooperative shirtmaking enterprise, Hamilton and Company, established to employ women in decent working conditions. Edith managed the day-to-day work of the business for nine years, and participated in the national Cooperative movement. She worked with Emma Smith Paterson to promote trade unionization for both women and men, gathering data, organizing meetings, and negotiating strikes. Simcox and Paterson were the first women delegates to the Trade Union Congress, to which Edith returned many times as delegate and speaker. She was active in the New International movement, working to revive the International Working

Men's Association after its British dissolution in 1876, and often serving as translator between delegations. In 1879, she was elected as a representative of Westminster to the London School Board, and spent many days and hours visiting schools, writing reports, and advocating for changes in educational policy. It is clear that, despite her personal diffidence, she had no trouble working with men, women, and children of all classes, or with making impromptu speeches before large audiences, in English or French. She regularly wrote reviews and articles from a feminist point of view, arguing for the equal capacities of men and women, advocating work opportunities for women, and promoting trade unionism and cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

Simcox met George Eliot in December of 1872, while she was working on a review of *Middlemarch* for the *Academy*. By this time, Simcox—aged twenty-eight—was already quite an eloquent writer whose power of generalization commanded authority. *Middlemarch* set “a fresh standard for the guidance and imitation of futurity,” she wrote in the lead article of the issue. It “marks an epoch in the history of fiction in so far as its incidents are taken from the inner life, as the action is developed by the direct influence of mind on mind and character on character, as the material circumstances of the outer world are made subordinate and accessory to the artistic presentation of a definite passage of mental experience” (*Academy* 1). From her point of view, George Eliot had created a model of the mind as a place of action that made an attractive synthesis of her own conflict. The novelist had also spoken directly to the younger woman's crisis of ambition, though not, perhaps, precisely in the way she had intended: “*Middlemarch* is the story of two rather sad fatalities, of two lives which, starting with more than ordinary promise, had to rest content with very ordinary achievement, and could not derive unmixed consolation from the knowledge, which was the chief prize of their struggles, that failure is never altogether undeserved” (*Academy* 2). The final twist—the novel tells not only the story of failed promise but the story of failure deserved—poignantly illustrates the traps into which Edith's rather tortured moral imagination could readily fall.

If *Middlemarch* allowed Simcox to think of the mind as a place of action, George Eliot herself would have offered a compelling transcendence of gender categories: she was a successfully ambitious woman with the mind and the name of a man, an unmarried woman who gave and received intimate domestic love. Yet as Simcox became

one of the group of younger idolators who formed George Eliot's substitute family in the 1870s, she found herself entrapped by the exigencies of her own desire. She went to George Eliot as a great writer who had led an unconventional woman's life, and found herself battling instead with an icon who projected—among other things—Victorian norms of womanly sympathy, renunciation, and heterosexual marriage. The “inexhaustible gospel of Renunciation,” as Simcox later called it (AS114), had already queered her own young ambition, yet the successful writer she chose to love was not only sexually inaccessible, but also the preeminent preacher of that very gospel.

*Autobiography of a Shirtmaker* was begun because Simcox had no other place to express and discipline the excess of her feeling for George Eliot. Although she kept a regular daily journal, she did not start the secret locked journal until May 1876, the year her brother William was married and her mother came to live permanently with her.<sup>7</sup> The new journal may have been inspired by the receipt of a “stern letter” from George Eliot in March 1876 (McKenzie 88). Although Simcox does not describe its contents, it seems possible that George Eliot had chastised her for the extravagance of her love notes, or rejected her advances in some other way. The sole entry for 1876 quotes three lines from the opening of Robert Browning's “The Last Ride Together” (1855), marking the failure of both love and life (AS 3).

The journal writing proper did not begin until October 1877, at another moment of internal crisis. Simcox was waiting in despair for George Eliot and George Henry Lewes to return to London from their country house, hoping to hear some response to her *Natural Law*, which she had dedicated to George Eliot “with idolatrous love” and presented to her the previous June (Haight, *Letters* 9: 302n). During her first visit with the returned pair, Simcox records, the book was not mentioned at all and she was devastated; she went home wondering whether she should withdraw it from circulation. What *had* they talked about? Edith's failure to appreciate men. A week later, George Eliot finally offered some moderate praise — “there was nothing which jarred on her in reading the book” (AS 7). It would seem that their ongoing dialogue had concerned Edith's inclination to satire and asperity, tendencies that George Eliot had worked hard to soften in her own writing. “She will love me well enough,” Simcox tells herself, “when she finds that—when I have got what I wanted I know how to be therewith content” (AS 10). Teaching herself to live in an economy of diminished returns was



to be the endless, Sisyphean task of the journal during the next ten or eleven years. Titling it, she reduced herself to the most domestic of her public identities, the one in which she literally served the Eliot-Lewes circle by providing them with their shirts.

Read page by page, the earliest section of the journal can be painfully repetitious: over and over Simcox tries, fails, and tries again to force herself into a George Eliot plot, in which the heroine is granted love only if she relinquishes desire. When she has filled herself with the immediate experience of being with George Eliot, Simcox professes that she has transcended desire, announcing to herself “the physical absence of conscious unsatisfied craving” (AS 10). Or she proclaims that she has, like a George Eliot heroine, undergone an inward “revolution [. . .] it is deliverance—to feel that one asks nothing—only to feel tenderly towards all men, whether they accept the affection or not” (AS 42). Such renunciations of desire are inevitably followed by collapses, as in October 1878, when she has waited through the summer for her idol’s return: “I am hungry! Oh the howl that is in my mind there are no words to spell, but it echoes wolfishly” (AS 45). Caught between George Eliot’s overt language of spiritual renunciation and the more contemporary recognition that women’s desires would fester without an outlet, Simcox moved, at times helplessly, between them.

The language of desire also shaped Simcox’s struggle to define her attitude toward her life as a socialist activist. While she tries to use the journal to tame the love-desire that overwhelms her, she simultaneously berates herself for the failure of connection between her desire and her work. Reprimanding herself for idleness, she feels she has wasted her life, “because it is a sentence of death for myself, that no particular good thing will be done by anyone who has not a personal selfish desire prompting him to do just that” (AS 17). She had developed an interpretation of George Eliot’s philosophy of sympathy in which doing good for others was only valid if it sprang from spontaneous “selfish” desire. On 28 November 1878, Simcox summed up her dilemma in a retrospective entry. She had learned to endure without pleasure, but this had not taught her what to do with her life, and she required action. From George Eliot’s criticism of *Natural Law* she had deduced that “virtuous action was the natural fruit of untaught, involuntary happiness, and that no good thing came from any other root” (AS 51). Like Simcox’s account of *Middlemarch*, this conclusion requires scrutiny: it may include an interpretive twist on whatever it was George

Eliot did say. Simcox often wrote of her public work as a willed, dutiful response to the state of the world; at one low point she refers to the shirtmaking cooperative as “a kind of suicide” (AS 28). It is not difficult to imagine such complaints evoking George Eliot’s strong ambivalence about women’s public work, or provoking advice about the private sources of womanly influence. Yet it was Simcox, I would guess, who turns such gestures into absolute critiques, uses them to invalidate her own achievement, and then goes on to protest that only bad luck prevented her from having the “untaught happiness” that would render her social actions naturally virtuous.

This problem of desire and virtue remained with Simcox as the most difficult puzzle to which George Eliot subjected her. When she came to write a public memorial after the novelist’s death, she touched on its complexities, with a suggestion that her idol had shown a certain impatience with her inability to care wholeheartedly for what she did. In George Eliot, she wrote,

passions of volcanic strength were harnessed in the service of those nearest her, and so inspired by the permanent instinct of devotion to her kind, that it seemed as if it were by their own choice they spent themselves only where their force was welcome. Her very being was a protest against the opposing and yet cognate heresies that half the normal human passions must be strangled in the quest of virtue, and that the attainment of virtue is a dull and undesirable end, seeing it implies the sacrifice of most that makes life interesting. (“George Eliot” 786)

The “heresies,” as Simcox calls them, are her own: it is she whose passions are strangled, who rebels against the sacrifices she makes. Her exaggerated notion that George Eliot had perfectly integrated “passions of volcanic strength” with service to others suggests the height of the barriers Simcox established to her own sense of ease. Yet she continued to believe that George Eliot undermined her sense of virtue by insisting that it spring from an inward desire that Simcox could not feel—in part, no doubt, because she had to work so hard to trample on her desire for George Eliot herself.

In the early section of *Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*, it is possible to discern the outlines of the parental, therapeutic, erotic, and intellectual sides of Simcox’s relation with the Lewes couple. Because Simcox recorded their dialogues almost verbatim, we can glimpse the intellectual respect, the humor, and the kind therapeutic attention offered by the novelist. The more disciplinary aspect comes through as well:

George Eliot chides Simcox about her supercilious manner and her lack of sympathy for men, and touts the value of marriage, while Edith privately reprimands herself for “rebellion” against this maternal treatment, and vows to submit. Against the grain, she follows George Eliot’s advice to dissociate herself from public atheists like Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh and then regrets the lost opportunity to participate with them in the Internationalist effort (*AS* 14–16). While the erstwhile iconoclast George Eliot was putting brakes on Simcox’s fierce sexual, political, and religious iconoclasm, George Henry Lewes was whetting her desire by encouraging a kind of cheerful competition in heaping extravagant love-praises on “the Madonna.”

This tangled situation could not have been easy for any of its participants, and there was nothing ideal about its course. It is difficult to tell whether the Lewes couple appreciated the depth of Edith’s pain and turmoil, although it is clear that they sometimes attempted to defuse it with what they hoped was affectionate humor. Their standing joke that Edith’s jealousy of rival worshiper John Cross might lead her to poison his shirts is the well-known example. Simcox also records, “She said it was a pity my letters could not be kept some 5 centuries to show a more sober posterity what hyperbole had once been possible. I asked if she took so gloomy a view of the future as to think 5 centuries hence there would be no one as adorable as herself:—of that, said Lewes, you may be sure” (*AS* 25). Like several of Simcox’s recorded dialogues, this little drama suggests the level of edginess among the three participants. George Eliot tries to distance Edith’s desire by projecting it five centuries into the literary future (she also tried going the other direction, calling the letters productions of “the newest Helöise” [*AS* 39]). Edith catches the rejection and fights back with love-talk that implicitly accuses George Eliot of grandiose egotism. And Lewes tries to take the sting out by turning it into the ultimate compliment.

When George Henry Lewes died in November 1878, the dramatic shift in Simcox’s response suggests that Lewes, as father and husband, was an essential part of the original attraction. “I feel as if I would give my mother’s life for his!” Simcox exclaimed in a burst of wishful daughterly fantasy as Lewes lay dying (*AS* 50). Haunting the Priory for news during the four months after Lewes’s death, Simcox drowned her desire in a new identification: she would be the only person to share imaginatively in the full depth of George Eliot’s solitary mourning. If this was at the same time a way to mourn by proxy for her

own father, the clue lies only in her unbroken silence about that father's existence.<sup>8</sup> She planted ivy on Lewes's gravesite and tended it for years, until it reached a profusion that pleased her. "All the glad lover-like indiscretion—that was more welcome to him than to her, that is over," she promises herself, "I will fill all these years of life with love—of their lost blessedness" (AS 53).

In a Brontëan fantasy, her lover's desire is projected upon the dead Lewes, and buried with him. "I sat on the step of a large stone grave and looked down on the flat slab—where all my desires lie buried," she writes after one of her many solitary visits to the grave (AS 90). The removal of Lewes's mediation of her sexual love in that triangular structure of desire had, perhaps, rendered the desire too threatening for direct contemplation. Instead, she merged her own hopeless love with George Eliot's hopeless mourning for Lewes. Arguing against the worries of other friends and relatives, she defended George Eliot's decision to see no one, as if that solitude would strengthen the (imagined) bond of solitary suffering between them. Underlying it all, however, was an irrepressible hope that when the bereft author returned to normal life, it would be Edith—and not the rival, John Cross—who would best serve her.

This mood was to last through another round of winter visits and another period of summer absence before Edith heard that George Eliot had married John Cross and fled to Italy in May 1880. Even before that reality struck, however, Simcox's recorded dialogues with her beloved began to shift in tenor. Left alone by Lewes, George Eliot was seeking a receptacle for her own history, and she began to tell Edith stories of her experience, being careful to emphasize her preference for men over women. At the same time, Edith began to renew her independent sense of action. She began in earnest the research for her history of property. Asked to run for election to the London School Board, she felt she had no choice but to say no until she had heard whether her idol would approve of such a step. A few weeks later, no advice forthcoming, she was asked to reconsider. This time she accepted Augustus's encouragement to stand for election, and won. Suddenly, on Christmas 1879, she began to understand what had happened: "I think now it was the strength not the weakness of my character that made it impossible for me to accept her ideal rather than my own. It is curious how bit by bit I find myself as it were possessing just the place or character I had dimly coveted long ago" (AS 107). Her own

ideal of unmarried political activism had been temporarily lost in collision with George Eliot's emphasis on heterosexual marriage and the inner life. Simcox had often wished she had met George Eliot earlier in her life; now she acknowledges "had I loved her at 20 and been referred by her to other possibilities of love—it is barely conceivable that I might have accomplished an unhappy marriage" (AS 113). As she rereads *Daniel Deronda* (1876) she muses on the width of the sexual and personal distance between herself and George Eliot: "It is strange that with all the intensity of my love for her, I never cease to feel as if the physical part of our conscious nature was more than remote—opposite." She also recognizes, through the mediation of the novel, the "solitude of eminence" that divides George Eliot from shared and reciprocal confidences, and puts the practice of sympathy into a questionable light (AS 102).

The shock of the Cross marriage shook these insights into anger. During the six months between the marriage and George Eliot's death, Edith maintained her professions of love but braided them together with cogent analyses of what had gone wrong with her desire: "It was more than I could bear that while I was trying to do without what I wanted most, she should be always ready to congratulate me on getting what I didn't want or to scold me for not wanting something else—that I could get as little as what I wanted" (AS 124). Her rage centered on George Eliot's advocacy of marriage: "I am not proud she knows, but it is rather humiliating to me to be told again and again that the association called up by my name is always that of a woman who might find a husband if she would take a little more pains with her dress and drawing room conversation—and this in the mind of some one that I love." As she writes on, she turns to a direct accusation: "Without your encouragement, I should hardly think so meanly of myself as to say my life was worthless unless I could achieve that triumph" (AS 125). She also finds ways to blame George Eliot's idea of sympathy for the idleness she chastises in herself. "Shall I ever tell her that in some ways she has done me harm?" she asks. "My native idleness wrests to its own use her praise of sympathy if all good is to be done by the help thereof—failing the sympathy is one to blame for doing nothing?" (AS 127). A month later, having received a cheering letter, she answers herself with a twist of the knife that cuts both ways: "She is very dear—I must not tell her how much she has herself done to kill the ambitions to which she now appeals" (AS 130).

In the event, she told nothing. Simcox was only to see George Eliot once more, on her deathbed in December 1880. The loss took her back to a strongly idealizing position, but she retained some of the perspective her anger had illuminated. Her “lasting grief,” she recorded in February 1881, was that “[s]he would have had me be something different, lead some other life—and I never knew *what* she would have me do or *be* except the impossible which she owned was not perhaps quite always the one thing needful” (AS 151). It is not clear whether it was George Eliot or Simcox herself who insisted that she be someone different from what she was. Even as Simcox constructs her as an advocate of the “impossible,” she admits that George Eliot did not actually see marriage as the only solution. The situation itself was impossible; that was, perhaps, its point. While George Eliot tried to turn the ferocity of Edith’s love away from herself and into other, more conventional channels, Edith clung for her own reasons to the drama of prohibited desire and hopelessly idealizing love.

Those reasons may be illuminated, though not fully explained, by Simcox’s construction of both real and fictional situations that mirrored her relationship with George Eliot. The journal makes it clear that she lived and worked in a community of women who loved women, and that she herself was loved and desired by one Miss Williams.<sup>9</sup> Simcox saw in Miss Williams not a real potential lover but “a replica of my own foolishness” (AS 158). When Williams declared her feeling, and hoped for a return, “I thought of my like love and urged upon her that *I* did not deserve such love as I had given *to Her*, it pained me like a blasphemy” (AS 159). Williams was presumably not offering quite so exalted an adoration, but Simcox could not risk thinking of her except as a chastising mirror of herself: “Poor Miss Williams haunts me like an exaggeration of every foolishness with which I ever teased or wearied Her. I hope I am not unreasonable in thinking she is more unreasonable and *exigante* than I ever was; it is any way a fit judgment that I should feel all the helplessness I can ever have made Her feel” (AS 179). Experiencing the other side of the dilemma of unrequited love, Edith recognizes and sympathizes with George Eliot’s inability to help. But when she sent Williams away for good two months later, she touched on her own discomfort with the reality of physical sexuality: “Poor Miss Williams is not to be helped—I do not know that it is my fault, when physical sanity is wanting, one cannot count on establishing a fundamentally wholesome relation, and it was not wholesome as we were” (AS

182). Simcox was capable of seeing her own love for George Eliot both as a “wholesome natural reasonable passion” (AS 114) and as an emotion that contained elements of the “abnormal” (AS 141). Although she is forthright in recording the bodily frustration of thwarted desire, her banishment of Miss Williams suggests that she feared lesbian love as insanity or abnormality. Her solution to the dilemma of prohibited desire was to dwell in an idealizing love that left her safely, if depressively, autonomous.

It is noteworthy that the opportunity to play George Eliot’s role in relation to Miss Williams marks the beginning of a significant cooling in Simcox’s preoccupation with memories of George Eliot. The cooling may also be explained by the publication of *Episodes in the Lives of Men, Women, and Lovers* in the same spring of 1882. In this series of eleven autobiographical fictions—all but two recounted by male narrators—Simcox addressed the issues of her life with an imaginative understanding and a talent for descriptive narrative unmatched by anything in her journal.<sup>10</sup> Using a form that may have been inspired by George Eliot’s *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), she created an impressive array of voices that allowed her for the first time to capture her conflicts in a series of artistic displays.<sup>11</sup> Although she worried as she wrote the early sections that George Eliot might see in it “too plain a confession to her” (AS 124), she was quick to identify the sketches as autobiographical once they were published. “There is no imagination here,” she wrote in response to a reviewer who found *Episodes* full of imaginative power: “Every scrap of insight or feeling is taken direct from my own experience.” The effect of imagination was, she thought, produced by “a sense of life’s analogies, so that one can confess one’s own hidden feeling undisguised in a new framework which disguises our part in it” (AS 185). Although Simcox had had the idea for *Episodes* by March 1880, the large part was written during the summer and fall of that year, after she had received the news of George Eliot’s marriage and understood that her relationship had no significant future. Five of the sketches—the ones with apparently happy endings—were published in *Fraser’s* magazine during the summer and fall months of 1881. This success gave Simcox the courage to publish along with them the more searing stories of failed desire that make this volume especially compelling.

The three categories of Simcox’s title—men, women, and lovers—bear witness to her lifelong belief in a middle or mixed gender category to which she belonged. It is also a quite accurate title. Each

autobiographical sketch is told by a different character; most are men, two are women, some are lovers, some are failed lovers, and some are distressed by difficulties of ambition and vocation rather than those of love. The fiction of the writing situation is established in the introductory piece, "In Memoriam," which eulogizes "the master of the island," an idealized landowner on a remote island who brings peace and community to his neighbors, institutes socialist reforms, and invites guests for month-long stays. The unmarried master, who combines George Eliot's wisdom with the power to implement Simcox's social ideals, also presides over the production of his guests' autobiographies. Once they have become familiar with the island, he invites them to write privately in a blank book "some episode of real experience—the description of a scene, a moment, a feeling, a reflection, something that should be the more entirely their own because of the remoteness of such veiled confessions from the intercourse of ordinary life" (*Episodes* 15). The fragmentary nature of this assignment allows Simcox to concentrate on the moments of tension, waiting, suspense, and inaction that were so central to her inward experience of loving.

The sketches themselves fall into various groupings. The ones that imagine an ultimately successful love are generally set in the most literary way, as Italian pastorals. The ones that struggle most honestly with unresolved feeling are often set on cliffs overlooking the Atlantic, where the narrators hang precariously between land and sea, life and death, in their despairing isolation. I will concentrate first on two stories, one apparently unhappy, one apparently happy, which dramatize Simcox's ongoing battle with George Eliot on the subject of marriage. In these sketches, as in many of the ones I do not discuss, Simcox imagines situations in which communication fails or goes astray, or in which a character finds it impossible to articulate a secret block to the realization of his or her desire.

The most vertiginously placed of the cliff-dwellers is Hester, who narrates the story of a failed approach to marriage in "Looking in the Glass."<sup>12</sup> Hester likes to hang out on "the Slab [. . .] a sheer reach of unbroken rock, rising some eighty feet from an inaccessible shingle beach." Simcox's ambiguous sexuality seems to be inscribed in this rock: "The strata have been half inverted and then stayed, so that the action of rain and land streams cleaves the grain of the rock in an almost vertical line" (*Episodes* 169). Sunsets at the Slab are not romantic: "the glorious blood of gods, the awful spiritual life, curdles and pales;



black cinders and ashy emptiness mock the sight, and a chill of disappointment and self-contempt ends the diurnal tragedy" (*Episodes* 171).

The story concerns "a mistake that stopped so long to look in the glass that it never got itself fairly made" (*Episodes* 169). It is not immediately clear whether the mistake is a desire for suicide or a desire for heterosexual marriage; the two become conflated in the language of the sketch. Hester scorns "the wooing of the great god Pan" with an acerbic vision that dissects the Keatsian romanticism apparent in earlier sketches: "Love is loneliness; the self expands to cherish all it can embrace, and, reflected upon its adopted mirror, it expands and ascends till it becomes too subtle for a medium, and then it is reabsorbed into the selfish, soulless beloved" (*Episodes* 174). Like many of Simcox's sentences, this one ends with a self-annihilating turn. She begins with the image of love as a one-way self-projection: "Reflected upon its adopted mirror," the self "expands and ascends." Lonely enough, we might think, to imagine a universe in which the self can only be reflected upon a delusory mirror, but Simcox does not stop there, for the self so projected never returns to its owner. Instead it is sucked away from her, "reabsorbed" into the now-porous mirror, newly personified and resented as a "selfish, soulless beloved." This deconstruction of romantic sublimity reappears later in the piece in a more specifically human context: "That is why we deify courtship," Hester muses, "where love is not yet shut out from the possibility of return by the acceptance which starves or stifles it" (*Episodes* 182).

Like the lure of love, the lure of suicide is demolished by this decidedly unromantic narrator: "I am sane enough to know that pebbles are hard, and a corpse devoured by crabs as unpicturesque as the public houses where coroners' juries sit, so I forbear to throw myself headlong" (*Episodes* 174). The case of marriage is more complex. When Hester is courted by a man with "a knack for turning up at all my favorite haunts" (*Episodes* 172-73), it is difficult to tell exactly what goes wrong, except that neither party can feel enough desire to risk a commitment. Nonetheless, Hester is powerfully attracted by the possibility of marriage, and the veering, often bitter tones of her voice suggest how clearly Simcox could see and dramatize her own defensive distrust. "Herbert and I might have loved each other more passionately than three-fourths of the couples joined in holy matrimony; but there was no faith in our love, so pride was stronger than it," Hester muses. "He might have taught me to love him, I might have led him to wish to

teach; instead, we both felt like moths of one mind in view of a brilliant candle" (*Episodes* 175). Of all the sketches, "Looking in the Glass" comes closest to revealing the psychological underpinnings of Simcox's need to dwell in the idealizations of her love for George Eliot, and of "the most faithful perfect love" she imagined between George Eliot and George Henry Lewes (Simcox, "George Eliot" 783).

The following sketch, "Love and Friendship," seems to mend the gaps of "Looking in the Glass" by imagining a similarly reluctant pair of young lovers who are guided toward marriage by an ideal parental couple. The suicidal image of moths hovering about the flame of love is revised, though the lovers do not escape without scorching: the turning point of the courtship comes (incredibly enough) when "a piece of flaming wood [. . .] leapt, all glowing, into Elma's lap" and the lover takes the burning fragments in his hand (*Episodes* 214). The real glow of the tale is not for the lovers, though; it shines in the narrator's lovingly sexualized description of the older woman/mother-confessor, and in two interpolated tales told around the fireside. In one, a stranger loves and serves a lady for forty-nine years, risking all but always "missing her will" (*Episodes* 197). He is finally rewarded by being allowed to serve as pallbearer at her funeral, after which he hardens into a stone statue by the side of her bier. The other, a fairy tale set in Patagonia, involves a giant whose heart has been stolen from his body by a wicked sorceress who threatens to destroy it. Through such allegories, the young peoples' courtship is prodded toward its obviously dangerous and fiery consummation.

Both "Looking in the Glass" and "Love and Friendship" are devoted to imagining love and marriage as either impossible or fantastic. Another aspect of Simcox's ongoing argument with George Eliot, and with herself, is taken up in "Eclipse," which treats the problem of matching desire and vocation. The piece attacks George Eliot through the figure of Anson, the narrator Egerton's friend and Oxford classmate. Anson's failure to understand Egerton's problem in choosing a career corresponds with an eclipse of the sun, which loses "its dignity as well as its power" and contributes to the narrator's "chill of discouragement" (*Episodes* 224, 225). Like George Eliot (at least in Simcox's version of her), Anson insists that "the only sane and natural state was one of keen personal desire, and appetite for that particular good too real to be argued out of existence" (*Episodes* 226). He further deepens the narrator's sense of being misunderstood by recommending that he marry. Simcox spends most of the sketch arguing with George Eliot in

philosophical terms against the idea that “every one can have a selfish liking for the best actually in their reach” (*Episodes* 231), much as she argues in some sections of her journal. Egerton is particularly enraged when Anson sees him speaking at a working men’s meeting, and assumes that he has found the solution to his vocational crisis. Both the well-meaning mentor and the rebellious mentee are rewarded by early deaths.

“Eclipse” highlights a persistent narrative pattern in *Episodes*; the story lies in a failure to make a coherent story of a life. The same might be said of all the honorable failures who populate the book. Even the sketches that end with a marriage fail to imagine the course that leads to it; the “happy endings” occur in brief framing moments that place an earlier experience in a retrospective framework. A “selfish liking for the best actually in their reach” eludes these characters, unless they are blessed from without by a happy and improbable accident. Whether the problem is erotic or vocational, it is haunted by an unexplained history of truncated or arrested action.

Like *Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*, the sketches also show us a mind caught betwixt and between. Simcox could neither accept George Eliot’s positions nor give them up. She could see through the ideology of spontaneous goodness, but not firmly enough to shake it off. She could apparently imagine neither loving a man nor living as a lesbian. Her relation with George Eliot might represent the generational difference between two ambitious, talented, self-doubting Victorian women, yet the difference was complicated by Simcox’s need for an alternative mother figure, one who was capable of understanding the life of the mind. In that role, George Eliot gave Simcox a great deal. She served as the central erotic figure in Simcox’s adult life. She acted as the primary audience for a developing career, inspiring writing in many different genres. And she led Simcox to confront and resist the full ideological power in the Victorian story of heterosexual love and sympathy.

After the publication of *Episodes*, it was to be another four years before references to “Her” disappeared entirely from *Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*. By that time, Simcox had declared an end to suffering by returning to her original preference for the “objective,” active self. “All that is written in this book is part of me,” she wrote in May 1886, “but the objective ego looks and is from most points of view very much the same whether one’s private soliloquies tell of uncontrollable agony or effortless calm” (AS 229). By December 1890, the whole episode is made to appear as the experience of an earlier being: “Have just

opened on a rather pathetic entry of nearly 10 years ago. When that sort of pain has become entirely a thing of the past, there is nothing painful in the memory of it, I suppose, because one's natural sympathy is with the self that remembers—now—not the self that suffered then" (AS 250). Comparing her own journalizing to that of Carlyle, she reiterated her sense of objectivity in contrast to Carlyle's long life of private "groans" (AS 229). She had shifted her identification, from the suffering protagonist to the retrospective narrator of autobiography.

In fact, she was now intent on telling her life as a story of emergence from melancholia. At the age of forty, she attempted to distance herself from desire by assigning it to the young, "whose troubles have come and not yet gone [. . .] It seems to me that it must be better for the young bears to get their honey combs (chancing the bees) instead of sucking their own paws till they have learnt to put up with a den and rations in the menagerie of a civilized world" (AS 226). The sexual sadness in the image of young bears sucking their own paws belies her claim to have lost her appetite for sweets. In metaphor, at least, Simcox knew that her embrace of "objectivity" covered a real loss. Her acceptance of aging as a release from desire is shadowed by the growing number of entries about ill health, including severe psoriasis and asthma, which were to contribute to her death at fifty-seven.

She did not, however, end the "subjective" part of her journal without one last extraordinary attempt at an entirely different kind of autobiographical narrative. On 17 October 1887, at the age of forty-three, Simcox wrote the longest entry of the journal in response to the news that an older man had married a woman known to the Oxford community as "an old maid when I might have been called a young one" (AS 233-41). Because the troublesome marriage question had obtruded again, Simcox was prompted to write a history of her sexuality, feeling that her written confidences would encourage others:

I confess I should like to hear a few more frank autobiographical details as to women's intimate natural feeling about men than the sex has yet indulged in. Historically, psychologically, intellectually—and it may be admitted from pure carnal curiosity too I should like to know how many women there are who have honestly no story to tell, how many have some other story than the one which alone is supposed to count and how many of those who think it worth while to dissect themselves are in a position to tell all they know of the result. (AS 233)

Simcox's categories are revealing: dismissing the conventional story of love and marriage "which is alone supposed to count," she is especially curious about stories that may or may not be narratable. Sexuality is associated with storytelling, but as Simcox proceeds to write about her own inclinations, her story line is characteristically unclear.

The narrative falls into no single shape, but moves roughly between three kinds of discourse. For a few paragraphs, Simcox tells concrete memories of her affections for women, boys, and a fatherly family doctor in childhood and adolescence. Her avowal of indifference to marriage in the abstract turns gradually into an abstract discussion of marriage and its alternatives. She meditates on the necessity for both men and women to combat the melancholia of youth—in her case arising from "the emotional inanition of spinsterhood" (AS 236)—through the activities of work, play, and friendship. Veering between personal reminiscence, feminist argument, and the ideology of work, the entry dramatizes in miniature the contest between Simcox's private memories and the public essay-writing voice in which she offers advice to putative future readers.<sup>13</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain from this entry whether Simcox was a woman with "some other story" to tell, or whether she concealed a story she could not tell even to her secret journal. Her preference for boys' play and men's work, together with her easy affection for women, may suggest a homoerotic sensibility. Yet she is also quick to record instances of her affection for men, and avows that she would have "surrendered at discretion" had a male person as admirable and lovable as George Eliot come into her life. As she tells of early attractions to a female teacher, a male doctor, and an adolescent boy, her narrative moves repeatedly to descriptions of instinctive childhood secrecy and concealment.

In the last section she returns to a personal reminiscence taken up with a history of kissing: whom she felt naturally inclined to kiss ("nice boys, only very nice babies and the women one likes" [AS 240]), whether it is possible to kiss insincerely, disapproval of young girls who kiss promiscuously, and, finally, the kissing of George Henry Lewes. "There was something very innocently boyish about Mr Lewes and it did not seem to me unnatural that he should expect to be kissed or petted a little when he was ill, but when he was well, in the palace of Truth I think, I should have betrayed an impression that he was a little too hairy for the purpose." The suggestion that there might be something "unnatural" about kissing a full-grown man is interestingly juxtaposed

with a description of Lewes and herself as “brother worshippers at one dear shrine.” Immediately the entry closes, abruptly and in a troubled key. Simcox notes that there are many good kinds of kisses “provided always that two things separately lawful are not contaminated by an unavowed mixture, as when something amorous sneaks into the relation between two persons who are not lovers or who stand to each other in some relation incompatible with that” (AS 241).

It is just possible that this evasive description of “contaminating” feeling contains and conceals a story Simcox could not tell. The unavowed sexuality that sneaks into another kind of love may well refer to homoerotic desire, but the emphasis on the wrong mixture of two lawful loves also suggests the possibility of incestuous feeling. Once having written the sentence, however, Simcox shuts the door with a bang: “Here ends a chapter which is rather long considering how little there is in it” (AS 241). From that point on, the journal concerns her political work and the care of her mother. Only the strangely unnarratable reservations which create impediments to connection among the various characters in *Episodes in the Lives of Men, Women, and Lovers* remain behind to underline the silence.

Simcox made her final journal entry on 29 January 1900. She closed with an epitaph for her mother, to whom she had given a lifetime of service and devotion. “I rank her above my other love in perfection for human relations,” she wrote. “She did not reason about right doing. Why do it? ‘It wants doing, it has to be done, how can any body do anything else?’ Would perhaps reflect her thought if she had been compelled to transcribe the unconscious process” (AS 280). An observer of Simcox’s active external life might readily hear the daughter in this projection of the mother’s voice. At the pole of practical action where *Autobiography of a Shirtmaker* had come to rest, an unquestioned, unbroken allegiance to this mother had been a sustaining part of Simcox’s story, all along.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Laura Marcus has ably summarized Simcox’s “Autobiographies,” emphasizing “the impossibility of a synthesis between self and world, ego and non-ego,” and linking Simcox’s arguments with prevalent Victorian anxieties about the modern “disease” of self-consciousness (40–44). She touches on the peculiarities of the essay when she describes

Simcox's third stage as "the *negation*," "the end," and even "the suicide" of autobiography: "Romantic literature, with its idealized concept of self, both is, through its self-absorption, and cannot be, autobiography" (42).

<sup>2</sup>Both Haight and McKenzie distance the intense feeling by pathologizing it (Haight, *George Eliot* 494; McKenzie 135). Beer shares the dis-ease: "The reader at a distance across time is always *de trop* and can find ease only through identification, or as was the case in earlier commentary, embarrassment and medicalisation" (Beer, "Knowing a Life" 262). I hope to offer a reading that does not pathologize or find relief from interior struggle in external achievement.

<sup>3</sup>The opportunity arises from the 1998 publication of her secret journal, *Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*, edited by Constance Fulmer and Margaret Barfield under the rather misleading title *A Monument to the Memory of George Eliot*. As it is no longer necessary to read the minute handwriting of the manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, it becomes possible to work more intimately with the text of this extraordinary document.

<sup>4</sup>In previous critical incarnations, Simcox has figured as a satellite of George Eliot or, more recently, as a remarkable Victorian woman whose work deserves attention in its own terms. The most substantial work remains McKenzie, who was the first to publish sections of the journal, and to research Simcox's life, work, and family. In his biography, Haight made ample use of excerpts from the journal to illuminate George Eliot's later years. Recent articles by Fulmer, Polkey, and Vince recuperate various aspects of Simcox through politics and feminist theory, although none presents a sustained reading of the journal. For the most acute survey of Simcox's intellectual talents and dilemmas, see Beer.

<sup>5</sup>See Linda Peterson's reading of Oliphant's autobiography as "a union of two autobiographical traditions"—the domestic memoir and the professional artist's memoir—designed to resolve the tension between motherhood and authorship (148). I am indebted to Peterson for her excellent account of the various and intersecting genres of Victorian women's autobiographical writing.

<sup>6</sup>See for example, "Women's Work and Women's Wages" (1887); "The Capacity of Women" (1887); "Industrial Employment of Women" (1879); "Eight Years of Cooperative Shirtmaking" (1884). For an introduction and bibliography of Simcox's journalism, see Fulmer.

<sup>7</sup>George Henry Lewes wrote to Elma Stuart in May 1876 that Simcox's brother was about to be married, "so that her mother will come and live with her" (Haight, *Letters* 6: 294).

<sup>8</sup>So far we have no indication about when or how Edith's father, George Price Simcox, died. According to McKenzie, her brother Augustus simply disappeared on a walking tour of northern Ireland at the age of sixty-four; his body was never found. Edith had her ashes buried in her mother's grave, with no indication of her own identity (McKenzie 2, 138-39). It seems that self-erasure was the Simcox way of death.

<sup>9</sup>In a vigorous riposte to earlier Eliot biographers who construed Simcox as "sad, mad and lonesome," Pauline Polkey has articulated this network of energizing, actively political women, and identified Miss Williams as Caroline Williams, a writer on women's issues (Polkey 70-71, 74).

<sup>10</sup>McKenzie gives the only previous account of *Episodes* that I know. He summarizes the plots of most of the sketches, noting how the relationship with George Eliot provides the hidden “key” to their sometimes obscure intensities (64–75).

<sup>11</sup>Two of the essays give an especially masculine cast to the volume: “Some One Had Blundered” is told by a man whose idealistic military ambition has been shattered by the incompetence of generals, while “Men Our Brothers” is a dialogue between the narrator, a middle-class social reformer, and a working-class activist who mistrusts the motives of his upper-class comrades. These public pieces remind the reader how widely and intelligently Simcox could cast her nets: the first piece includes detailed accounts of military operations, while the second deserves a place among the literature of class and social reform.

<sup>12</sup>This sketch was apparently so disturbing to McKenzie that he does not mention it in his account of *Episodes*.

<sup>13</sup>Her wish to reach readers with the kind of story women did not tell may be one reason why Simcox allowed herself not to burn her journal before she died, leaving it discoverable by later generations. For a full account of the journal’s surfacing, see Fulmer and Barfield viii. None of the three Simcox children left heirs, so the manuscript was disposed of by executors, and was among the papers left by an Oxford undergraduate in the early 1930s. His mother, Annie Gill, kept the journal for twenty years before a BBC broadcast on George Eliot prompted her to reveal it.

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