

*Body, Spirit, Print:  
The Radical Autobiographies of  
Annie Besant and  
Helen and Olivia Rossetti*

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FOR SCHOLARS OF FEMINISM and socialism, the lives of Annie Besant and Olivia and Helen Rossetti are full of interest, not least because they described these lives in political autobiographies at a time when women rarely wrote in this mode. In late-nineteenth-century London, these women edited radical newspapers and stumped for radical causes, and they captured their political experiences in two fascinating memoirs that are drastically different in conception: Besant's *An Autobiography* (1893) and the Rossetti sisters' *A Girl among the Anarchists* (1903). The works document the dynamic social movements of 1880s' and 1890s' Britain, when feminism and socialism presented the principal ideological challenges to the social and political order of the day. Although both movements had long histories pre-dating the fin de siècle, this highly fraught era saw their organization and institutionalization within British society and marked their transition from radical to mainstream points of view. Feminism and socialism remained heterogeneous rather than fully unified, but the establishment of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in 1887 and the Independent Labour Party in 1893 centralized the two movements, bringing newfound power, size, and legitimacy.

Feminism and socialism were interconnected movements, and traffic between them was active; yet conflicts often emerged over a central philo-

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sophical difference: late-nineteenth-century feminists tended to emphasize individual rights—women’s right to vote and control property, for example—while socialists stressed collective-minded reform above individual liberties. In the context of such debates, the autobiographies of Besant and the Rossettis stake out a compromise between individualist and collectivist values. Using the genre of self-representation, the authors complicate notions of self and divisions between self and other, exploiting new conditions of print and literary media that were transforming conceptions of authorship.

Many critics have examined the interactions between *fin de siècle* feminism and socialism, identifying the fault lines that divided the movements and the shared values that brought them together.<sup>1</sup> What remains underinvestigated is the wider framework of change that shaped their relations, including the media and venues in which they occurred. A key context here is the modern information culture that took root at the end of the century, with the development of a genuinely mass-market press, the rise of visual and aural mass media, and the expanding availability of print. Crucial developments in the 1860s and 1870s, such as the Forster Act establishing universal public education and the invention of cheaper methods to produce paper, prefigured major media shifts, such as the collapse of the circulating libraries and the consolidation of the publishing industry into a mass-market business.<sup>2</sup> A surge in print was accompanied by key developments in other media: in the 1880s, a “photomechanical revolution” made photography and other images easier to reproduce, creating a more image-centered media landscape even before the emergence of cinema in the 1890s, while new audio devices such as the phonograph threatened to sever the seemingly indissoluble connection between speech and speaker.<sup>3</sup>

Positioning my analysis in the broader context of Victorian women’s autobiography and feminist and socialist writing, I want to show how the autobiographies of Besant and the Rossettis conceive of this modern media sphere and how they assess its possibilities for representing self, gender, and social inequalities amid entrenched wealth and power. Trev Lynn Broughton deems it a “cliché of auto/biographical studies that bourgeois modes of subjectivity, or properly literary subjectivity,” dominated

nineteenth-century life writing and that the voices of women and other marginalized subjects were "at best constrained, at worst repressed" by this template.<sup>4</sup> At the *fin de siècle*, however, new conditions of media and print were calling into question long-standing assumptions about "literary subjectivity" and authorship, and the radical women I discuss here exploited such changes to represent their own political subjectivity.

Although Besant and the Rossettis advocated many of the same socialist and feminist ideals, their politics were often opposed, and they could hardly be more different in style or mode of self-expression. Besant advocated moderate, parliamentary socialism, and her autobiography presents itself as an earnest account of her life and a sincere reflection upon its significance; the Rossettis were anarchist-socialists, and their political memoir is a joint endeavor, tongue-in-cheek and heavily fictionalized. Both books exhibit, however, a sophisticated awareness of key shifts in print culture and reflect in fascinating ways on how gender informs these transformations in language and media. More specifically, both autobiographies establish parallels between life writing and oral speech, exploring a curious likeness between autobiographical prose and the verbal speaking situation.

In his pioneering work on orality and literacy, Walter Ong describes life writing as perhaps the least "oral" of all written genres: noting that oral cultures "are more communal and externalized, and less introspective" and that "[w]riting and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself," he argues of the personal diary, "[t]he kind of verbalized solipsistic reveries it implies are a product of consciousness as shaped by print culture."<sup>5</sup> Besant and the Rossettis, in contrast, highlight a distinctively "oral" aspect to writing about the self—a conclusion that I argue is inextricable from their gender and political ideology and from historical configurations of gender, class, and politics. As women writers in a male-dominated political-discursive sphere, and as activists deeply engaged in the materialist ideological critique of nineteenth-century socialism, Besant and the Rossettis bring to autobiography a special attention to the author's body. Their works are acutely conscious that an autobiography purports to express a particular embodied perspective, unlike critical prose, which postures a stance of neutral impartiality, and unlike

fiction, which engages a narrative voice to filter between author and reader. Readers expect to find in autobiography the expressions of a voiced "self" but also assume that "self" is a body in the world. As Broughton emphasizes in her work on women's autobiography, "We read autobiographies to hear from, learn from, specific historical figures about how they found their own voice, not just as a matter of intratext, but as a product of historical, material forces."<sup>6</sup> Autobiographers may undermine such expectations or use them to ironic effect as the Rossettis do, but the presumption remains central to the genre.

Linda Peterson and Carol Hanbery Mackay, among others, have discussed the gender politics of Victorian autobiography and show that women rarely took up the mantle of the "classic, hermeneutic" autobiography, as Peterson calls it, until the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Such an autobiographical stance was by no means natural or universal—as Regenia Gagnier reminds us in her study of working-class autobiographies—but it was the stance of political authority.<sup>8</sup> Pioneering women writers in this mode, such as Harriet Martineau and Annie Besant, tended to be deeply engaged in political discourse, suggesting that the taboo against women's autobiography and the taboo against women's political speech were closely related: both mitigated, it would seem, against women's *embodied presence within public discourse*. It was one thing for a woman to write anonymous or pseudonymous fiction or prose, or a domestic memoir, or to maintain an authorial identity under her real name in the abstract world of print; it was quite another to claim a corporal place at the table of political discourse.

Besant and the Rossettis challenge the established discursive convention that political autobiography—and relatedly, political speech—was a "male" genre and describe real-life work as open-air propagandists and editors of radical periodicals. Interestingly, although many of their contemporaries saw the new superfluity of print as having drained the written word of its authority and durability, Besant and the Rossettis, for distinct reasons, present the new media conditions of the *fin de siècle* moment as a boon to women writers and speakers. Together, the two works make a subtle connection between a new, modern, transitory sense of self and a new, modern, transitory form of print.

MEDIATING MATERIALITY IN  
ANNIE BESANT'S *An Autobiography*

Besant begins with the conventionally apologetic tone of Victorian autobiographers, who felt the need to justify prolonged exercises in self-assertion, but her unconventional notion of selfhood is nonetheless apparent: "It is a difficult thing to tell the story of a life. . . . At the best, the telling has a savour of vanity, and the only excuse . . . is that the life, being an average one, reflects many others, and . . . may give the experience of many rather than of one. And so the autobiographer does his work because he thinks that, at the cost of some unpleasantness to himself, he may . . . stretch out a helping hand." She imagines stretching out a hand to readers through the medium of the text, as though the text itself facilitates physical oneness, and ends her autobiography with a similar gesture of communion, a blessing: "PEACE TO ALL BEINGS." Blessings literalize the idea that one person's words can have a physical, material effect on another.

Besant wrote *An Autobiography* after her conversion to theosophy, a spiritualist philosophy heavily influenced by Eastern religion. Earlier, when she still ascribed to scientific, socialist materialism, she had written another autobiography entitled *Autobiographical Sketches*, serialized in her monthly socialist journal, *Our Corner*, from January 1884 to June 1885. The two texts indicate how Besant's sense of self changed amid her conversion and how her self-representation transformed itself accordingly. *An Autobiography's* opening and closing passages position her text as a means of traversing space and time, of reaching out in a semimystical way to those of us on the other end of the page. In the beginning of the volume, this gesture toward communion with readers is followed by a description and chart of the astrological conditions of Besant's birth, suggesting that her seemingly individual self is similarly in communion with the wider universe. In contrast, the first installment of *Sketches* presents Besant's life story as an assemblage of discrete evidence, documentation, and facts for evaluation: "I have resolved to pen a few brief autobiographical sketches, which may avail to satisfy friendly questioners, and to serve, in some measure, as defence against unfair attack."<sup>10</sup> This earlier text imagines the self as an autonomous subject that can be described by rational exposition; in her

*Autobiography*, Besant's new self can be detached from neither her readers nor the astrological cosmos.

The disparity between these two autobiographical selves recalls what many of Besant's biographers have noted about her: she is a woman who seems almost to have lived multiple lives. She began as a devout young Christian, who married a stern clergyman before losing her faith. Her refusal to take communion at church precipitated legal separation from her husband, and thereafter she became a freethinker, then an atheist and a scientific materialist, and eventually England's most prominent female advocate for secularism and free speech. For years she coedited with Charles Bradlaugh the controversial secularist journal *National Reformer*, but in the early 1880s she dismayed Bradlaugh by taking up socialism, countering his belief in individualist self-reliance. Besant joined forces with the Fabian socialists, a middle-class group advocating parliamentary socialism through incremental reform, and from January 1883 to December 1888, she edited *Our Corner*, a key socialist publication of the era. She became deeply involved in labor agitation, distinguishing herself nationally by leading the London match-girls' strike; won election to the London school board; and attempted to bring unity to the disparate socialist movement by cofounding, with William Stead, the Law and Liberty Defense League and its journal, *The Link*. In 1889, however, Besant suddenly decided that humanity's soul, not its body, was in most dire need of liberation. Soon she was stumping for theosophy and editing a theosophical journal, and in 1891 she became the worldwide theosophical leader. In 1898, she emigrated to India, where she embraced the cause of Indian nationalism and became a prominent anticolonial activist and the first woman president of India's National Congress.<sup>11</sup>

In her 1893 autobiography, Besant draws on her various conversions and deconversions to create the sense of a fluctuating, evanescent self. Her "writing self" does not emerge as the crowning development of all her earlier selves but as one more self in a long succession, befitting her new theosophical beliefs in reincarnation and astral projection. Biographers such as Arthur H. Nethercot and Anne Taylor have taken Besant's volatility as evidence of charming unpredictability or erratic whimsy, but I see her autobiographical emphasis on a multiplicity of selves as a response to a

particular moment in feminism and a particular historical convergence of feminist and socialist ideology. An anti-individualist strain in late-Victorian socialism sometimes manifested as an antifeminist argument against the campaign for women's emancipation. In an essay on "The Woman Question," for example, the eminent socialist eugenicist Karl Pearson argued that scientific arguments about the good of the "race" must always trump abstract reflections on women's individual rights: "We have first to settle . . . what would be the effect of [woman's] emancipation on her function of race-reproduction, before we can talk about her 'rights,' which are, after all, only a vague description of what may be the fittest position for her, the sphere of her maximum usefulness in the developed society of the future."<sup>12</sup> Besant, like most socialists of the day, was a strong proponent of feminism and said it "was one of the things that attracted me to the Socialist party, because they do claim absolute economical independence for women; because they do claim absolute equality for her."<sup>13</sup> Socialists such as Pearson and E. Belfort Bax, however, used collectivist arguments against women's emancipation, claiming that the cause of feminism was an essentially individualist issue that would distract from and compromise a collectivist agenda.

Under the weight of such debates, Besant's autobiography emerges as an effort to reconcile feminist individualism with socialist collectivism by means of a theosophical doctrine that allowed for mystical union between self and other. Her shift from freethought to socialism to theosophy thus represents an ongoing search for an ideological bargain between a feminist insistence on an independent self and an accompanying sense of communion with others. I am not arguing that theosophy was an altogether satisfying solution to this dilemma, nor, by extension, that occultism was an adequate avenue to empowerment for women of this era. Many politically engaged women did find voice, authority, and influence by way of spiritualist movements; but these women-centered fringe groups could also distract feminists from more overt forms of activism and public engagement, since, as Alex Owen puts it, they offered "a compromised understanding of power."<sup>14</sup> Theosophy undoubtedly provides Besant, however, with a new model of selfhood, and it also provides the basis for her mystical vision of mass print, which is compellingly related to her new understand-

ing of self. Although writing has occupied a binary position in relation to embodied speech at least since Plato, in Besant's work, it is no less authentically embodied a medium than speech. At the time Besant is writing, new technologies such as photography and recorded speech have disrupted the speech/writing binary in relation to embodiment and absence, and authorship itself has been transformed in the wake of print's post-1860s surge. Besant does not address all of these changes directly, but they inform her representation of print as facilitating a spiritual and material union with an audience she cannot see, and they provide an explanatory logic for her quasimetaphysical depiction of print and the author's body.

Consider, for example, the photograph Besant reproduced as frontispiece to her autobiography (fig. 1). Seriousness of expression was not unusual in Victorian photography, but here, the piercing fixity of her locked gaze exceeds photographic convention. This frontispiece photograph insists on the author's physical particularity; it is a reminder that the speaking voice of the volume has emanated, or always "is" emanating (in grammatical convention), from this individual woman. With her finger pointing to her temple, Besant draws attention to her seat of words and ideas, a subtle reminder of language's embodiment. Multiple photographs of Besant interspersed throughout the volume keep her body always present before the reader. The Rossettis' memoir, as we shall see, works to obscure the bodies of the authors, conveying the disembodied agency of mass print culture, but Besant uses photography—increasingly reproducible in texts as the century wore on—to anchor her words *within* her body. The ghostly words on the page thus bear the trace of her body, although they have transcended it.

Besant's discussion of pseudonyms and names has much the same effect as her use of photography. Names, like portraits, pin down individual identity in distinctive ways; yet, as her autobiography describes, when Bradlaugh initially hired Besant on to the *National Reformer*, she felt compelled to use a pseudonym: "My first contribution appeared in the number for August 30, 1874, over the signature of 'Ajax.' . . . I wrote at first under a *nom de guerre*, because the work I was doing for Mr. Scott [a pamphleteer] would have been prejudiced had my name appeared in . . . the terrible *National Reformer*, and until this work—commenced and paid

for—was concluded I did not feel at liberty to use my own name.” Such authorial masquerading did not sit well with Besant, however, and she notes with relief how, in January 1875, she finally “threw off my pseudonym, and rode into the field of battle with uplifted visor” (180, 190). Besant depicts her pseudonymous armor with regret, but curiously, in the era she is describing, authorial anonymity was in fact the default position in periodical discourse, as Leah Price describes: “In 1877, the newly founded *Nineteenth Century* still provoked outrage by putting authors’ names on the



Annie Besant.

Fig. 1. Frontispiece to Annie Besant's *An Autobiography* (1893).

cover; by 1907 even the conservative *Quarterly* had begun to attribute its articles. Between those two dates, the collapse of the circulating libraries . . . spurred publishers to invent new marketing gimmicks . . . autographed photographs, illustrated interviews, . . . even directories listing home addresses of pseudonymous writers.”<sup>15</sup> Radical publishing was a unique print context, and its writers had distinct reasons for signing articles or remaining anonymous, but anonymity and attribution posed the same thorny questions here as elsewhere regarding authorial integrity, the possibility of objectivity, and the politics of literary celebrity.

The decline of default anonymity in Victorian periodicals did not actually signal a new degree of authorial authenticity within the culture of mass-market publishing but, rather, a new commitment (often pseudonymous) to the *premise* of embodied authorship, in lieu of the polite obfuscation of anonymous publication. An anonymous text acknowledges that a “real” embodied author exists, who can’t be named, instead of creating a “fictional” author with a pseudonym. Besant describes how she chose her pseudonym, “Ajax,” after a statue at the Crystal Palace, site of the Great Exhibition and a monument to mass production and markets. She does not remark on the irony of this choice, but it reflects a perhaps unconscious admission that authors’ names and the premise of embodied authorship are as much a part of the new conditions of mass-market publishing as author photographs and other marketing techniques.

Laurel Brake has described anonymity policies in nineteenth-century periodicals as a means of asserting a “corporate identity” that “mitigates the differences of . . . individual contributors.”<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Besant’s decision to sign her contributions to the radical press and to maintain a policy of attribution within the journals she edits signifies an opposing effort to maintain individualism within a collective body, echoing her theosophical claim that “each individual is a single consciousness, a unit of consciousness” even as “all consciousnesses are fragments, parts, of the one all-pervading consciousness.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the idea that writings not only signify selfhood but contain it as well characterizes Besant’s treatment of her print career within her autobiography. In composing her autobiography, Besant borrows extensively from the journals she has edited and the countless pamphlets and articles she has written, quoting freely as a means of re-creating her “self” at various moments in her life. *An Autobiography* often resembles, in fact, a collection of contributions to the radical press, woven together with an account of the conditions under which they were composed. This was not a particularly unusual technique in nineteenth-century life writing, but because of Besant’s varying allegiances, it has the effect of highlighting the contradictions and unevenness of her life rather than presenting it as a unified document. Indeed, although critics such as Nancy L. Paxton have concluded that Besant’s autobiography “is framed in retrospect”<sup>18</sup> by her conversion to theosophy, her frequent recourse to

past work serves to break the frame of her contemporary worldview, in deference to the ideological multiplicity of her life.

In Besant's use of past writings, print, not voice, becomes the organizing principle of subjectivity in her narrative. She even suggests that her birth as a writer occasioned her birth as a self-conscious individual:

My first serious attempts at writing were made in 1868. . . . I wrote some short stories of a very flimsy type. . . . I sent them first to the *Family Herald*, and some weeks afterwards received a letter from which dropped a cheque as I opened it. Dear me! I have earned a good deal of money since by my pen, but never any that gave me the intense delight of that first thirty shillings. It was the first money I had ever earned, and the pride of the earning was added to the pride of authorship. . . . [It] was "my very own," I thought, and a delightful sense of independence came over me. I had not then realized . . . that all a married woman earned by law belonged to her owner, and that she could have nothing that belonged to her of right. I did not want the money: I was only so glad to have something of my own to give, and it was rather a shock to learn that it was not really mine at all. (84-85)

For Besant, gaining a print forum was crucial to her burgeoning sense of self, but this passage also offers a complex view of how feminist "consciousness raising" complicates the ideological division between individualism and socialism. Besant's contemporary socialists argued against a capitalist system that reckoned one's consequence according to resources; yet, for women, who often could not own what they did earn, a wage and a job could be important means and symbols of independence. Here, Besant describes how earning money gave her a sense of individual worth, although as a socialist, she would have recognized the ideological liability of this sentiment. She echoes free-market liberalism in grounding selfhood in wage-work, self-sufficiency, and property; but she also grounds it in print and in the freedom to give to others.

Besant's frequent recourse to past publications serves not merely to provide a record of her experience but also to bring the past into the living moment of the present, disrupting chronological succession in an almost magical way. Print emerges as a radically immanent medium; it is not the dead letter, but the living word. One might suspect that this autobiographical mode would pose difficulties when Besant describes sentiments

or positions she no longer upholds, but she embraces the possibility of intermingling multiple autobiographical selves by intermingling multiple print sources: "In order that I may not colour my past thinkings by my present thought, I take my statements from pamphlets written when I adopted the Atheistic philosophy. . . . No charge can then be made that I have softened my old opinions for the sake of reconciling them with those now held" (140). Far from attempting to deflate prior positions, she reprints them alongside current ones, producing a dialectical autobiography rather than a strictly progressive one.

Throughout her career, Besant put such intertextual pastiche to brilliant intellectual use. Her autobiography describes how she first began to doubt the Bible when she outlined the four gospels and discerned their intratextual discrepancies. In an 1882 pamphlet entitled *Blasphemy*, she juxtaposes a long series of quotations under the headings "Religion" and "Blasphemy" to prove the "artificial" nature of the offense.<sup>19</sup> *An Autobiography* uses similar techniques to create the effect of a polyvocal self, such as when she quotes from her 1876 pamphlet, *Gospel of Atheism*, written in the first throes of liberating doubt:

"The ideal humanity of the Christian is the humanity of the slave, poor, meek, broken-spirited, humble, submissive to authority, however oppressive and unjust; the ideal humanity of the Atheist is the humanity of the free man who knows no lord, who brooks no tyranny, who relies on his own strength. . . ." A one-sided view? Yes. But a very natural outcome of a sunny nature, for years held down by unhappiness and the harshness of an outgrown creed. It was the rebound of such a nature suddenly set free, rejoicing in its liberty and self-conscious strength. (158)

As a theosophist, Besant no longer holds the same heroic view of atheism, yet she recaptures not only the reasons she held this belief but the positive effects of it. She places her earlier self from the pamphlet in dialogue with her present authorial self: "A one-sided view? Yes. But a very natural outcome. . . ." Her rekindling of this past self suggests that the former self still exists, not so much within Besant as within the pamphlet itself. Rather than suppressing the multiplicity of her past experiences and views in favor of a fully unified subject position, Besant gives her former selves equal time in the memoir through the transcendent medium of print.

In some cases, Besant's past print selves overrule her "writing self." Describing the bitter attacks she has long been subject to, she mentions one critic who said she was "at the mercy of her last male acquaintance for her views on economics." Besant, who prided herself on her tenacity in mastering difficult subjects such as physics or economic theory, comments in *An Autobiography* that "I was foolish enough to break a lance in self-defence with this assailant. . . . I certainly should not now take the trouble to write such a paragraph as the following: 'The moment a man uses a woman's sex to discredit her arguments, the thoughtful reader knows that he is unable to answer the arguments themselves'" (315). The irony, of course, is that Besant *is* again writing the paragraph; she gets to retaliate in the voice of her past "self" while remaining above the fray.

Besant's reconjuring of former selves is especially evident when she discusses her long legal and journalistic struggle to print a pamphlet on birth control, the struggle that led to the loss of her daughter's custody when she was convicted of obscenity. Despite the fact that Besant no longer agrees with her former position on birth control ("I gave up Neo-Malthusianism in April, 1891," she says, after "two years' instruction from Mme. H.P. Blavatsky," the theosophical leader), her autobiography offers a convincing argument for birth control as a social measure (237). It describes the "passionate gratitude evidenced by letters from thousands of poor married women . . . thanking and blessing me for showing them how to escape from the veritable hell in which they lived" and gives ample voice to the former self who published the illegal pamphlet: "I had seen the misery of the poor, of my sister-women with children crying for bread; the wages of the workmen were often sufficient for four, but eight or ten they could not maintain. . . . Did it matter that my reputation should be ruined, if its ruin helped to bring remedy to this otherwise hopeless wretchedness of thousands?" (223-24, 208). To voice this position in the rhetorical form of the question repositions her dilemma in the present tense, bringing her past self into the present, and posing an unresolved problem for readers. The ghostly presence of an earlier self asserts itself alongside the theosophical Besant who is holding the pen.

In grammatical convention, texts are always discussed in the present tense; they take on a permanently active tense and are always restating

what they say. Besant employs print as a reincarnational medium, as the enduring presence of her past writings provides a forum for her past selves. There is doubtless a mystical element to this permanent presentness in print, but Besant's depiction of texts echoes the odd combination of scientific materialism and mystical occultism that characterizes theosophy and spiritualism:

All the Theosophists aver is that each phase of matter has living things suited to it, and that all the universe is pulsing with life. . . . "Spirit" is a misleading word, for, historically, it connotes immateriality and a supernatural kind of existence, and the Theosophist believes neither in the one nor the other. With him all living things act in and through a material basis, and "matter" and "spirit" are not found dissociated. But he alleges that matter exists in states other than those at present known to science. (356-57)

For Besant, the material text becomes an embodied manifestation of its author's "spirit," a kind of astral projection impervious to the dictates of space and time. As Joy Dixon has argued, theosophy challenged the "liberal vision of the body as marking the outer limits of an autonomous and independent self" in favor of a more fluid notion of embodiment.<sup>20</sup> Print, in Besant's autobiography, both contains the author's embodied self and brings it into union with others.

In this way, Besant depicts writing as an embodied medium, fully imbued with the author and not orphaned, fatherless, or cut off from its origins as alleged in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Recalling her career on the stump and in print, Besant puts writing and speech on equal footing: "The written and the spoken word start forces none may measure, set working brain after brain, influence numbers unknown to the forthgiver of the word, work for good or for evil all down the stream of time" (189). Some parts of the autobiography present the spoken word as an almost erotic form of intercourse between speaker and audience when she writes of "what joy there is in the full rush of language that moves and sways; to feel a crowd respond to the lightest touch" (117). And yet, Besant's first powerfully intoxicating experience as a speaker, as a young woman alone in her husband's church, involved no live audience at all:

A queer whim took me that I would like to know how "it felt" to preach . . . the longing to find outlet in words came upon me, and I felt as though I had something to say and was able to say it. So locked alone in the great, silent church . . . I ascended the pulpit steps and delivered my first lecture on the Inspiration of the Bible. I shall never forget the feeling of power and delight—but especially of power—that came upon me as I sent my voice ringing down the aisles. (115-16)

This famous scene of Besant claiming her voice has an obvious feminist resonance, yet critics have not been alert to the full significance of its absence of audience. The scene relies on a new sensibility related to new aural media—in particular, the invention and proliferation of the phonograph in the years leading up to 1893—wherein the power of speech is no longer indexed to the bodily presence of speaker or audience. One thinks of Edward Bellamy's 1888 novel, *Looking Backward*, widely read by nineteenth-century socialists, in which a live sermon is broadcast to an audience that is absent in body but listens from afar via a telephonic device. Ivan Kreilkamp has argued that Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, originally published in 1899, similarly "draws on new representational possibilities suggested by the phonograph" but in this case "to represent a grave danger to human agency and authorship."<sup>21</sup> Besant evokes speech detached from audience not to register a threat to self and to authorship but to suggest new possibilities of verbal authority for women. She sets up a parallel between her speech in the church and other powerful words that emanate from an invisible speaker: the "Inspiration of the Bible." It is not that writing has displaced speech in the modern media sphere, but that speech is no longer defined by its proximity to bodies, and for Besant, this newly indistinct line between speech and writing can be a source of feminist power and authority; it can put women, so to speak, in the pulpit.

MY SISTER, MY SELF: PRINT AND DISEMBODIMENT IN  
*A Girl among the Anarchists*

If Besant wants to emphasize the embodiment of her words in print, the Rossettis focus instead on their disembodiment as authors. In their fictional autobiography, *A Girl among the Anarchists*, Olivia and Helen

Rossetti present their autobiographical self as fleeting and indeterminate by combining themselves into one fictional autobiographical entity—"Isabel Meredith," who serves as narrator, protagonist, and author—and playfully traversing the line between fiction and reportage throughout the book. Their work resists the very notion of the discrete, autonomous self, upon which autobiography as a genre seems to depend. A collaborative memoir, it takes the *autos* out of autobiography and subsumes both sisters' identities into one coherent but imaginary autobiographical voice. This autobiographical mode uncovers a feminist and radical potential within the increasingly anonymous sphere of the turn-of-the-century print marketplace.

The sisters' interest in anonymity and masks may have come from observing the prominent celebrity of their near relatives. Daughters of William Michael Rossetti and Lucy Madox Brown, they were nieces of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, granddaughters of Ford Madox Brown, and cousins of Ford Madox Ford. As teenagers, with the initial participation of their brother, Arthur, the sisters embarked on an independent political career in the anarchist-communist movement on London's socialist fringe; mounted an aggressive campaign of open-air and print propaganda for the anarchist cause; and later collaborated on a fictionalized political memoir, published in 1903 as *A Girl among the Anarchists*.<sup>22</sup> In subsequent years, the sisters renounced anarchism for internationalism, but eventually the two women experienced a mutual reversal of consciousness and rejected internationalism for hypernationalist Italian fascism. Given their strongly anti-authoritarian beliefs as young anarchists, their fervent allegiance to Mussolini in later life seems almost incomprehensible, but both women wrote and translated tracts promoting the fascist guild system.<sup>23</sup> Olivia worked as a propagandist for the Italian Ministry of Popular Culture and was an intimate correspondent of Ezra Pound, garnering a mention in the *Cantos*.<sup>24</sup> The Rossetti sisters' ideological fluidity, like Besant's, reminds us of the strange nexuses that existed among seemingly dissimilar groups in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century radical culture, a political landscape quite different from our own, where scientific socialism could lead to theosophy and anarchism to fascism. This fluidity also suggests, however, a lack of satisfy-

ing political outlets for women that produced a kind of restless ideological promiscuity, a continual search for an affiliation that fit.

Long before their conversion to fascism, the Rossetti sisters documented their anarchist years in such terms, as a quest for political subjectivity. Their memoir recalls their adventures as publishers of the *Torch*, an anarchist periodical, at a time when anarchist-socialism constituted a significant adjunct to the more mainstream groups of the British Left wing. British anarchism of this era was a communitarian and anti-authoritarian philosophy, resting on a core belief that people would cooperate for the common good when relieved of the capitalist state. As the *Torch* put it in 1893, "Anarchist Communism implies organization of a much more developed kind than anything we see to-day. But at the same time it insists that such organization shall be completely free, that it shall be maintained by no law-enforced authority, [and] that each individual who joins with others to accomplish some common object shall be free to leave that association."<sup>25</sup> Rather than advocating a powerful centralized state as Marxist socialists did—at least as an intermediary condition—anarchists envisioned small social collectives based upon cooperation and voluntary association.

In Britain, anarchism attracted many women.<sup>26</sup> Charlotte Wilson edited *Freedom*, the most significant and long-running anarchist paper of the era, and her 1884 series of essays in the socialist newspaper *Justice*, has been called "the first native Victorian contribution to genuinely anarchist theory."<sup>27</sup> Other prominent women anarchists included Nannie Florence Dryhurst and Agnes Henry, also associated with the *Freedom* group, and L.S. (Louisa Sarah) Bevington, a poet of some renown who contributed to a wide range of anarchist publications, including the *Torch*. British anarchism drew so many women that Bernard Shaw, himself a socialist who had flirted with anarchism, allegedly joked upon the publication of the Rossettis' memoir: "A girl among the anarchists! . . . if they had said 'A man among the anarchists' it would have been more of an adventure."<sup>28</sup> Anarchism may have appealed to radical women because it addressed issues of class and economics that liberal feminism often ignored but also promised personal liberty for women in a way that mainstream socialism did not always do. A strain of eugenicist socialism, perhaps best exempli-

fied by Karl Pearson, advocated such extreme interventional measures as state licenses for childbearing.<sup>29</sup> Anarchist women such as Wilson, who was involved in Pearson's Men and Women's Club, opposed such roundly interventional measures and called instead for an economic collectivism that would preserve individual liberty, including sexual liberty.<sup>30</sup> Anarchism insisted on a total social revolution—encompassing the private family as well as labor and capital—and in this way resembled early-nineteenth-century utopian movements such as Owenism, which also had many women followers.

At the time of the *Torch's* inception in 1891, Olivia was sixteen and Helen was twelve; when they left the paper in 1896, Olivia was twenty-one and Helen was seventeen. The sisters were remarkably young, and their youth has prevented many critics from taking their anarchist propaganda seriously.<sup>31</sup> The *Torch* is a journal flawed in many ways, and in its first year it was quite an amateur production; but it approximated other anarchist newspapers of the day, such as *Alarm*, *Anarchist*, *Freedom*, and *Commonweal* (in the *Commonweal's* post-1890 anarchist phase). It proposed to “educate” the working classes toward revolution, provided hefty doses of international news, and reiterated anarchist opposition to state schools, voting, unionism, and parliamentarianism. This isn't to deny its unusually domestic and private origins; when the Rossettis first began “publishing” the *Torch*, it bore all the hallmarks of a homemade operation. It was composed by teenage siblings in their parents' basement, and it was written in cyclostyle, a rudimentary form of printing that makes a stencil of a page as one writes and is quite difficult to read (see figs. 2 and 3). The very first issue, in fact, had a “run” of only three copies.<sup>32</sup> Despite its handwritten rather than print status, the Rossettis attempted to distribute the *Torch*—once they advanced beyond three-issue runs—to the radical public, hawking it in Hyde Park to crowds gathered to listen to open-air propagandists on Sunday mornings. By 1891, however, a printing press was requisite equipment for any organ wishing to make a written contribution to political discourse, no matter how radical or fringe its politics, and the Russian exile Stepniak—a fixture on the London radical scene—complained that the cyclostyle paper was unreadable and a mere “children's magazine.”<sup>33</sup>

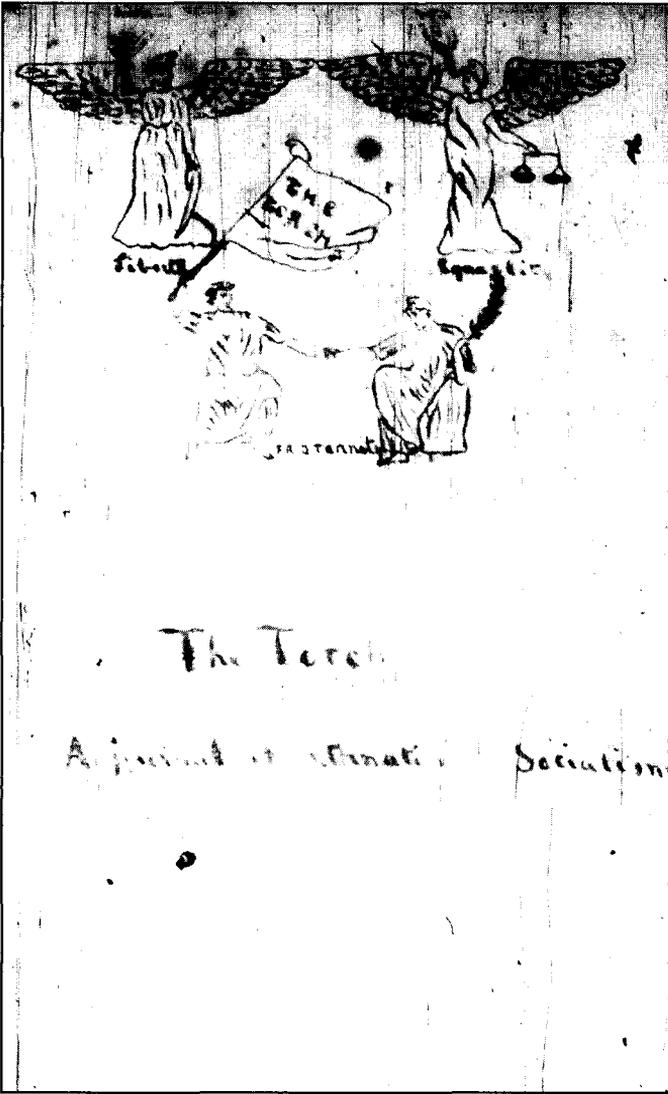


Fig. 2. Cover from the first issue of the *Torch*. The subtitle would later change to "A Journal of Anarchist Communism," "A Revolutionary Journal of Anarchist Communism," and others.

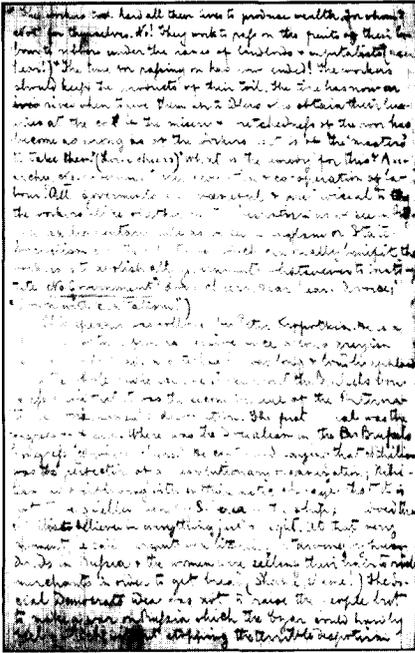


Fig. 3: *The Torch*, vol. 2, no. 4 (15 April 1892).  
Article by Olivia summarizing speeches at an event commemorating the Paris Commune.

In the earliest days of the *Torch*, the sibling-centered activity of the paper, the youth of its writers, and its illegibility all bear salient resemblance to the Brontë family's "Gondor chronicles," but unlike the Brontës, the Rossettis never intended their work as a private enterprise. They obtained a printing press less than a year into the venture, and their first printed issue appeared on July 15, 1892, announcing: "This month's *Torch* appears in print for the first time which must be our excuse for its shortness and late appearance, for we have comp'd it ourselves and as we are but novices in the noble art of printing we are as yet slow,

but with use we hope to improve." The Rossettis' success in drawing other anarchists' interest allowed them to transition to print: "Our comrade Alfred Belcher has been most instrumental in bringing about this improvement in the *Torch*, having procured us the press on most advantageous terms, and persuaded a friend of his, Mr. Barton, to give us a whole font of type for nothing, which well suits the low finances of the *Torch*. The best thanks of the Group are due to him and to John Thomas, the compositor who has devoted his evenings to teaching us composing."<sup>34</sup> Figure 4 shows the cover of this first printed issue, and as it suggests, moving from cyclostyle to print made the *Torch* more readable, accessible, and public. Indeed, the paper did not so much appeal to a preexisting public as create a public via interpellation; the activists who rallied around the paper soon became known as the "Torch Group." Members of this group gradually assumed

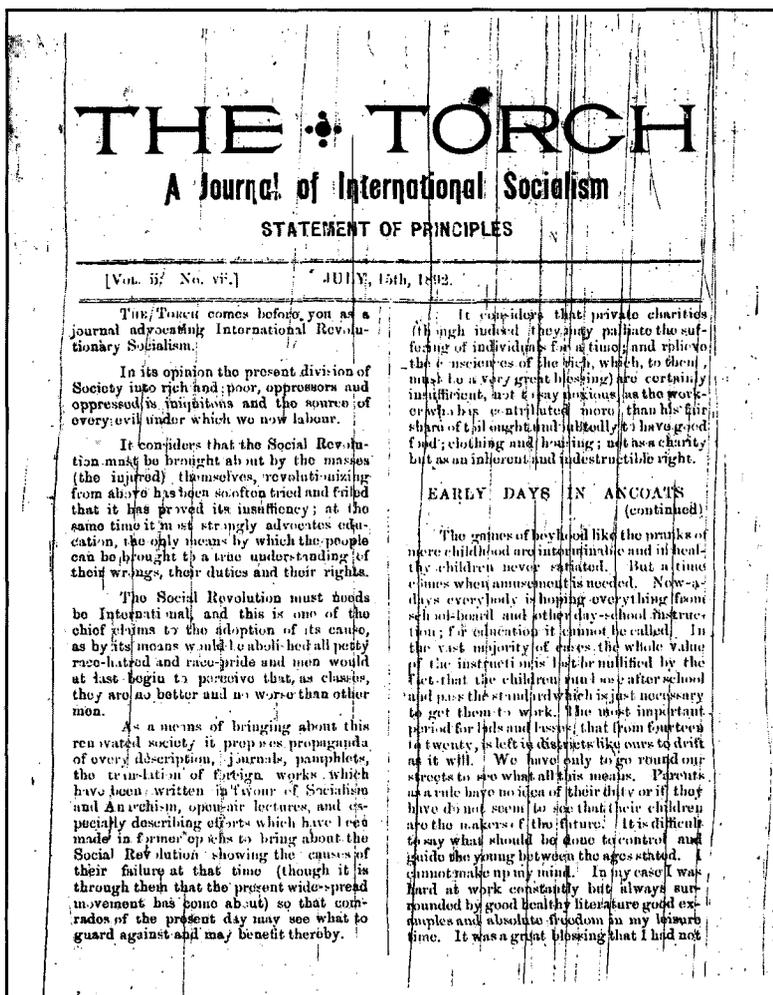


Fig. 4: *The Torch*, vol. 2, no. 7 (15 July 1892). First printed issue.

more responsibility for the paper, taking it over when the Rossetti sisters left England in 1896, Olivia with her Italian anarchist lover, Helen for a long sea voyage meant to heal her consumptive lungs.<sup>35</sup>

The origins of the Rossettis' paper provide a fascinating contrast to their treatment of it in *A Girl among the Anarchists*, indicating that key ques-

tions of gender, print, and representation are at stake in their autobiographical work. Linda Peterson has argued that late-Victorian women writers faced two distinct yet prominent traditions of women's autobiography: an "Eliotean strain," modeled on George Eliot that "concentrates on the intellectual and artistic development of the woman writer, struggling with domestic repression . . . and ultimately winning fame for the work of her genius," and a "Brontëan strain" that focuses "on the household as the nursery of genius, on the collaborative and familial origins of authorship."<sup>36</sup> The Rossetti sisters' dual memoir may seem an obvious example of the Brontëan, collaborative, domestic model, but the authors actually present their print career as individualized and public rather than collaborative and domestic. Isabel Meredith, the Rossettis' amalgamated fictional self, works on the paper alone without the assistance of siblings, and the anarchist paper that she edits (called the *Tocsin* here) never exists as part of her home life. This truncates the *Torch's* history, erasing its familial and domestic origins, but at the same time, the memoir rejects aspects of the "Eliotean" tradition: the Rossettis' mutual authorship challenges a vision of the writer as individual genius, and the work as a whole expresses deep reservations about the *bildungsroman* as a textual model of individual subjectivity. Rejecting the developmental, coherent model of the Enlightenment self that operates in conventional political autobiographies, the Rossettis' memoir blends two traditions of women's life writing but also breaks wholly new ground.

Shifting the print history of their paper away from the domestic sphere complicates the collaborative project of the Rossettis' memoir. The sisters' decision to combine their two selves into one autobiographical voice could be viewed as an attempt to present their political careers as less foundationally familial and more individual; on the other hand, their dual authorship also presents the sisters' political and autobiographical work as inextricably mutual and radically collaborative. Viewed within an anarchist political context, the memoir's complex interplay of autonomy and collaboration consciously echoes the central tension of the Rossettis' political ideology; for, from the outset of their narrative, it is clear that their conception of anarchism seeks an ideological compromise between individualism and collectivist socialism. Isabel Meredith explains that she

finds anarchist communism more congenial than state socialism because it maintains "the right to complete liberty of action, the conviction that morality is relative and personal and can never be imposed from without"; yet her writing career begins when she writes a rejoinder to *The Ethics of Egoism*, a book "advocating the most rabid individualism, denying the Socialist standpoint of the right to live."<sup>37</sup>

Meredith's idea of "liberty" is feminist as well as anarchist, for she is a remarkably self-sufficient Victorian woman, navigating the city on her own and returning from political meetings late at night. Still, the Rossettis present a complicated view of Meredith's agency: her writing, for example, is both autonomous expression *and* scripted propaganda. She dedicates herself to the art of printing almost immediately after joining the anarchists: "I felt a strong desire to free myself from all the ideas, customs, and prejudices which usually influence my class, to throw myself into the life and the work of the masses. Thus it was that I worked hard to learn how to compose and print, that I might be of use to the Cause in the most practical manner of all—the actual production of its literature" (56). The language of selfhood here alternates between libertarian and instrumental: she wants to "free" herself, "throw [herself] into," "work hard," and "be of use" all at the same time, producing "its literature"—the movement's literature—not her own. Composition and print, as represented in this passage, are not so much means of expressing the self as of transmuting the self, collectivizing the self by mechanizing it.

The Rossettis' autobiographical self eventually rejects the anarchist movement that she promotes for most of the work, but anarchism's vexed conception of individuality and collectivity is quite apparent in the melding of Olivia and Helen into Isabel Meredith. This maneuver sustains the anarchist ideal that the lone individual can be a potent political force but radically discounts the intactness of that individual. Compare the Rossettis again with the Brontë sisters, who published their first poems together in one collaborative volume, with each poem signed by its distinct author; the Rossettis are far more willing to collapse the walls of personality separating their authorial selves. Indeed, Olivia later claimed—truthfully or not—that she could not remember which sister wrote what in the memoir: "I wrote it jointly with my sister Helen [as] we had lived

the experience together. . . . [We] were not together at the time; she was in London, and I was married to an anarchist in Rome, but though [it was] written quite separately and neither revised the work of the other, it seems to me quite homogenous."<sup>38</sup>

The Rossettis sustain this sense of indeterminate individuality through a playful antireferentiality. Unlike a fictional autobiography such as *Jane Eyre*, the sisters make special claims for their book's accuracy by referencing external proof of its truth value but at the same time resist these claims. The work begins, for example, with a preface by the writer Morley Roberts, who vouches for the volume's reliability: "There is nothing whatever in 'A Girl among the Anarchists' which is invented. . . . I know what she [Meredith] has written to be true" (xix-xx). But when the book goes on to depict recognizably genuine events and people, it uses pseudonyms to disguise them, giving a simultaneous promise of real-life reference and refusal of it. This playful transgression of the art-life limit can be understood, in part, as a response to the new discursive conditions established by the mass-market literary trade. Leah Price has argued that the emergence of ghostwriting as an adjunct industry to the literary mass-market transformed cultural perceptions of autobiography, fiction, and authorship. Ghostwriting became defined "as the opposite of autobiography," making "authenticity depend on a threeway equation of author, signatory, and narrator—on the naming of the author not simply on the title page, but throughout the work. 'Art' becomes synonymous with plagiarism, solipsism with 'the impress of truth.'"<sup>39</sup> The Rossettis' own complex authorial masking was especially elaborate in that many readers knew it was contrived. Shaw was obviously aware that the work was by the Rossettis, because he refers to the author as "they" in the quotation cited earlier, but even across the Atlantic, outside the world of radical politics, a *New York Times* reviewer realized that *A Girl among the Anarchists* was written by a daughter of William Michael Rossetti, although he failed to discern that it was actually by two of them.<sup>40</sup>

Enmeshed as the novel is in the crowded sphere of fin de siècle radical print, where new publications are constantly popping up across London, the Rossettis' mischievous approach to their "author function," to use Michel Foucault's term, appears inextricably related to a cultural prolifer-

ation of print. To write in the genre of autobiography, seemingly an "embodied" form of prose, and yet self-consciously to fake a single-body existence, demonstrates that new conditions of authorship have emerged with new conditions of mediation. Pseudonymity and anonymity have long shielded authors' bodies, and often their gendered bodies, from public perception, but the Rossettis appropriate an embodied textual stance for an experiment in disembodied or falsely embodied revelation. For although parts of their memoir are fictionalized, as William Michael Rossetti wrote in his own 1906 memoir, *A Girl among the Anarchists* relates "with fancy-names and some modification of details, a genuine account of their experiences."<sup>41</sup> More than a novel pretending to be autobiography, and more than a pseudonymous autobiography, it claims the authority of the embodied autobiographical voice with the conscious awareness that many readers will recognize its deception. According to this maneuver, mass print culture has adapted to an awareness of the fiction of the authentically embodied author.

The Rossettis mark out the *bildungsroman*, like the autobiography, as a textual mode that, in its conventional form, is inadequate to express modern subjectivity. References to Meredith's maturity position the tale as a story of development—in the last line of the book, she is a "woman" rather than a "girl"—but the ambivalence of the conclusion prevents us from viewing her as an educated subject. In weighing whether to leave the newspaper, for example, Meredith asks, "How had I come to give such undue importance to the publication of a paper which, after all, was read by a very few, and those few for the most part already blind believers in the ideas it advocated? Yet I told myself that the *Tocsin* had done good work, and could yet do much. Besides, I had undertaken it, I must go on with it; life without an object would be intolerable" (287-88). To decide that a pointless object is better than no object calls into question the value of directional or progressive conceptions of the self. At the book's end, she has left the anarchist print shop for good, calling it "the place which had witnessed so much enthusiasm, so many generous hopes and aspirations, and where so many illusions lay buried" (302). One might say this tone suggests a successful journey into adult self-knowledge, except that her

postanarchist self is so acutely adrift, and she has nothing to replace anarchism in her life.

The ambiguity of the Rossettis' ending, as well as their deliberate toying with their author function, was very much against the moralistic grain of nineteenth-century women's life writing. Alison Booth has charted a vast English tradition, originating around 1830, of didactic volumes that cull together pieces on multiple historically significant women, and she argues that these "collective biographies," of which hundreds were produced, "might be the lost ancestors of late-twentieth-century women's studies."<sup>42</sup> Although the dual referents of the Rossettis' single protagonist could be said to echo the collective impulse of multibiography, their book's amoral perspective and tone of rueful amusement resists the genre's edifying aims. The book also departs from feminist discourse in many of its political claims: it offers a spirited defense of "free love" (separating the Rossettis from most feminist contemporaries, including Besant, who trumpeted their respectability as a moral platform from which to promote women's rights) and denounces intrusive governmental intervention. Liberal and socialist feminists tended to advocate state interventionism to combat domestic abuse, protect women's independent property rights, and otherwise serve feminist aims; but Meredith depicts the police and state authorities as hindrances to women's personal liberty, rather than protectors of it. The Rossettis' newspaper similarly reported regularly on police brutality and corrupt officials; a recurring column titled "Police, Parsons, and Politicians" culled together in one instance over twenty different news items on the misdeeds of those in power.<sup>43</sup>

Despite these differences from contemporary feminists, the Rossettis' curious mode of autobiographical self-presentation also serves feminist ends. Women's collaborative writing was itself key to fin de siècle feminism. Writerly pairs such as Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) and Somerville and Ross (Edith Somerville and Violet Martin Ross) modeled female creative partnerships that challenge the Romantic—and arguably male—notion of the author as autonomous genius. Beyond collaborating, the Rossettis actually alter their lives, in documenting them, to convey feminist contentions. *A Girl among the Anarchists* is a politi-

cal autobiography, but it owes more to the open-ended ambivalence of New Woman fiction—a genre that thrived in 1890s Britain, exemplified by authors such as Sarah Grand and Olive Schreiner—than to the lesson-laced life writing of Benjamin Franklin or John Stuart Mill.<sup>44</sup> The story begins, for example, with Meredith as a woman on her own. Her parents have died, her sister lives abroad, and her brother is always away: “I was used to looking after myself” (1). The real Rossettis had an invalid mother, three siblings, and many family responsibilities, but Meredith is solitary and independent—a fantasy version of the authors as a New Woman. Gone are factors that hampered their full participation in anarchism, such as parental authority and their mother’s illness. Lucy Rossetti died in the midst of the events the book describes, a terrible loss that nonetheless left the sisters much freer to pursue their political interests. *A Girl among the Anarchists* unsettlingly acknowledges this grim reality by killing off both parents before the story begins.

The separation between *A Girl among the Anarchists*’s apparent autobiographical “author” (Meredith) and its “authors” (the Rossettis) suggests that texts exist first and foremost on an intertextual plane, curiously removed from the bodies of their producers and from the real-life events to which they refer. If the Rossettis’ memoir articulates a theory about the new media conditions that it depicts, it is a theory of disembodiment. Authors and print have become less tethered to material circumstances, providing an opportunity for women authors—indeed, for all authors—to shed the trappings of gender and body within an anonymous mass print culture, even in autobiography. Although it is true that Isabel Meredith does have a sex and that her sex is the same as her authors’, the book nonetheless treats its authors’ two bodies as irrelevant, indicating that historical and material shifts in print culture fomented such ideas long before they were articulated in postmodern theory.

We find in Besant and the Rossettis’ works, for all their differences, an alertness to their own forms and conditions of mediation, an awareness of mass culture and mass audiences, and a new attentiveness to postmodern concerns with media and material. At the dawn of the age of mass media, their work situates feminism within this new sphere of authorship. The new, transitory sense of self, voice, and print at work in these narratives

captures a cultural moment that saw an unprecedented explosion of mass print media, a vigorous groundswell in radical journalism and publishing, a broader audience of readers, and manifold new aural and visual technologies. All these changes affected the way that author, narrator, and voice function in discourse, transforming texts' relations to bodies of origin. Rather than bemoaning the loss of personality within an expanding media sphere, the autobiographies of Besant and the Rossettis highlight the benefits of such shifts for women and for radical politics: the Rossettis celebrate how the presumed authority of the print media voice has become an increasingly impersonal—and genderless—entity, and Besant imagines new inroads for women's embodied perspective in political discourse via the transcendent medium of print.

#### NOTES

1. See, for example, Barbara Caine, "Beatrice Webb and the 'Woman Question,'" *History Workshop Journal* 14 (1982): 23-44; Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992); Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Jo Vellacott, "Feminist Consciousness and the First World War," *History Workshop Journal* 23 (1987): 81-101; Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
2. See Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998); or Patrick Brantlinger, *The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
3. On the "photomechanical revolution," see Geoffrey Wakeman, *Victorian Book Illustration: The Technical Revolution* (Newton Abbot, Devon, U.K.: David & Charles, 1973), 119-45; on image and vision, see Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), and *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992); on new audio devices, see Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 179-205.
4. Trev Lynn Broughton, *Men of Letters, Writing Lives: Masculinity and Literary Auto|Biography in the Late Victorian Period* (London: Routledge, 1999), 8.
5. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 69, 102.
6. Trev Lynn Broughton, "Women's Autobiography: The Self at Stake?" in *Autobiography and Questions of Gender*, ed. Shirley Neuman (London: Frank Cass, 1991), 79.

7. Linda Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), ix; Carol Hanbery Mackay, *Creative Negativity: Four Victorian Exemplars of the Female Quest* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
8. Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
9. *Annie Besant: An Autobiography* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893), 5, 364. Further citations appear in parentheses in the text.
10. Annie Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches*, pt. 1, *Our Corner* (January 1884), 1.
11. Mark Bevir, "Mothering India," *History Today* 56, no. 2 (February 2006): 19-25; Arthur H. Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); and Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
12. Karl Pearson, "The Woman Question," privately printed 1885, repr. in his *Ethic of Freethought: A Selection of Essays and Lectures* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1888), 371.
13. Annie Besant and G.W. Foote, *Is Socialism Sound? Verbatim Report of a Four Nights' Debate between Annie Besant and G.W. Foote* (London: Progressive Publishing Co., 1887), 109.
14. Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 242.
15. Leah Price, "From Ghostwriter to Typewriter: Delegating Authority at Fin de Siècle." in *The Faces of Anonymity: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publication from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert J. Griffin (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 214.
16. Laurel Brake, *Print in Transition. 1850-1910: Studies in Media and Book History* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave, 2001), 4.
17. Annie Besant, *Communication between Different Worlds*, 2nd ed. (Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1913), 4.
18. Nancy L. Paxton, "Feminism under the Raj: Complicity and Resistance in the Writings of Flora Annie Steel and Annie Besant," in *Women's Studies International Forum* 13, no. 4 (1990): 341.
19. Annie Besant, *Blasphemy* (London: Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, 1882), 2-8.
20. Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
21. Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*, 182.
22. Arthur failed to take a fair share of the labor of producing their anarchist journal, the *Torch*, and soon "O. and H. Rossetti" were the paper's only acknowledged editors. See Olive Garnett, *Tea and Anarchy! The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett, 1890-1893*, ed. Barry C. Johnson (London: Bartlett's Press, 1989), 134, 147; Juliet M. Soskice, *Chapters from Childhood: Reminiscences of an Artist's Granddaughter* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1972), 23-27.
23. Olivia Rossetti Agresti, *After Mussolini What?* (New York: Italian Historical Society, 1937); Mario Missiroli and Olivia Rossetti Agresti, *The Organisation of the Arts and Professions in the Fascist Guild State* (Rome: Laboremus, 1938); and Tomaso Sillani, ed., *What Is Fascism and Why?* trans. Helen Rossetti Angeli (London: Ernest Benn, 1931).

24. Demetres Tryphonopoulos, "Ezra Pound and Olivia Rossetti Agresti: Their Correspondence," in *Ezra Pound and Europe*, ed. Richard Taylor and Claus Melchior (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 93-104; *I Cease Not to Yowl: Ezra Pound's Letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti*, ed. Demetres Tryphonopoulos and Leon Surette (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998). For more on the sisters' lives before and after fascism, see *The Anecdotal of an Interpreter: The Reminiscences of Olivia Rossetti Agresti* (1958) in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University; Mark Samuels Lasner and Vincent Brome, "A BBC Interview with Mrs. Helen Rossetti Angeli," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 2, no. 2 (1982): 7-19; and Angela Thirlwell, *William and Lucy: The Other Rossettis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
25. "A Debate: Anarchism versus Governmental Socialism," *Torch* 3, no. 6 (15 June 1893): 4.
26. In France, anarchism did not attract as many women. See John Hutton, "Camille Pissarro's *Turpitudes Sociales* and Late-Nineteenth-Century French Anarchist Anti-Feminism," *History Workshop Journal* 24 (Autumn 1987): 32-61.
27. Hermia Oliver, *The International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 30.
28. Gilbert K. Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw* (New York: John Lane, 1909), 73.
29. Karl Pearson, "Socialism and Sex," *To-Day* (1887), repr. in his *Ethic of Freethought*, 43; and "Socialism and Natural Selection," *Fortnightly Review* (1894), repr. in his *The Chances of Death and Other Studies in Evolution*, vol. 1 (London: Edward Arnold, 1897), 137-38.
30. For more on the discussion group, see Lucy Bland, "Rational Sex or Spiritual Love? The Men and Women's Club of the 1880s," *Women's Studies International Forum* 13, nos. 1-2 (1990): 33-48.
31. See Matthew Thomas, *Anarchist Ideas and Counter-Cultures in Britain, 1880-1914* (Aldershot, Hampshire, U.K.: Ashgate, 2005), 44. John Quail treats the Rossettis less dismissively but equally parenthetically in *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists* (London: Granada, 1978).
32. Arthur Rossetti to Max Nettlau, 9 Nov. 1893, Max Nettlau Papers, International Institute for Social History (hereafter cited as IISH).
33. Garnett, *Tea and Anarchy!* 126.
34. *Torch*, 2, no. 7 (15 July 1892): 2-3.
35. A major rift in the *Torch* group was occasioned by the Rossettis' departure, due to a power struggle over the paper (Olivia Rossetti to Max Nettlau, 10 Mar. 1896, Nettlau Papers, IISH).
36. Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography*, 174.
37. Isabel Meredith [Helen Rossetti and Olivia Rossetti], *A Girl among the Anarchists* (1903; repr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 18, 15. Further citations appear in parentheses in the text.
38. Tryphonopoulos and Surette, *I Cease Not to Yowl*, xiii.
39. Price, "From Ghostwriter to Typewriter," 228.
40. W.L. Alden, "Mr. Alden's Views," *New York Times*, "Review of Books and Art," 25 July 1903, 14.

41. William Michael Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner's, 1906), 450.
42. Alison Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3.
43. "Police, Parsons, and Politicians," *Torch* 2, no. 4 (18 Sept. 1895): 52-53.
44. Elsewhere, I position the Rossetti's volume within the late-Victorian genre of New Woman fiction; see Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Framed: The New Woman Criminal in British Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

## notes on contributors

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