

ALICE THORNTON: A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SUBJECT

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Sometime in 1668 Alice Thornton of East Newton in County York deliberately sat down to write about her life. It had been her practice to write about her experiences since her "first youth and childhood"¹ in some sort of diary form and these were now written up in a work called *A Book of Remembrances*.² This book in turn was later considerably fleshed out to become her *Autobiography*, and it is with this larger work (of some 280 pages) that I will be dealing with here.

Why did an ordinary woman such as Alice Thornton take this step? Autobiography as a genre had to an extent 'taken off' during the seventeenth century.³ Many reasons have been given for this: the growing emphasis upon individual experience encouraged by Renaissance confidence and Reformation Protestantism; the economic and social rise of the self-made man; the resultant movement between the levels of the hierarchical social class systems which encouraged justificatory writings etc.⁴ Some of these autobiographies were of the *res gestae* type — an account of public achievements by successful Renaissance men (at least in their own eyes). Others were conversion narratives — life stories impelled by the desire to demonstrate the subject's belief in God's providential control of his or her life. I mention "her" here because in a century where men had necessarily taken control of this new genre of the "individual", a few women also took the step of writing about their lives in a formal manner, some under the pretext of the more gender friendly conversion narrative. There are about ten extant women's autobiographies from the seventeenth century, although there are many more diaries, journals and short personal justifications of particular episodes in the lives of the authors.⁵

Some of these autobiographies also concerned themselves with the *res gestae* of women's lives, for the most part of a more private though not less important kind of achievement. Bet-

rothals, marriages, births and deaths (often of their own children), family and friendship connections — these were the events many women wrote about, events which until recently have relegated their writings to a second class status.

Alice Thornton, although a member of the "true Protestant Church of England" (p78), did not write her life as a conversion narrative *per se*; yet she does spend a great deal of time contemplating the providential design of God in her life. The account of every event, whether insignificant or momentous, is accompanied by a meditation about God's purpose for that event. In a way this constant and habitual looking towards God seems a denial of what has traditionally been seen as the autobiographical impulse — the proclamation of the individual self — but the fact is that very few seventeenth century female selves could ever conceive of their identities as separate from God or, indeed, from his representatives on earth, fathers and husbands.

Like all autobiographical subjects, Alice Thornton was both the subject of and subject to the cultural discourses of her society. Spiritual, social, familial, and intellectual discourses all determined the boundaries of self-identification; yet Alice Thornton's acceptance of an appropriate point of intersection of these discourses for a satisfying construction of 'self' was also dependent upon the circumstances and events of her own particular life and the amount of significance she determined to give these in her autobiography. Even though her 'self' was constructed for her in many ways, then, Alice Thornton did have a say, whether directly or indirectly, in the final determinacy or indeterminacy of that 'self' or those 'selves' called 'Alice Thornton'.

When she began to write her book of remembrances she sent the first volume to her friend Dafeny Lightfoote so that:

... she might be able to satisfy all my friends of my life and conversation, — that it was not such as my deadly enmyes suggested, and the reasons I had to take caire for all my poore children, and what condition I was reduced into affter the intaile was cutt off, and my other great remarks of my life ...

(p259)

Written soon after the death of her husband, the book was an attempt to justify her life and his. Mr Thornton seems to have been

a poor financial manager, much worse, Alice Thornton obliquely implies, than either herself, or that model money manager, her mother. Moreover, Alice had entered into the marriage with good prospects as opposed to Mr Thornton's relatively poor ones. She, after all, was the daughter of the former Lord Deputy of Ireland, and although her father's will was first of all lost and then disputed by her brother, eventually she could expect to be as well provided for as her father had arranged.

Despite the fact that hers was a marriage of deep affection, Alice Thornton felt obliged in her autobiography to give the details of her financial affairs with all the exactitude she could. Her resentment and bitterness in the final thirty or so pages is directed at the source of the slander, her niece by marriage, Mrs Danby, and her accomplice, Mrs Batt. The strength of feeling displayed towards these "deadly enymyes" is clear evidence that this was the motivating force that led her to embark on the more lengthy and formal business of autobiography proper. She has to justify her own financial acumen and caution, and her own good Christian character:

... I blesse God for His grace to me, in giving me to strive and indeavour affter the adorning of my spirritt and heart with all those Christian vertues of faith, humility, patience, meekness, chastity, and charity ... (p270)

Ironically, she had shown this last virtue of charity in a practical way by giving money to that very niece who is now slandering her, and she does not fail to point this out.

Justification, then, was one powerful motive for Alice Thornton's autobiographical impulse. But if we are to believe her claim that such writing had been her practice since youth then it does appear that she also possessed the more common autobiographical desire: to construct a 'true' picture of her life, her character, and her social, familial and historical context. Indeed, the portrayal of her life did not begin and end with the domestic events of her own life. She spends much time on her immediate family history, and on producing character studies of her father, Sir Christopher Wandesforde, Lord Deputy of Ireland, her mother, her siblings, her husband and children. She also makes reference to the execution of King Charles, the civil war itself, the

particularly poor behaviour of the Scots who fought on the side of the Parliamentary forces, and the Irish Rebellion.

Nevertheless, the bulk of Alice Thornton's autobiography is concerned with what happened to her either directly, or more or less indirectly, as it affected a member of her family. Her numerous illnesses (including haemorrhoids) and her physical accidents are described, as are her financial troubles. All her immediate family's near accidents, illnesses and deaths are treated at length — and *everything* is placed in the context of her religious belief.

Thornton's apparent unwillingness to separate her own life and affairs from those of her family reflects the life circumstances of women in the seventeenth century. It also places her firmly within Nancy Chodorow's version of 'relationally defined' women, women who construct their 'selves' primarily through their connection with others.⁶ However, Alice Thornton seems to be involved in producing a different kind of self to that constructed *only* in relationship to others such as has been posited for the 'Dorothy Wordsworth' of the *Journals* for instance.⁷ Thornton moves towards a version of herself as a feeling, directing, thinking being who can see others as 'other' than herself. By the same token, she does not seek to create the same sort of extremely individual self in history which her contemporary, Margaret Cavendish, deliberately set out to fashion in her autobiography. Cavendish tells her reader exactly why she is writing about and, indeed, living her life:

... I think it no crime to wish myself the exactest of nature's works, my thread of life the longest, my chain of destiny the strongest, my mind the peaceablest; my life the pleasantest, my death the easiest, and the greatest saint in heaven ... For I am very ambitious, yet it is neither for beauty, wit, titles, wealth, or power, but as they are steps to raise me to fame's tower, which is to live by remembrance in after-ages ...⁸

Alice Thornton, too, forges an identifiably individual self, although not as bold or as stark a one as this; nevertheless, she hammers away at the events of her life, moulding them to the view of her self she wishes to produce, and placing them firmly in God's design for her life.

One of the ways she constructs this self is by comparison with the lives (and deaths) of others. One of the first important

episodes of this nature is her account of the death of her elder sister, Lady Danby. "Account" is perhaps too dry a word for the full scale production this scene becomes in Thornton's autobiography, for Lady Danby is re-created in these pages as the exemplary Protestant woman and mother.⁹

Nineteen-year-old Alice Wandesforde, as she was then, attended the bedside of her sister as did her mother, her friend Dafeny Lightfoote, Lady Armitage, and Alice's ubiquitous Aunt Norton — the community of women we so often see at these scenes. Lady Danby's husband, Thomas, was fighting for the King and arrived only when it appeared that his wife was not going to survive long after the birth of this, her sixteenth, child.

The child was born "after exceeding sore travill" and assisted into the world by "one dame Sworre". For a month after the birth Lady Danby was extremely ill yet during that weary time she displayed her faith and her absolute resignation to God's will. She prayed for her own soul, "for pardon and remission of sins", and for the souls and lives of her husband, her children, and all her family and friends. She also prayed for the restoration of the King, the Church, and the kingdom's peace. Lady Danby is even portrayed by her sister as a kind of prophet predicting "that God would humble the kingdome by afflictions for their sin and security". (p51)

In this manner, Lady Danby is presented by Alice Thornton some twenty years later as having lived the final days of her life: praying, comforting others, resigning herself to the fact of death, seeking assurances on the future material well-being of her children, and finally dying:

... immediately she said with as strong a voice as she could, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,' then, giving a little breathing sigh, delivered up her soule onto the hands of her Saviour ...
(p52)

Alice Thornton herself was not present at the actual death bed, having returned home worn out a short time before. However, whilst she may have received eye-witness reports, the degree of authenticity of Lady Danby's words and the exactitude of the detail of the scene itself can easily be doubted. As can be seen elsewhere in this autobiography the lengthy extracts of reported conversation, from memory or from hearsay, are unlikely to be

accurate. Indeed, Thornton is so obviously prepared to throw caution to the wind on these occasions that it appears that a concern for absolutely authentic words and actions was not a pressing one for her project. What was important was to portray Lady Danby as the model seventeenth century woman:

... as she lived the waies of godlinesse from her youth, so may she be a godly example to all her children. She was a most obedient childe to her parents, loving and loiall, affectionate and observant to her husband, a tender and prudent mother to her children ... a wise and discreet mistresse towards her servants...truly affectionate to all her relations in general, and courteously affable to all neighbours and friends. (p53)

Surely Alice Thornton had a key part to play in the making of this godly example, in the pages of her autobiography. Her sister's virtues were the expected behaviours of a seventeenth century gentlewoman, and if Alice Thornton wished to make a saint of her she could only do so by having her excel in the particular relational roles of daughter, wife, and mother.

Alice Thornton seeks to present her own life as an attempt at attaining the same sort of virtues, partly no doubt in answer to the recent slandering of her own character by her niece; yet she is unable to exclude an awareness of how far she fell short of the mark. Modesty and humility necessitated a different kind of construction of her own character, but we do not read her attempts as "false modesty". The complicated interaction between her character, the events of her life, and the often painful need to see these events as God's will ensures that we get no simple depiction of Alice Thornton's "self". The difficulties involved in reconciling this triad of character, life, and God's will are most in evidence in her reactions to the tragedies of her children's deaths.

During the seventeen years of her marriage to William Thornton, Alice bore nine children, of whom only three survived infancy. (This was by no means an unusual survival rate for her time.) Bearing children was an expected cultural, familial, and religious duty and many women knew the dangers for themselves and their babies, and were terrified at the prospect. It should not surprise us then that Alice Thornton had enough doubts about giving up her contented single life to make her fall ill on her wedding day. I am sure that similar misgivings which are often

expressed by seventeenth century women are symptoms of the terror they felt at the constant round of births and deaths that awaited them.

Despite the frequency of such deaths in society at large and in her own family, Alice Thornton seldom fails to blame herself for them. Sometimes the guilt she feels is focussed on an event in her pregnancy, such as a difficult walk (p84) or a fall (p95) which, in her view, was responsible for the child being wrongly positioned in the womb before the birth. But even if such a 'rational' explanation could be found, it was not enough to remove the burden of guilt involved.

Her reaction to the loss of her first child in 1652 is more culturally acceptable than is the case with other, later deaths. Here Thornton attempts to show a spirit of resignation not only about the child's death but also about her own sickness which followed. (During this illness she suffered "distempers", "faintings", fevers; her hair fell out, her fingernails and toenails came off, and her teeth turned black.) However, in a long prayer of thanksgiving for the deliverance of this dead child Thornton frequently mentions her offences and her repentance; her implicit acknowledgement is that the sickness especially was both a punishment for and a test of her ability to accept God's control of her life:

... lett it incourage me to put my whole trust and confidence in
Thee alone ... that I may accept of the punishment of my
iniquities, and learne by this not to offend. (p89)

Later Thornton is slightly more direct in her juxtaposition of the description of the death of her sixth child next to an account of her own spiritual failings. However, it is with the death of her eighth child, Joyce, that the anger and confusion under the surface of these guilty outpourings displays itself with real poignancy:

... I dare not, I will not repine at this chastisement of the Lord, though it may seeme never soe troublesome to part with my suckeing childe of my wombe, but say, Good is the will of the Lord, inasmuch as He hath spaired my deare husband's life, which I soe earnestly begged of Him, spairing my owne allso, who is the vildest of creatures, and has given me still the lives of my husband and my three children, for which I will

praise the Lord our God, and begge of him patience to sustaine
the losse of my sweete infant. (p150)

These are the moments when we see the difficulties of a seventeenth century woman trying to sustain a view of herself which will satisfy all the expectations of what she ought to be. She is no saintly 'Lady Danby' figure, and no doubt Lady Danby wasn't either; yet Thornton continually feels the need to try to forge this figure out of her own life events. This results in a mixture of these disturbing moments of contradictory emotion, and other episodes which are constructed to reinforce a picture of an Alice Thornton who is secure and confident in her belief, or who will be once she has learned her lesson.

One of these episodes is the death of her daughter Betty who at eighteen months of age becomes a model of faith no less powerful than her aunt, Lady Danby herself:

... That deare, sweete angell grew worse, and indured it with
infinitt patience, and when Mr Thornton and I came to pray for
her, she held up those sweete eyes and hands to her deare
Father in heaven, looked up, and cryed in her language, "Dad,
dad, dad". with such vemency as if inspired by her holy
father in heaven to deliver her sweet soule into her heavenly
Father's hands and at which time we allso did with great
zeale deliver up my deare infant's soule into the hand of my
heavenly father, and then she swetly fell asleepe and went
out of this miserable world like a lamb. (p95)

This is the kind of thing the Thorntons had to believe if they were to survive such tragedies with their comforting religious belief intact; but perhaps the number of occasions on which Alice Thornton fell seriously ill after such deaths speaks of another and more fearful kind of disbelief. The fact is that the cultural and spiritual imperatives which sought to determine a certain kind of "self" for Alice Thornton were often implicitly rejected by her as unable to explain the facts of suffering, death, or even accidental falls. There was no discourse available which could adequately do that, not even that of the "true Protestant Church of England".

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REFERENCES

1. Alice Thornton, *The Autobiography of Mrs Alice Thornton of East Newton*. Co. York (Yorkshire: Surtees Society, Vol 62, 1873), p.271.
2. See Elspeth Graham et al., (eds), *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp.147-149.
3. See Paul Delany, *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969). Delany cites Thomas Whythorne's *Autobiography* of 1576 as the "first substantial English autobiography" p.13. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, however, had been written down in the mid-fifteenth century and must have some sort of claim to the title. Delany writes mainly about male autobiographers, although he does devote one chapter (out of eleven) to female autobiography in the seventeenth-century. Alice Thornton is not mentioned.
4. See Delany, chapter 2, and Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), Ch 2.
5. For recent collections of extracts from these see Graham et al., and Charlotte F. Otten, (ed), *English Women's Voices, 1540-1700* (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1992).
6. See Susan Stanford Friedman, *Women's Autobiographical Selves, Theory and Practice* in Shari Benstock (ed), *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (London: Routledge, 1988). Friedman sets the work of the social psychologist Nancy Chodorow and other influential feminist social theorists within the context of women's autobiography.
7. For an example of this critical position see James Holt McGavran, Jr, *Dorothy Wordsworth's Journals: Putting Herself Down* in Benstock op cit. pp230-253.
8. in Graham et al, p.97.
9. Thornton, pp49-53.