An Opera Singer's Gothic Fiction: The Autobiographies of Sims Reeves

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In George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876), the eponymous protagonist is "stung to the quick" by the suggestion that he could become like the famous Italian tenors Mario and Tamberlik.[1] He is offended because he believes that their profession is "not thought of [as being] among possible destinations for the sons of English gentlemen."[2] As this quotation suggests, opera was seen as a particularly unsuitable occupation for a man in nineteenth-century Britain, for which there were two main reasons. Firstly, music was widely considered to be a feminised pursuit that compromised the perceived masculinity of men who were professional singers.[3] Secondly, the identity of British singers was complicated still further, since opera attracted prejudice as an Italian art form that was frequently imagined to be at odds with the British character.[4] Due to such attitudes, it became imperative for British male opera singers to assert their masculinity, respectability, and national identity. The genre of autobiography offered these men a unique chance to do so, and a number of singers across the century seized the opportunity.[5] Although the majority of these autobiographies have hitherto been neglected by scholars, they are complex and often unusual works that deserve

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[1] George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh & London: Blackwood and Sons, 1876), 306–7.
[2] Eliot, 1:308.
[3] For more information on music as feminised, see: Corissa Gould, 'Aspiring to Manliness: Edward Elgar and the Pressures of Hegemonic Masculinity', in *Masculinity and Western Musical Practice*, ed. Ian Biddle and Kirsten Gibson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 161–81; Derek B. Scott, 'The Sexual Politics of Victorian Musical Aesthetics', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 119, no. 1 (1994): 91–114.
[4] Annemarie McAllister, *John Bull's Italian Snakes and Ladders: English Attitudes to Italy in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007); George Biddlecombe, 'The Construction of a Cultural Icon: The Case of Jenny Lind', in *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies*, ed. Peter Horton and Bennett Zon, vol. 3 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 45–61; Deborah Rohr, *The Careers of British Musicians, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
[5] For example: Michael Kelly, *Reminiscences of Michael Kelly*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1826); Henry Phillips, *Musical and Personal Recollections During Half a Century*, 2 vols (London: Charles J. Skeet, 1864); Sims Reeves, *Sims Reeves: His Life and Recollections* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co, 1888); Sims Reeves, *My Jubilee: Or Fifty Years of Artistic Life* (London: The London Music Publishing Company, 1889); Charles Santley, *Student and Singer: The Reminiscences of Charles Santley* (New York and London: Macmillan & Co., 1892); Charles Santley, *Reminiscences of My Life* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1909).

critical attention.[6] Within this body of literature, the writings of one singer are particularly fascinating: those of the tenor Sims Reeves (1821–1900).

Reeves was typically described as "the most famous British tenor of the century."[7] This was no mere hyperbole; he sang before British audiences for over five decades. Initially, Reeves established his reputation in Italian opera, making a notable early appearance at La Scala in 1846 as Edgardo in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. He reprised this role in Britain shortly afterwards, where he continued to gain acclaim in roles including Elvino in Bellini's *La sonnambula* and the title role in Verdi's *Ernani*. Around the middle of the century, Reeves focused increasingly on concert work and soon became Britain's leading interpreter of ballads. At the same time, he forged a reputation in oratorio. A return to the operatic stage in the 1860s saw him take on parts including the title role in Gounod's *Faust*. Throughout the 1870s Reeves appeared mainly in concert, and in the following decade he joined the staff of the newly founded Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He gave a farewell concert at the Royal Albert Hall in 1891.

Reeves's autobiographies are unique on several counts. Although other singers had written two-volume memoirs, Reeves was the first to write two separate autobiographical works: *Sims Reeves: His Life and Recollections* (1888: henceforth *Recollections*) and *My Jubilee: Or Fifty Years of Artistic Life* (1889: henceforth *My Jubilee*). These autobiographies were carefully constructed in order to project a favourable image for Reeves, who also used them to respond to his critics. Unfortunately for Reeves, there were many criticisms to answer. Though he enjoyed much fame and success, his career was dogged by controversy. He was well known for cancelling appearances, doing so with such regularity that rumours of a drinking problem soon began to circulate. This gossip, coupled with criticism of the high fees he commanded, meant that Reeves was sometimes lampooned in the press as an arrogant, vain, and overpaid alcoholic. One satirical article of 1871, which claimed that Reeves drinks "more wine than any respectable artist had any right to drink", is typical.[8] This scathing piece

[6] For a preliminary exploration of the autobiographies of Sims Reeves and Charles Santley, see: Anna Maria Barry, '"The Singer's Work Is a Picture Painted on Air": Operatic Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century', *Peer English*, no. 10 (2015): 57–72. These autobiographies are explored in more detail in my PhD thesis: Anna Maria Barry, 'The Dream of a Madman: Constructing the Male Opera Singer in Nineteenth-Century Britain' (Oxford Brookes University, 2017). Please see below, n.26, for details of existing scholarship on Michael Kelly's autobiography.
[7] See, for example: Anon., 'Death of Mr. Sims Reeves', *Northern Echo*, 26 October 1900.
[8] Anon., 'The Great Tenor', *The Hornet*, 10 May 1871.

sarcastically refuted the charges that had been levelled at Reeves in a manner that (deliberately) had the converse effect of underscoring them. It concluded with the lines:

> The great tenor, however, *does not*, as has been whispered, require managers to beseech him on their bended knees to sing for them at a pound a note [...] he is a Great Tenor, and one has only to see him on a night when he has not mislaid his voice lozenges to find it out, especially if someone has the temerity *to encore* him.[9]

Though these opinions were not universally held, they were prevalent enough to cause substantial damage to Reeves's reputation. He thus faced two sets of problems: general prejudices about British men who sang opera professionally on the one hand, and specific accusations about his character on the other. This meant that, unlike other singers, he had a double incentive to turn to autobiography, a medium that offered him a unique opportunity to negotiate his public identity. Through life-writing, he was able to respond to his critics and craft a reputation as a respectable British man. Furthermore, autobiography allowed Reeves to create an enduring documentary record of his career – a particularly keen concern for a singer in an age before sound recording technology.

It is not just Reeves's motivation that was unique, but also his style. His first autobiography is particularly unusual, as a substantial portion of this work might more accurately be defined as gothic fiction. This is because the majority of its chapters take the form of fictional short stories. Though it is implicit that these stories are not grounded in reality, Reeves curiously presents them as events he has actually experienced. Moreover, he takes a starring role in many of the tales. It might be argued that this unique blend of fiction and autobiography stretches the boundaries of the latter genre; but these works are presented as recollections both literally (through the title of the volume) and figuratively (through Reeves's presentation of his imagined stories as true ones.) These tales return repeatedly to the themes of horror, death and romance that define gothic fiction. The eighteenth-century origins of gothic fiction can be traced back to Horace Walpole's celebrated novel of 1764, *The Castle of Otranto,* which purported to be Walpole's translation of a genuine Italian manuscript of the sixteenth century.[10] Here a clear parallel may be drawn with Reeves's tales, which also claim to be true,

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[9] Anon.

[10] Though first published in 1764, a new edition of 1765 was published with the subtitle 'A Gothic Story', which (unlike the earlier version) identified Walpole as the author: Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story* (London: William Bathoe and Thomas Lownds, 1765).

indicating the tenor's awareness of gothic literary conventions.[11] Following the success of Walpole's novel, the gothic genre enjoyed great popularity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Reeves's stories draw upon many of the key tropes that the gothic fiction of this period employed: the tyrant, the deranged woman, ruined abbeys and castles, and the supernatural.[12]

In the nineteenth century the gothic genre evolved into the style that many scholars now recognise as 'Victorian gothic'.[13] The hallmarks of this style include an increased interest in psychology and monstrosity, the quintessential example being Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novel *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.[14] Victorian gothic also favoured the short story format and bore the influence of both detective fiction and the sensation novel.[15] This latter genre was a popular form of fiction emerged in the 1860s. Its "distinctively transgressive" stories typically featured ordinary middle-class characters experiencing sensational revelations and surprising plot twists.[16] Reeves's tales conform to many of these Victorian gothic conventions: they are sensational short stories and often display an interest in psychology. Though it may at first appear counterintuitive that subject matter of this nature could be used to create a respectable persona for their author, these stories frequently feature Reeves himself as an honourable hero. Furthermore, they also assign Reeves an alternative professional identity: the author. This, he seemed to recognise, was potentially less problematic than his operatic identity. Nonetheless, Reeves's second autobiography features no fiction. Instead, this volume conforms to the typical conventions of autobiography, offering a straightforward chronological account of his life and career.[17]

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[11] Other gothic novels that adopt the guise of being true stories transcribed from freshly discovered manuscripts include William Beckford, *An Arabian Tale, From An Unpublished Manuscript* (London: J. Johnson, 1786) and Clara Reeve, *The Old English Baron, A Gothic Story* (London: Edward & Charles Dilly, 1778). Beckford's novel was written in French in 1782 but not published in English until 1786; it is now widely known as *Vathek*. An earlier version of Reeve's novel was published anonymously in 1777 under the title *The Champion of Virtue.*

[12] For an outline of the typical features of gothic fiction see: Jerrold E. Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2–3.

[13] Chaplin recognises this definition in her work on nineteenth-century gothic literature, but cautions that the term can be a somewhat artificial distinction which risks understating the genre's continuity across the century: Sue Chaplin, *Gothic Literature* (London: York Press, 2011), 81–103.

[14] Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1886).

[15] See: Chaplin, *Gothic Literature*, 81–103.

[16] Pamela K. Gilbert, 'Introduction', in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. Pamela K. Gilbert (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 3.

[17] For more on the typical conventions of performers' memoirs see: Cheryl Wanko, *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lubbock: Texas Tech

The first section of this article will focus on Reeves's earlier autobiography, arguing that the singer attempted to negotiate his problematic identity through the medium of fiction. It will analyse several of his short stories, demonstrating that they can be read as both a coded defence of his profession and an attempt to fashion a more favourable public image. For example, some presented opera as a respectable and manly pursuit, while others were designed to defend Reeves against charges of greed and alcoholism. The article will then consider the non-fictional portions of Reeves's two autobiographies, exploring the tactics and tropes that the tenor adopted in order to present his profession in a favourable light. It will conclude by contemplating a further unique aspect of Reeves's life-writing: its reception. Both of his volumes were widely reviewed, offering a particularly rich opportunity to assess the impact that autobiographies could have on the public image and enduring reputation of a musical personality in Victorian Britain.

Far from serving as an isolated case study, this article seeks to contribute to our understanding of musical auto/biography more broadly by addressing several gaps in scholarship, which has hitherto predominantly focused on auto/biographies of composers rather than performers. This is consistent with a broader trend in the field of theatre history. The autobiographies of performers (actors as well as singers) have been widely regarded with cynicism due to their "suspect reliability" and "self-promoting agendas".[18] Consequently, historians have tended merely to trawl the autobiographies of actors and singers for objective and verifiable facts, rather than examining them critically.[19] It is perhaps not surprising that performers' works should be seen as especially problematic as their profession entails the embodiment of fictional identities. However, an acknowledgement that such works are subjective constructs rather than objective records should not lead to the assumption that they lack scholarly value. This is recognised by Christopher Wiley, who has explained that the value of life-writing can "[hinge] not so much on the factual information offered by authors as on the precise ways in which those details are expressed."[20] Consequently, this article's

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University Press, 2003); Thomas Postlewait, 'Theatre Autobiographies: Some Preliminary Concerns for the Historian', *Assaph C* 16 (2000): 157–72; Thomas Postlewait, 'Autobiography and Theatre History', in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, ed. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. Mc Coachie (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 248–72.

[18] Postlewait, 'Theatre Autobiographies', 157.

[19] Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 95.

[20] Christopher Wiley, '"A Relic of an Age Still Capable of a Romantic Outlook": Musical Biography and The Master Musicians Series, 1899–1906', *Comparative Criticism* 25 (November 2003): 161–202, at 162.

close analysis of one singer's autobiographical output offers a fresh perspective on the genre more widely. It will raise pertinent questions about how a musical figure decided to present himself publicly, both during his lifetime and for the sake of posterity, rather than merely focusing on how an individual's life story has been constructed and interpreted by other writers.

This article will focus particularly on the ways in which issues of gender and national identity were negotiated within the works in question. More specifically, it will consider the construction of British masculinity within Reeves's two volumes. The majority of scholarship on musical auto/biography and gender has focused on the lives of women.[21] This is evident in the field of singer studies: although little work has been undertaken on the autobiographies of opera singers, that which can be found is concerned almost exclusively with the life-writing of prima donnas.[22] Scholarship on the autobiographies of male opera singers is far scarcer, and almost entirely limited to the memoirs of tenor Michael Kelly (1762–1826).[23] However, this work is predominantly concerned with Kelly's descriptions of composers, including Mozart and Stephen Storace.[24] In other words, the focus is on what Kelly told us about others, rather than what Kelly was telling us about himself. Scholars, then, have largely failed to explore how autobiographies written by male singers are (like those written by their female counterparts) a space where gender identities are publicly constructed and disseminated.

Sims Reeves: His Life and Recollections

The chapters in Reeves's first volume alternate between fiction and autobiography. The first chapter recounts a grisly tale of a domestic mass murder, whilst the second launches into a more conventional memoir that recounts the author's early life. The rest of the volume

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[21] For example: Christopher Wiley, 'Music and Literature: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and "The First Woman to Write an Opera"', *The Musical Quarterly* 96, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 263–95; Christopher Wiley, '"When a Woman Speaks the Truth About Her Body": Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and the Challenges of Lesbian Auto/Biography', *Music and Letters* 85, no. 3 (August 2004): 388–414; Elizabeth Wood, 'Women, Music and Ethel Smyth: A Pathway in the Politics of Music', *The Massachusetts Review* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 125–39.

[22] See, for example: Joy H. Calico, 'Staging Scandal with Salome and Elektra', in *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 72; Alexandra Wilson, 'Prima Donnas or Working Girls? Opera Singers and Female Role Models in Britain, 1900-1925', *Women's History Magazine* 55 (2007): 6.

[23] Kelly, *Reminiscences*.

[24] See, for example: Jane Girdham, 'A Note of Stephen Storace and Michael Kelly', *Music and Letters* 76, no. 1 (February 1995): 64–67. The only other substantial assessment of Kelly's autobiography is: Alec Hyatt King, 'Introduction', in *Reminiscences of Michael Kelly* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), v–xv.

follows this same pattern, moving between fiction and autobiography. Reeves described this format early in *Recollections*, explaining that he intended to share "the practical details of my life: occasionally pausing to draw aside the curtain which shrouds some strange experiences I have encountered".[25] This strategy seems particularly risky, as the inclusion of fictional chapters could cast into doubt the veracity of the more conventional sections of autobiography. Furthermore, as we will see, these distinctions are sometimes blurred; for instance, when Reeves appears as a character in his fictional stories. Consequently, it is challenging for a reader to differentiate between fiction and (purported) fact – especially if they happen to be dipping in and out of the volume, instead of reading it from cover to cover. Nevertheless, through this unusual blend of autobiography and fiction, the tenor attempted to negotiate a coherent public identity for himself. Reeves's approach is certainly distinctive. Paul John Eakin has argued that all autobiographical efforts are fundamentally works of subjective fiction, rather than objective fact.[26] This, he suggests, is because they are all essentially constructs and products of the imagination. While this might be true of all autobiographies to a greater or lesser extent, Reeves's first volume is located towards one end of the spectrum since it so self-consciously blends fiction with fact. Despite their unconventional nature, a close reading of these fictional stories makes it clear what Reeves was attempting to achieve.

The fictional story most revealing of the singer's intentions is 'The Bishop's Daughter', whose protagonist, a promising and respectable young British tenor called Harry Sherstone, is a thinly disguised version of the author himself.[27] Like Reeves, Sherstone is from Kent and received his early musical education in a local church choir. This parallel was by no means hidden from the reader, as an account of Reeves's youthful service in a Kentish church choir was given three chapters previously.[28] Sherstone falls in love with the beloved daughter of the local bishop, whom we are told is an "obstinate and aggressive" man.[29] The bishop forbids his daughter from seeing Sherstone, whom he feels is "drifting into evil courses" as his singing

[25] Reeves, *Recollections*, 15.
[26] Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
[27] Reeves, *Recollections*, 36–50.
[28] Reeves, 15–16.
[29] Reeves, 37.

career progresses.[30] The bishop's disapproval of Sherstone's career is presented as unjust; the singer defensively reminds him: "I am a gentleman's son".[31]

The story continues in a subsequent chapter entitled 'La Scala'.[32] A fictionalised version of Reeves himself appears in this chapter, where he comes across the bishop's daughter in Milan. Due to heartbreak over her separation from Sherstone, she is suffering from melancholia, which her father fears will prove fatal. Reeves is able to reunite her with Sherstone, who is coincidentally performing at La Scala. This makes Sherstone an even closer parallel to Reeves, as both are in the unusual position of being Englishmen singing at La Scala. As noted, Reeves famously made his own debut here, and readers had access to the tenor's account of this occasion in the chapter immediately preceding 'The Bishop's Daughter'. As a result of Reeves's intervention, the bishop recants and allows the young couple to marry. Through this story, the author attempts to demonstrate that it is unjust and hypocritical to exclude singers from polite society. Using a thinly disguised version of himself as the wronged protagonist of this chapter, Reeves launches a coded defence of his own social standing and an implicit attack on those who feel that opera singing is a disreputable profession. This chapter effectively contains two fictional representations of its author, in the forms of Sherstone and the fictionalised Reeves. Evidently, the tenor was attempting to present two versions of himself: the respected (and eventually accepted) young singer he wanted to be, and the more problematic man that he was. By presenting the character with his own name as the hero helping to combat prejudice against singers, Reeves may have been signalling his own keenness to challenge negative attitudes towards his profession.

A similar message emerges strongly from another of Reeves's fictional stories, entitled '"Mephisto" Behind the Scenes'.[33] This chapter relates the tale of a lord who takes advantage of female performers backstage. One evening the fictionalised Reeves sees the lord preying on a young singer, before discovering that he has left the theatre with her. An alarmed Reeves runs after the lord's carriage and liberates the frightened girl. On freeing her from the predator's clutches, Reeves dramatically tells the lord: "I do no fear you or any man, and if you have any grievance in the matter, bring it into a court of law."[34] Though this story,

[30] Reeves, 44.
[31] Reeves, 49.
[32] Reeves, 51–59.
[33] Reeves, 101–9.
[34] Reeves, 109.

Reeves acknowledged the weak morals that were popularly understood to be part of theatrical life backstage.[35] However, by casting himself as the hero, actively opposing such immorality, Reeves endeavoured to distance himself from the negative connotations that were synonymous with his profession. Furthermore, his self-portrayal as the heroic rescuer of the ensnared female emphasises his masculinity. Through this story, Reeves again attempted to defend his profession and advocate for its respectability.

While stories such as 'The Bishop's Daughter' and '"Mephisto"' were clearly an attempt to elevate the moral status of his profession, Reeves uses other tales to respond to more specific accusations levelled against him: his reputation for failing to appear on stage, and his rumoured drinking habit. Reeves denies these allegations directly in the more conventional sections of his autobiography, but also uses fiction to support these repudiations. For example, several of his moralistic stories are designed to defend their author against accusations of alcoholism, and to indicate his distaste for excessive drinking by warning of the dangers of alcohol. Most notable is the opening chapter of the volume, entitled 'A Dark Record', which relates the harrowing tale of a multiple murder.[36] The story's protagonist is Sarah Webb, a violent woman with a drinking habit, who is in the service of a great house. One evening she begins to drink excessively, becoming progressively more deranged as she continues to drink, eventually attempting to rob her sleeping master. He awakens as she is stealing his watch, causing her to grab a dagger and "remorselessly bur[y] it in her master's throat!"[37] She then smothers her master's wife with a pillow before killing their two young sons – one of whom is a baby. Reeves's story is shocking on many levels: it is a graphic account of a woman murdering the family she was duty-bound to serve.

Though at first it appears that Reeves has chosen a particularly surprising topic with which to open his autobiography, the theme of murder by servants was calculated to tap into contemporary fears. As Judith Knelman has shown, there was a spate of high-profile murder cases in nineteenth-century Britain that involved female servants killing their masters.[38] In 1879 (a mere nine years before the publication of *Recollections*) this phenomenon reached its zenith when two notorious cases came to court. Most notable was a particularly brutal murder

[35] For more on the perceived immorality of performers, see: Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croom Helm London, 1978), 44–61.
[36] Reeves, *Recollections*, 1–13.
[37] Reeves, 11.
[38] Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 188–98.

committed by Irishwoman Kate Webster.[39] She had thrown her mistress down the stairs before cutting off her head, boiling it and selling the resulting liquid as 'best dripping'.[40] This story was covered widely in press, with many speculating that the country was gripped by an epidemic of murderous female servants.[41] It is difficult to imagine that Reeves did not have this infamous murder in mind when he wrote his gruesome tale. Indeed, two key elements of 'A Dark Record' suggest that it was loosely based on the case of Kate Webster. Firstly, it is set in the Irish town of Kildare, so it is reasonable to assume its protagonist was also Irish. Secondly, the name of that protagonist (Sarah Webb) bears a resemblance to that of the real-life murderess. It is possible, then, that Reeves was deliberately invoking the horrors of this well-known case in order to underscore his warning about the possible consequences of excessive drinking. In other words, he was tapping into a potent contemporary anxiety in an effort to connect with his readers and enforce his point. Furthermore, as Elizabeth Steere has shown, the female servant was a recurring trope in Victorian sensation fiction; she argues that "female servant characters represented one of the most 'sensational' aspects of sensation fiction: its largely unprecedented description of power for women and the servant classes."[42] In this context, Reeves's choice of topic demonstrates an awareness of the conventions of popular sensation novels. It is also suggestive of a commercial motive. Due in part to their domestic subject matter, sensation novels were particularly popular amongst the class inhabited by female servants.[43]

Another story that reinforces the message of Reeves's respectability is his longest. It spans four chapters, beginning with one entitled 'Willard O'Neill'.[44] The eponymous protagonist of this tale is fishing in the countryside and falls into a river, before being rescued by a girl, Norah Leslie, who nurses him back to health. Willard and Norah eventually go their separate ways. The story then moves to Dublin, where Reeves inserts an account of one of his real-life career highlights, which took place in 1849. This was the famous occasion on which he was in the audience for a production of *Lucia di Lammermoor.* The tenor was a man called Paglieri, who was so lacklustre that audiences heckled relentlessly. Realising that Reeves was in the building, and knowing that Edgardo was his most renowned role, the crowd protested

[39] The other case that came to court in 1879 was that of the servant Hannah Dobbs, who had robbed and murdered a female lodger in 1877: Knelman, 197.
[40] Knelman, 197.
[41] Quoted in: Ibid., 197.
[42] Elizabeth Steere, *The Female Servant and Sensation Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.
[43] Steere, 1–13.
[44] Reeves, *Recollections*, 110–16.

until he agreed to take to the stage and finish the performance himself, which he did to much acclaim. After his account of these events Reeves reverts to fiction, explaining that he was introduced to Willard O'Neill at the theatre after his impromptu performance. The two men decide to go for dinner together, but as they are leaving a woman is run over (presumably by a carriage). Willard recognises her as Norah.[45]

The story concludes with a chapter named 'A Star of Bethlehem', the title hinting at the religious imagery it contains.[46] The tale jumps forward in time; Norah has married Willard and they now have had a child. However, Willard has become a gambler and abandoned his family, leaving them destitute. The story is set on Christmas Eve, when Norah realises she is dying and so decides to look for her absent husband. She begins a long journey through the snow with her child, eventually finding her way to the grand house of Willard's father. Believing her to be a beggar, her father-in-law turns Norah and his grandchild away. However, early on Christmas morning he is awoken by what he believes to be a fire in his barn. He and Willard run to look, and realise it is instead a bright star shining overhead. The story concludes with the men realising to their horror that Norah and her son have frozen to death inside the barn. This story, with its unsubtle inversion of religious imagery, is clearly a moral tale. It vividly highlights the dangers of a dissolute lifestyle, suggesting the author's disapproval of such conduct. Furthermore, since Reeves wove this story around an account of one of his own career highlights (his spontaneous turn as Edgardo in Dublin), he thereby reminded the reader of his success and popularity with audiences. This real-life anecdote, placed in the middle of an otherwise fictional tale, served to set Reeves up as a favourable contrast to the immoral Willard O'Neill.

It is not only through the content of his stories that Reeves attempted to shape his public image. Through his literary activity he assumed the professional identity of the author. This was potentially far less problematic than that of the singer. Florian Schweizer has argued that by the 1830s (largely due to the success of figures such as Lord Byron and Walter Scott), writing had attained a celebrated role in British society, with authors becoming figures who were both respected and adulated.[47] Reeves would therefore have recognised that, by positioning himself as an author, there was potential to recover his sullied professional

[45] Reeves, 135–37.
[46] Reeves, 138–48.
[47] Florian Schweizer, 'Authorship and the Professional Writer', in *Charles Dickens in Context*, ed. Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 117–18.

reputation. In order to do so he used the celebrated literature of Charles Dickens as a blueprint. Reeves's story 'A Railway Tragedy' strongly supports this interpretation.[48] In this fictional tale, Reeves recounts his chance encounter with a railway signalman whose children have been killed by a train. This train now haunts the signalman's dreams; he tells Reeves: "at night I seem to follow its course into the darkness, and when the gleam of its accursed lamps has passed, I trace its black outline and I curse it. I know, too, that one day I shall either find the means to destroy it, or it will kill me".[49] This story is strongly reminiscent of Dickens' own ghost story, *The Signalman*.[50] Published in 1866, it predated Reeves's tale by twenty-two years. While the railway was not an uncommon theme for Victorian fiction, the similarities between the two stories are striking; both describe their narrator's encounter with an ill-fated railway signalman, tortured by his experience of rail accidents. Moreover, both stories also end ambiguously, with the reader left unsure whether the hauntings are supernatural or psychological in origin. It is also notable that Reeves's aforementioned tale 'A Star of Bethlehem' is a gothic-tinged morality tale set at Christmas, strongly suggesting the influence of Dickens' celebrated novella *A Christmas Carol* (1843).[51]

But it was not only the prospect of an improved professional standing that may have attracted Reeves to the act of writing. His literary works (both fictional and autobiographical) also offered him the opportunity to leave behind a legacy. Opera singers are fundamentally interpreters of the work of others. Though singers have historically incorporated varying degrees of creative licence into their interpretations, they nevertheless perform the works of great composers and tell stories penned by great writers, through words and music that are not their own. They do not create enduring art works themselves. This matter was even more pronounced in a period prior to the advent of recording technology when the performer's art was particularly transient. The ephemeral nature of their work was lamented by singers across the century. Sir Charles Santley summed up the point well in saying:

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[48] Reeves, *Recollections*, 70–79.
[49] Reeves, 79.
[50] This featured in a special Christmas edition of Dickens' magazine *Household Words*: Charles Dickens, 'The Signalman', *Mugby Junction*, December 1866, 20–25.
[51] Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843). It should also be noted that this story bears similarities to Ouida, *A Dog of Flanders* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872) in which the protagonist and his dog freeze to death on Christmas Eve.

> The singer has a difficulty to contend with which does not affect any other artist [...] The singer's work is a picture painted on air. No sooner is it depicted than it is gone; while the poet's, painter's, sculptor's and architect's works remain.[52]

As Santley makes clear, the singers' inability to leave behind a concrete legacy was problematic. This was partly because, in the nineteenth century, the figure of the creative genius was widely understood to be masculine. This idea was reflected in composer biographies of the period.[53] If singers were mere transient interpreters rather than enduring creators, their claim to the masculinity of creative genius was correspondingly fragile. Actors shared the same problem, as Michael Baker has noted.[54] By turning to writing, then, Reeves could cast himself in the role of masculine creator, and leave an enduring art work for posterity – a work that would invite the respect of the public in a way that the performance of opera could not. Though this same desire undoubtedly motivated the autobiographical efforts of other nineteenth-century singers, Reeves was the only one whose literary activity encompassed fiction in addition to memoir, thereby adopting the persona of author more completely.

Non-fictional autobiography

Though this chapter focuses on Reeves's gothic fiction, it is instructive to consider how he used a more conventional mode of life-writing to augment the messages encoded in his stories. This is evident in both the autobiographical sections of *Recollections* and his second publication, *My Jubilee*, which does not include fictional chapters. In these volumes, Reeves uses a range of recurring themes and tropes to serve similar agendas to his fiction.

Firstly, Reeves was not a modest author. Throughout his two volumes, he talked endlessly of his talents and triumphs. The tenor presented himself as a musical genius, even appropriating the trope of the musical child prodigy.[55] He achieved this by offering extremely minimal descriptions of his musical training, instead presenting his talents as an innate gift. He told the reader, for example, that "My father was a musician and it is said that at an early age I used my voice with no little skill."[56] The images of both the musical father and the naturally

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[52] Santley, *Student and Singer*, 19.
[53] Wiley, '"A Relic of an Age Still Capable of a Romantic Outlook"', 167–68.
[54] Baker, *Victorian Actor*, 32.
[55] Wiley has discussed this trope in biographies of canonical composers: Wiley, '"A Relic of an Age Still Capable of a Romantic Outlook"', 168.
[56] Reeves, *Recollections*, 15.

gifted child suggest the template of Mozart, which Reeves surely had in mind here, hinting to his readership that he might share some of the great composer's cachet.

Paradoxically, while presenting his musical talent as a natural gift, Reeves also emphasised the hard work and rigour required of a professional singer. This is a familiar trope in Victorian musical biography. Wiley has described how biographers (particularly of Mozart and Schubert) negotiated the danger of perceived facility of composition, which ran contrary to the idea of the work ethic.[57] In order to do this, they emphasised the "relentless hard work" that "testified to composers' unwavering dedication to their perceived vocation as it necessitated self-discipline and strict daily routines."[58] In a similar manner, Reeves repeatedly described the lifestyle of a singer in almost militaristic terms, explaining that it is a life of discipline, sacrifice and industrious labour. These are respectable masculine qualities that would not ordinarily have been attributed to the theatrical professional, who was typically characterised as bohemian and excessive.[59] By describing his career in a way that combats these negative stereotypes, Reeves presented himself as a manly and hard-working professional, whilst also signalling to readers that he was not prone to the overindulgences of which he had been so frequently accused. A passage typical of this approach reads as follows:

> think how every tenor, who wishes at all times to do his best, must regulate his life, must protect his valuable throat against all possible and impossible draughts. He eats in the most sparing manner, when all London sets him down as a glutton; drinks nothing but claret and water, when by universal consent he is a flaming, fiery drunkard. You get your feet wet, are hoarse, and are well the next day. The more delicate, more susceptible tenor gets his feet wet, is hoarse, and is not well the next day; and so long as he is unable to sing, not only loses his money [...] but is usually regarded as an impostor, because he frankly and conscientiously declines to torture the ears of a public, which he has been in the habit of delighting.[60]

This example emphasises Reeves's dedication, while also suggesting that he consumes alcohol only in moderation. Furthermore, it provides a respectable explanation for his repeated failure to perform, which he presented as a financial and professional sacrifice made selflessly out of respect for his audiences.

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[57] Wiley, '"A Relic of an Age Still Capable of a Romantic Outlook"', 169.
[58] Wiley, '"A Relic of an Age Still Capable of a Romantic Outlook"', 169.
[59] Baker, *Victorian Actor*, 44–61.
[60] Reeves, *Recollections*, 258–59.

Another way in which Reeves attempted to silence his critics was by amplifying the positive comments he had elicited. He quoted at great length from favourable reviews throughout his two volumes. His first autobiography even featured an appendix in which a hyperbolic review from the *Aberdeen Journal* was reproduced in its entirety, across ten pages.[61] However, it was not only favourable reviews that he quoted; he also reproduced a lengthy poem, written by one of his supporters, which praised him as a British hero. Its lines include: "The vast crowd thrill with joys unknown till then, / And music stirs the hearts of Englishmen."[62] The poem was also extremely critical of Reeves's Italian rivals, who were presented as a malevolent threat: "Surely some calumny, some slander vile, / Forged by Italian fraud, perchance, and guile. / Has closed that royal soul to Genius' claim; / For they, who cannot equal, may defame."[63] Reeves himself employed a similar strategy in his autobiographies, where we find several negative remarks about his Italian rivals. By distancing himself from southern European counterparts, he was able to present his status as a British singer as comparatively innocuous and respectable. He talked extensively, for example, of the petty "jealousy of Italian tenors".[64] He also portrayed foreign singers as exotic 'others' by emphasising traits such as their supposed lack of hygiene and strange superstitious beliefs.[65]

The reception of Reeves's autobiographies

Reeves used both the fictional and autobiographical elements of his two volumes very deliberately in order to answer his critics and craft a favourable public persona for himself. But how were his efforts received? His fiction was, on the whole, met with confusion and disapproval. A critic writing in *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, for example, found the "strange romances" to be "unduly tragic".[66] This characterisation of Reeves's stories as 'romances' indicates the critic's difficulty in positioning the stories within a specific literary genre, since few of them could comfortably be defined as romances in the conventional sense. The more gothic chapters were singled out as especially distasteful: "We could spare the first chapter, with its description of a fourfold murder [...] also the harrowing recital of the death of two children on the railway before the eyes of their father".[67]

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[61] Reeves, 269–78.
[62] Reeves, 204–5.
[63] Reeves, 204.
[64] Reeves, *Jubilee*, 58.
[65] Reeves, *Recollections*, 259–61; Reeves, *Jubilee*, 224.
[66] Anon., 'Recollections of Sims Reeves', *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 7 October 1888, 5.
[67] Anon., 5.

Along similar lines, a review in *The Observer* wrote that Reeves's stories were of "an unpleasing character", lamenting that these "irrelevant" episodes took up "more than two-thirds" of the book.[68] This comment on the stories' relevance reveals the critic's unease that they are not part of the author's life story. Furthermore, the suggestion that they are distasteful demonstrates that Reeves's stories had the potential to work against him, linking him to (rather than distancing him from) the shocking and sensational subjects he had written about. It is notable that this lengthy review does not refer to these fictional sections until the penultimate paragraph. The reviewer was clearly unsure how to interpret them, beyond expressing the wish that they be withdrawn from future editions. Most interesting, however, is this review's failure to clarify that these stories are fictitious, suggesting only that there is some lack of clarity regarding their veracity.

Most damning by far was a review in *The Spectator*.[69] It was entitled 'Mr. Sims Reeves as a Novelist', indicating the pre-eminence of fiction in the volume as well as recognising the tenor's self-representation as an author. Like other reviewers, this one expressed regret that the work consisted largely of "sensation novels condensed", instead of focusing on Reeves's musical career.[70] The explicit reference to sensation fiction reveals that the tenor's stories were indeed received as contributions to the genre that had clearly inspired him. This review mocked several of Reeves's stories, identifying lines that highlighted his overwrought style. For example, it quoted from the story of Willard O'Neill at length, including Reeves's description of a 'circling kingfisher', of which the critic commented with irony:

> A student of natural history will not fail to notice the singular originality of the epithet "circling," as applied to the flight of the kingfisher. It is as if one should speak of the lightning rapidity of the snail, the melodious note of the peacock, or the modesty of the operatic tenor.[71]

Despite these scathing reviews, the reception of Reeves's fiction was not universally negative. A more charitable critic writing for *The Musical Times* described how they were "entranced" by the tenor's "literary powers".[72] However, not a single review of Reeves's volume attempted to engage with his fiction in a serious manner. At best the reviews ignored

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[68] Anon., 'The Life of Sims Reeves', *The Observer*, 7 October 1888, 3.
[69] Anon., 'Mr. Sims Reeves as a Novelist', *The Spectator*, 10 November 1888, 1558–59.
[70] Anon., 1558.
[71] Anon., 1558.
[72] Anon., 'Sims Reeves: His Life and Recollections', *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, 1 October 1888, 620.

or dismissed it, while at worst it was mocked or interpreted as evidence of his vanity. These reactions are not surprising, given the highly unusual form that he had adopted for what was ostensibly a work of autobiography. Self-narration is not a genre that necessarily demands literary experience, as a distinguished career or interesting life is typically the main qualification for writing an autobiography. Therefore, while Reeves was an ideal candidate to write a memoir, he lacked the literary credentials for fiction. In this context, his authorship of gothic stories could be seen as presumptuous, underscoring his perceived arrogance.

Contemporary attitudes towards gothic and sensation fiction go some way towards explaining the poor reception accorded to Reeves's literary efforts. As Isabella von Elferen has noted, gothic fiction is a "flamboyant style" characterised by an excess of "metaphors, adjectives and mood".[73] Flamboyance and excess were also seen as primary characteristics of feminised Italian opera and its native singers.[74] For a singer like Reeves, who wanted to distance himself from such negative prejudices and project a respectable persona that enforced his masculinity, the gothic style was incompatible with his aims. Sensation fiction likewise carried connotations that conflicted with Reeves's endeavours. It was seen as an especially female form of literature, as it often focused on dominant female characters and was frequently written by female authors.[75] Furthermore, detractors of the genre also saw it as a distinctly working-class form of literature, due to its proliferation in affordable periodicals and as penny fiction. As Andrew Mangham has argued, it was consequently disparaged as a "low" form of literature which threatened more respectable forms of literature with "contagion".[76] If Reeves sought to achieve masculine respectability through his fiction, he had alighted on a particularly unfortunate blend of genres. It is clear that Reeves's attempts to gain favour with the public through his fiction were ultimately unsuccessful. However, the volume received so little serious attention that it did not cause significant lasting damage to his public image.

The reception of Reeves's autobiographical writing was more balanced. On the evidence of the reviews, his efforts to cast singing as a respectable profession met with considerable success. Several reviews quoted long passages illustrating the restrained and dedicated

[73] Isabella von Elferen, *Gothic Music, The Sounds of the Uncanny* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 12–13.
[74] Barry, 'The Dream of a Madman', Chapter One.
[75] Andrew Mangham, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. Andrew Mangham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 4.
[76] Mangham, 8.

lifestyle of the tenor.[77] Some explicitly stated that they felt Reeves had adequately silenced his gossiping critics. For instance, when reviewing his second autobiography, *The Times* asserted that "[Reeves] has been bitterly blamed for disappointing the pubic; but that charge he has very successfully answered.[78] For this reviewer, at least, Reeves had convincingly recovered his tarnished reputation. Notably, this critic elsewhere described the tenor as "manly", suggesting that Reeves's autobiography had successfully emphasised his masculinity. Critics were also receptive to certain tropes he had employed. For instance, many picked up on his disparaging remarks concerning Italian singers, one review quoting at length from his descriptions of the tenor Mario's superstitious behaviour.[79] This suggests that Reeves had successfully portrayed himself as a quintessentially British contrast to his Continental counterparts.

Critics of Reeves's works frequently referred to his repeated quotations from favourable reviews. *The Times*, for example, stated: "Like most artists, he has drawn inspiration from popular applause and has carefully preserved all laudatory notices. It is only natural that any depreciating criticisms should have been ignored or casually adverted to as outbreaks of splenetic envy."[80] This opinion was reasonably neutral, but others were blistering about the tenor's inclusion of so many positive reviews, seeing them as evidence of his vanity. *The Spectator*'s aforementioned review concluded with the damning lines: "Their egotism would be intolerable if it were not so naïve. But at best they do no more than constitute an addition to the annals of conceit."[81] For this critic, Reeves's repetition of the praise he had elicited served to bolster accusations of vanity, rather than challenging them.

Several critics interpreted Reeves's works as defensive in tone. One reviewer of his second volume perceptively noted:

> Mr. Reeves has published an autobiography, a very sensible thing to do, because by doing so you prevent many a fibbing monolith being erected about you with its urticaceous exaggerations, by the polypodian order, whose biographies are frequently

[77] For example: Anon., 'London, Saturday, September 29', *The Standard*, 29 September 1888, 4.
[78] Anon., 'Mr. Sims Reeves's Reminiscences', *The Times*, 24 September 1889, 7.
[79] Anon., 'The Life of Sims Reeves', 3.
[80] Anon., 'Mr. Sims Reeves's Reminiscences', 7.
[81] Anon., 'Mr. Sims Reeves as a Novelist', 1559.

> machiavelian [sic] bulbs going far to prove that a lie will travel twenty miles before truth can get its shoes on.[82]

Other reviews echoed these sentiments, suggesting both a ready awareness that Reeves's works were careful constructs and a wider understanding that autobiography was a tool used by prominent figures as a means of controlling their public persona. But did Reeves ultimately succeed in preventing the perpetuation of "fibbing monolith[s]"?[83]

The impact of Reeves's autobiographies

At the end of *Recollections,* Reeves wrote of his intention to publish a second autobiography the following year. He fulfilled this aim with *My Jubilee,* but the first lines of this second volume curiously implied that it was the tenor's first attempt at autobiography:

> Several of my friends have done me the honour to make me the subject of biographical sketches, and even of full biographies. These, however, have all in some respects been incomplete; and now that I am entering upon the fiftieth year of my professional career, it may possibly interest a portion of that public from which I have received so many marks of favour to hear, as it were, from my own lips, the true story of my life.[84]

With this statement Reeves effectively attempted to expunge his unusual first autobiography from the record. This is most likely in response to its negative critical reception. With *My Jubilee,* then, Reeves sought to start afresh.

In 1924 journalist Charles E. Pearce produced a lengthy biography of Sims Reeves.[85] It is useful as a reception document because the author identified many notable omissions and manipulations of truth in Reeves's own works. Although Pearce did not refer to *Recollections* (ignoring this volume like Reeves had), he said of the tenor's later autobiography: "*My Jubilee* is fragmentary, and, owing to the paucity of dates and for other reasons it cannot be accepted as authoritative."[86] One example is Reeves's failure to mention that his father had been in the Royal Artillery Band, instead glossing over the military association and

[82] Anon., 'Notes and Comments', *The Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser for Lancashire Westmorland, and Yorkshire Lancaster,* 25 September 1889, 2.
[83] Anon., 2.
[84] Reeves, *Jubilee,* 3.
[85] Charles E. Pearce, *Sims Reeves: Fifty Years of Musical Life in England* (London: Stanley Paul & Co Ltd, 1924).
[86] Pearce, 7.

describing him solely as a "musician"; Pearce described this as "somewhat singular".[87] This twist on his early life presented Reeves as a born musician who was part of a dynasty; this is a trope found in many Victorian biographies of composers.[88] Pearce also noted that Reeves claimed to have made his debut at eighteen years old when he was in fact twenty, and neglected to mention the lowly roles he took at insalubrious venues early in his career.[89] Pearce's findings reveal the extent to which Reeves's memoirs are carefully constructed texts, designed to project a very particular image – even when it did not fully accord with the facts of his life.

Despite their complexity, Reeves's autobiographical efforts had a positive impact on his enduring reputation. Although his notoriety for cancelling appearances never entirely disappeared, references became less frequent in the press and were often tempered by reasonable explanations for this behaviour. The principal evidence for the success of his autobiographies, however, is the way in which they became the standard source for authors who subsequently wrote about him. Biographies of Reeves that followed the publication of his autobiographies tended to use his own words as a template, often quoting them verbatim.[90] This became especially apparent when he died in 1900. Many who wrote obituaries of Reeves borrowed heavily from his works. For example, *The Leeds Mercury* reproduced whole paragraphs from his autobiographies, echoing their accounts of Reeves's childhood propensity for music. This obituary made explicit the parallel with Mozart that the singer had only hinted at, claiming that the "father of the famous tenor was an excellent musician, and, like the father of the immortal Mozart, he recognised very early his son's genius."[91] This example highlights the way in which autobiography functions at its most effective: enabling others to grasp indications as to how the subject wishes to live on in posterity, and (whether knowingly or not) to perpetuate them. We might ask whether these subsequent biographers could realistically have ignored Reeves's own published words, as they became the most important and credible source of information about his life and career. This speaks to the wider value of autobiography. Despite the negative reception some elements of Reeves's volumes received in the short-term, they became the definitive record of his life over time.

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[87] Pearce, 18.
[88] Wiley, '"A Relic of an Age Still Capable of a Romantic Outlook"', 166–7.
[89] Pearce, *Sims Reeves*, 30–33.
[90] *My Jubilee* was especially mined by subsequent biographers.
[91] Anon., 'Death of Sims Reeves', *The Leeds Mercury*, 26 October 1900, 5.

Reeves's autobiographies offer a fascinating glimpse into the anxieties, intentions, and imagination of a celebrated cultural figure. His unusual volumes indicate that the autobiographies of male singers are just as worthy of examination as those written by their female counterparts. Although Reeves was alone in turning to fiction, other male singers of the period adopted equally distinctive approaches to life-writing. Charles Santley's two autobiographies, for instance, blend autobiography with travel-writing.[92] The construction of gender within these works is just as potent as those found in works authored by female singers.

The case of Sims Reeves highlights the ways in which a musical celebrity used the genre of autobiography to shape his reception. Here we might draw a comparison with other musical figures such as Ethel Smyth and Charles Ives, both of whom sought to influence their reputation and reception through life-writing.[93] The present article demonstrates that not only did singers share the autobiographical urges of composers, but that they had an even greater incentive to turn to autobiography. Unlike Smyth and Ives who left scores (and, indeed, recordings) behind them, a singer of the nineteenth century could leave only their words to posterity. In this respect, we might we might view the autobiographical efforts of singers as a facet of their performance that was just as important as their performances on stage. Like singers themselves, those working in the field of singer studies have grappled with the problem of voices whose sounds are lost to history. In their work on prima donnas of the nineteenth century, for example, Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss discuss the "obstacle" of voices that have now vanished. [94] They explain that this absence compels scholars to rely on written documentary sources that offer only an approximation of a singer's art. The example of Reeves, though, suggests that a reassessment of autobiographical writings might offer us a new way of accessing a crucial element of a singer's performance that has been entirely preserved: his performance of self. Although the great tenor's operatic voice has been lost to time, his autobiographical voice rings out even now, long after his death, like a ghostly voice from one of his sensational stories.

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[92] Santley, *Student and Singer*; Santley, *Reminiscences*. For an analysis of Santley's autobiographical travel-writing see: Barry, 'The Dream of a Madman'; Barry, '"The Singer's Work"'.
[93] Wiley, '"When a Woman Speaks the Truth About Her Body"'; Maynard Solomon, 'Charles Ives: Some Questions of Veracity', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 40, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 443–70; Wood, 'Ethel Smyth'.
[94] Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss, 'Introduction', in *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), xxix.