

Chapter 1

Writing the Self

I have a duty against which my habits, even more the pride of my instincts, revolt at bottom, namely, to say: Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else.

—Friedrich Nietzsche¹

GROUNDWORK FOR A STUDY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Several recurring questions drive contemporary discussions of self-identity. Why do we utter 'I'? Why do we speak about ourselves in the first-person? Who or what does the 'I' of our utterances represent? What purposes do first-person utterances serve? What does the increasing usage of 'I' statements in current parlance (scholarly and popular) suggest about the contemporary human condition?

These questions may seem either so obvious or so arcane as not to be worth raising. But it is important to consider them for two related reasons. First, these questions conceal fundamental presuppositions that underlie autobiographical writing (presuppositions about the nature of the self and presuppositions about the nature of writing). To subscribe to the habits of artful living that philosophical autobiography exemplifies, we must acknowledge the conceptions of self-narration that shape both the story told and the life lived.² Second, these questions provide a useful context for examining autobiographical writing. As such, they mitigate the temptation to consider questions of essence and identity in isolation from human experience and expression. They also

mediate the urge to collapse the distinction between the author and the writer. I strive to resist both temptations throughout this book.

Speech act theorists H. P. Grice and J. L. Austin offer partial answers to these questions.³ According to their descriptive account of first-person utterance, we speak in the first-person for five reasons. First, we aim to know ourselves. Second, we wish to both individuate and unify ourselves (i.e., to reinforce our unique existence among other 'I's). Third, we hope to distinguish our privately conceived life from the lives others believe that we lead—to communicate the self to others. Fourth, we strive to give continuity to our lives; that is, we seek to discern our own variegated experiences and to realize how these experiences culminate in a single, albeit syncretic, life. Fifth, we struggle to make our existence and identity transparent both to ourselves and to others (i.e., to explore the relation between the self and the subject). For all of these reasons, we subconsciously or consciously instantiate a single referent to which all of our individual perspectives point. We become an 'I.'

Implicit within Grice's and Austin's work is the philosophical belief that the 'I' is both an ontological and a logical (grammatical) placeholder. Used as a referent of individual experiences, the term *I* implies wholeness of being (i.e., a coherent set of practices, roles, and beliefs converging within the unique life of each person for which it stands, a coherency that is expressed by our names, our familial roles, our social security numbers, our distinctive physical appearance, and other identity-bearing features of our lives). Used as a referent of indicative statements, the 'I' is the subject of sentences one writes about himself or herself. Taken together, the 'I' has both a universal quality and an existential quality. Consider the following statement: "I am limited in my reasoning ability." Here the proposition may refer to an individual limitation (I, the person making this statement, may lack a keen analytical ability, or I may have a particular learning disability that obviates my formal reasoning capacities). In this sense, the 'I' functions as an existential quantifier. The 'I' may also refer to a general limitation (all humans qua humans are limited in their reasoning capacities). In this instance, the 'I' functions as a universal quantifier.

Logic is helpful in clarifying the meaning of 'I' statements as such, but it cannot explain our philosophically rooted desire to live authentic lives, to give expression to our lived experiences, and to extrapolate knowledge about who we are and what we are from these expressions. From a contemporary standpoint, the increasing usage of 'I' statements reflects the deeply modern sensibilities of human agents living today. 'I' statements convey our commitment to individual rights as well as individual accountability. In this sense, the 'I' carries with it the residue of our political and legal history. The 'I' evokes the questions of identity and essence raised first by Descartes and later reformulated by the social, political, and legal philosophers of the modern period. And the 'I' reflects the prevailing influence of modern philosophical conceptions upon our understanding of the ego and the

individual, conceptions that inform everything from our political rights and legal contracts to theological beliefs and medical practices.⁴

The seemingly simple conclusion that we might draw from Grice's and Austin's work is that humans seek to know themselves and to be known by others. We use 'I' in a logical sense, a sociopolitical sense, and a poetical sense. We invoke it to circumscribe self-knowledge: to individuate experiences, to acknowledge a particular social and political placement in the world, and to "become who we are," as Nietzsche exhorts. This rich usage, however, creates a paradox. If the human condition is both limited, as modern thinkers suggest, and fragmented, as postmodern thinkers claim, then the 'I' that stands in for ourselves belies the degree to which the human condition is bifurcated. Put another way, 'I' statements disguise the fragmentation of the human encounter with reality; they imply coherency of experience where there is none (or none that is obvious). Even if we acknowledge the fragmentation of human experience, we have no adequate language, no real lexicon, with which to express it. Even if we follow Nietzsche's lead and affirm our fragmentation, using it to deepen our bifurcated identities and to create meaning and identity where there is none, we are cut off from the discourse of the community around us. Even if we attempt integration, following Augustine who transcends his fragmented existence, first confronting and then displacing absolute nothingness with God, exchanging a temporal understanding of reality for a spiritual one, we are bereft of a language to articulate our existential situation.

Kierkegaard points to this limitation in *Fear and Trembling*.⁵ He argues that when Abraham stands face-to-face with God, prepared to kill his son to obey God's will, his actions fall outside the scope of moral judgment. In hearing the commanding voice of God, Abraham transcends the ethics that guide human behavior. Abraham's actions, then, are inexplicable to his fellow humankind. Wittgenstein speaks aphoristically of a similar limitation in the *Philosophical Investigations*: "If a lion could speak, we could not understand it."⁶ The rules of the language games we play constrain what we know by limiting what we can express and what we can understand to that which falls within the scope of the particular language games we play and within the complicated form of life we live. The limitations of morality and language also constrain the self-knowledge we seek. In both examples, fragmentation of the psyche leads either to silence or paradox, or both.⁷ Must we remain agents with obscured identities and inexplicable essences? Or can the act of writing and speaking in the first-person loosen the barriers of speech and yield bits of self-knowledge otherwise off limits to human knowers? Is this why we write autobiographically—to achieve self-knowledge? Why we self-narrate on paper—to self-know?

According to Schuster, Susan Sontag suggests that these questions and concerns drive the philosophical exposition of the self in narration: "One of the responses to the breakdown of the philosophical system-making of the nineteenth

century was 'a new of kind of philosophizing: personal (even autobiographical), aphoristic, lyrical, anti-systematic. Its foremost exemplars: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein."⁸ Historically the desire to know thyself has motivated the adoption of first-person perspectives in discourse. Coupled with the political and legal nuances of the 'I' described earlier, first-person narration connotes ownership of our actions and identity in the world. Yet both a commitment to self-knowledge and a vestment in individual rights fail to explain fully why we pen in the first-person. Furthermore, neither a need for self-knowledge nor a belief in individual rights explains why individuals autobiograph themselves, affixing views of themselves that arise from introspective impressions in written form, presenting and preserving their utterances and actions for others. Nor do these motives explain why we create a deliberate and sometimes carefully constructed self-presentation when we are engaged in self-writing. How, then, do philosophers explain the choice to self-narrate in word rather than in speech?

Recall the lessons of Plato's dialogues. Writing is an act performed for the sake of a temporally and spatially absent reader. Plato learns this lesson from his teacher, Socrates, who shows us that truth does not necessarily yield philosophical knowledge or self-transformation. Changing lovers of shadows into lovers of Forms requires a fragmenting encounter with the self, one that results in a heightened sense of self-awareness. Plato illustrates this change in the *Symposium*: lovers of wisdom must move away from material goods and bind themselves to the Good forever—a bond that necessitates the dialectical model of Socrates and his interlocutors; a bond we attempt to forge today through our written expressions. Yet as Socrates argues in the *Phaedrus*, this bond remains weak. Old men can hand down their traditions in writing, but only they know the truth of their traditions.

Still, written self-narration offers hope. Bound by the conventions of autobiography, written narration occurs through a stylized expression of life that translates ordinary experience into literary form and private thoughts into revealed actions. The distance born out of the writing process—by the invocation of an authorial voice, a distinctive literary form, and a specific narrative structure—enables the writer to engage in a form of self-reflection otherwise closed off to him or her. More importantly, writing autobiographically invites others to see concrete examples of artful living as models they can adopt for themselves.

In the remainder of this chapter and throughout this book, I describe and evaluate the use of the first-person pronoun in five first-person philosophical texts: Augustine's *Confessions*, René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions*, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, and Hazel Barnes's *The Story I Tell Myself*. My aim in giving an account of the 'I' within philosophical autobiography is threefold. First, I aim to clarify "identity" in its varied historical and literary instances. Second, I intend to articulate conceptions of the self and the subject implied by philosophical autobiographies, thereby distinguish-

ing the subject from the self without invoking a formal discussion of “identity” *per se*. Third, I hope to show which views of the self and the subject best support the artful life. I devote the remainder of this book to these three aims. I pose probing questions along the way to guide the subtextual issues surrounding self-identity and self-knowledge that are part and parcel to this analysis.

WRITING THE EXAMINED LIFE

Autobiographical writing is particularly problematic for an inquiry into the self because the writer investigating the agent’s life is simultaneously the object and the subject of inquiry. As I have suggested previously in this chapter, the use of the first-person as both an ontological and a logical (grammatical) placeholder imposes specific conditions and constraints upon the philosophical notion of the subject in the world.⁹ In addition, the historical and cultural milieu in which one writes shapes the writer’s self-conception and defines the angle of critical reflection from which the author speaks. Theories intended to explain the relationship between personal action and thoughts and individual identity develop within discourses that are grounded in ideological commitments and cultural beliefs as well. Philosophical analyses are no exception. If we are to understand the ‘I’ in philosophical autobiography—a perspective and persona that bear both upon the writer of the text and upon us as readers—then we must investigate the senses of the self and the subject that inform it.

Nietzsche’s autobiography offers us a rich preliminary starting point. Completed in 1888, one year before his final and irrevocable collapse, Nietzsche embroiders *Ecce Homo* with Christian imagery and biblical allusions; imagery and allusion he brazenly mocks throughout this corpus. The title of the work is biblical. It is the phrase spoken by Pontius Pilate when he presents Christ to his impromptu jury (John 19:5): “Behold the man.” In selecting this line for his title, Nietzsche acknowledges that though we may crucify him, he aims to offer us a redeeming view of humanity. He then appropriates the Christian trinity to describe his own resurrected self: a disciple of Dionysus, a follower of Zarathustra, the Antichrist.¹⁰

Whereas ancient and modern examples of first-person writing focus sharply upon the nature of the self, Nietzsche dispenses with questions of essence (What am I?) in order to blow open the question of identity (Who am I?). By the time Nietzsche writes *Ecce Homo*, he has rejected essentialist metaphysical accounts of the self and coherence theories of truth altogether. One by one, he deconstructs the “idols” of the Western philosophical tradition. He includes Kant among the world’s false gods and thwarts the distinction between the *noumena* (the thing-in-itself) and *phenomena* (things-as-appearing) by embracing and transforming the metaphysical commitment to phenomena into an epistemological perspectivism.

Indeed, Nietzsche self-consciously presents *a* perspective of himself throughout his autobiography.

I cannot overstress the effect of the Nietzschean shift toward perspectivism upon the genre of autobiography. Walter Kaufmann, the great translator and editor of much of Nietzsche's work, aptly acknowledges the contributions and value of Nietzsche's personal insights:

Ecce Homo is one of the treasures of world literature. Written in 1888 and first published in 1908, it has been largely ignored or misunderstood. Yet it is Nietzsche's own interpretation of his development, his works, and his significance; and we should gladly trade the whole vast literature on Nietzsche for this small book. Who would not rather have Shakespeare on Shakespeare, including the poet's own reflections on his plays and poems, than the exegeses and conjectures of thousands of critics and professors?¹¹

Nietzsche's efforts to privilege questions of identity over questions of essence offer renewed opportunities for self-examination and self-knowledge. But these opportunities come with challenges as well. For example, Augustine's *Confessions*, Descartes' *Meditations*, and Rousseau's *The Confessions* correlate self-representation with a prediscursive essence either intuited or induced by a writer or thinker. Each then, ipso facto, presupposes degrees of metaphysical determinism wherein the self and thought coalesce, and self-identity either supervenes on or is commensurate with temporal and spatial continuity. By contrast, Nietzsche denies the deterministic claims of his philosophical forbearers for the sake of a constructivist account of the self and a perspectivist account of self-identity. Consequently, Nietzsche undermines the previously privileged writer or thinker who intuits or induces a self; he devalues the act of autobiographical writing as a truth-bearing activity; and he makes explicit the distinction between the rhetorical subject and the ontological self.

Nietzsche's renunciation of essentialist metaphysical claims explains in part why he subtitles his autobiography "How One Becomes What One Is." Indeed, it clarifies why Nietzsche titles the first three chapters of his work "Why I Am So Wise," "Why I Am So Clever," and "Why I Write Such Excellent Books," respectively: to laugh at his own awkward position at the helm of postmodern philosophy, a philosophical movement enamored with ambiguity and illusion. But buried within Nietzsche's provocative claims about his wisdom, cleverness, and literary prowess lie profound questions about the human relationship to oneself, questions about the 'I' or 'who' within our writing, not the 'what' behind our writing.

The genre of autobiography bears witness to fluid philosophical and literary models. Cultures that once embraced the Cartesian cogito as the paradigm of the

self now energetically embrace Nietzsche's commitment to constructed and individually perceived selves. American writers in particular are coupling an implicitly Nietzschean self-view with Michel Foucault's claim that power is an ineluctable social fact. According to Foucault, humans create hegemonies to control others, hegemonies that individuals internalize, hegemonies that shape self-identity. As a result of this cross-fertilization between Nietzsche and Foucault, autobiographical writers are adopting a highly personal and heavily social rhetorical stance. For example, when the journalist and *The New Yorker* contributor, Susan Orlean, was interviewed about *The Orchid Thief* (1998), she affirmed the autobiographical edge to her writing and her life as a writer: "The fact is I do not write news that must be reported. I choose to write about whatever captures my curiosity. Simply choosing what you write about is a subjective choice. . . . Sometimes I wonder how it is that I ended up as a writer. . . . Aren't we all inventions of our choices and decisions?"¹² Paradigm shifts that trickle down into culture writ large elucidate the legal, political, and social veneer of the first-person in autobiography.

As inheritors of both a modern political framework and a postmodern mind-set, we acknowledge ownership over the utterances we create by adopting the first-person pronoun (a sign of our commitment to political, social, and legal responsibility). These utterances remind us of the individually weighted positions from which we speak and think. But the generic 'I' that we substitute for our own names casts short shadows on our individual existence, shadows that do not reveal who we are in any important sense. Introspective gazes extend only so far.¹³ Nietzsche understood this. He knew, as Stanley Rosen argues, that "the extent to which 'I' am responsible for, or act as an agent of, my world and my life is superficial. The act of will that opens the perspective of my world is also the act by which 'I' as self-conscious ego am created."¹⁴ Nietzsche's perceptiveness and artfulness, combined with his critique of the Western philosophical tradition, render his work a valuable contribution to the study of philosophical autobiography. Yet in displacing a unified, prediscursive, essentialist self with a chaotic abyss of potentiality from which a self is constructed, Nietzsche leaves no room for an integrated account of self-identity.¹⁵ This omission is unfortunate, because self-identity weighs heavily upon contemporary accounts of autobiography.

The corpus of philosophical autobiography generates significant theories about self-identity in several ways. First, the texts that form the subgenre of philosophical autobiography circumscribe views of identity and essence. Second, they provide a unified body of work for the purpose of scholarly comparison and examination. Third, they demonstrate that philosophers cannot make assumptions about representational relations that other autobiographers make, not if they wish to succeed at living an artful life as I argued earlier. Fourth, they demonstrate the degree to which the self is self-ascribing. The provocative corpus of philosophical autobiography invites us to clarify the issues of self-identity,

self-narration, and self-knowledge surrounding first-person texts. But the text, with his or her writer and his or her subject, tells only half of the story. Matters are complicated further once scholars introduce the *autobiographer* and the *reader* into the mix.

As the subject and the locus of personal experience, autobiographers assume that they alone are in the position of unerring self-knower. I alone can judge, know, and present myself accurately. I alone can construct a life-story that bears a one-to-one correspondence to the life I have lived. Hence, responses to the questions of identity vary with the particularities of a life and the view of the subject. René Descartes proceeds on markedly different presuppositional grounds than does his fellow Frenchman by birth, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Likewise, Hazel Barnes's *The Story I Tell Myself*, which appears in print more than 100 years after Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, reformulates the questions of identity in existential terms: Who do I take myself to be? What is the source of my phenomenological experiences?

The view of the autobiographer as unerring knower, while attractive, is deeply flawed. As Socrates claims in the *Apology*, "Poets are among the worst interpreters of their own works: they create without understanding, standing on the wings of inspiration; but when they discuss their works they rely on their uninspired reason and falter."¹⁶ Yet inerrancy is an easy presumption to make as an autobiographer. Our experiences and memories are transparent to us because they "coinhere" with sensations that are introspectively accessible. These sensations and introspections shape the texts we produce both in content and in form. But they do not tell the whole story. Despite the immediacy of our sensations and memories, facts that extend beyond our own experiences shape our self-identity in equally profound ways.

For example, in contrast to the autobiographer, a reader shapes a text publicly through the act of ongoing dialogue and politicization of a text. The history of texts and the discourse surrounding subjectivity have been at times isolated to a literate few with privileged access to desirable texts. This predominantly male group is held together by social forces, cultural forces, and political and legal systems, and it manufactures the subject as both an intellectual category into which all subjects fit and as a particular persona from the numerous "facts" assigned to beings in the world.¹⁷ Since listeners and readers often assume that the views expressed in a speech or text are the views, sensibilities, and understanding of the speaker or writer who creates the speech or text in question, they assume also that the subject and speaker or writer are commensurate with one another. Yet the *rhetorical* voice (the Outer self or author-subject), unlike the thinking or speaking subject (the Inner or ontological writer-self), is not a syncretic entity limited by the time period in which he or she is constructed. Rather, the *rhetorical* subject is an open, vulnerable, inter-

pretable persona subject to the men and women who share the capacity to understand linguistic utterances even if they never arrive at truth. Stanley Rosen clarifies this difference by comparing Socrates to Odysseus:

The least one can say is that the enactment of truth requires the mask of deception and concealment, almost exactly as we learn from the *Odyssey*. The one significant practical difference between Homer and Plato is that Odysseus wishes to return to the tranquil life of city and family, whereas the Socratic eros can be satisfied by neither. But the consequence of this difference is that Odysseus reveals his identity at the end of his adventures. There is, however, no end to the Socratic adventure, and as Nietzsche understood perfectly, the philosopher never relinquishes his masks.¹⁸

To state this in traditionally analytic terms, the written ‘I’—the rhetorical subject or Outer self—signifies rather than refers to a writer; it functions as a sign rather than a reference. Hence, the subject, unlike the writer, is not constrained by theories of truth. By contrast, verbal claims we make about who we are presuppose honesty, relevance, and sincerity, three conditions necessary for successful communication. When we make self-referential utterances within social contexts and conversations, we necessarily do so in undeceiving, intelligible ways.¹⁹

The writer who transforms the self into a written subject is therefore not subject to the conditions of speech, because written narration is both nonreferential and atemporal. The immediacy of speech elucidates the singular temporal dimension of spoken utterance—its presence (here and now), its necessarily truncated field of vision, its fleeting texture. Writing, however, expands the literary field of vision. As the writer chooses the descriptions, diction, and other components and qualities of the text, the written expressions take on new significance and nuances previously absent from the writer’s psyche.

The bifurcation of the self occurs vis-à-vis this intentional, self-conscious literary process. I will introduce the distinction between the rhetorical and the ontological self formally in a moment, but let me describe this process briefly here. The bifurcation of the self within and through writing occurs on both the rhetorical and ontological levels. It occurs rhetorically through the instantiation of an authorial ‘I’; it occurs ontologically through an encounter with the self as Other. The latter encounter, which creates a chasm within the psyche, makes possible self-transformation of the Platonic sort and may lead to artful living, both in the writer *and* in the reader. Contra Derrida, I argue that the reading of self-narration leads closer to rather than “paradoxically away from” self-knowledge obtained through self-scrutiny.²⁰ My thesis is that self-narration implicates the reader in a hermeneutic process of critical reflection, a process that has the potential to

transcend in Schuster's terms, "habitual and slavish trends of cognition" and engage the reader dialectically in the ongoing act of self-knowing.²¹ I will say more about this process in Chapter 4.

Even writers who seem unaware of the limitations and possibilities that writing occasions exhibit a sense of urgency about their own (literary) mortality. This urgency expresses itself as an ever-pressing need to affirm our existence, to know ourselves, and to show that our lives matter in some nontrivial way. The desire to be remembered runs both deep and wide in Western thought. Diotima, the sophistic stranger invoked by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, is one of the first figures in the Western world who articulates the human desire to live forever, at least in word if not in deed.²² Diotima suggests that our desire for immortality is satisfied through reproduction and/or the production of good works and ideas. Christianity provides additional examples, with its wealth of allusions and references to immortality. For example, Christians receive the sacraments as a sign of Christ's Crucifixion and resurrection, and as a symbol of Christ's continued life through and in his followers. Like reproduction and writing, the past is brought to bear on the present in the taking of the sacraments; the future is promised and consecrated in the past. Writing is an effective strategy for coping with the fear that future generations may forget our existence.²³

The belief that death encircles and defines life is common among peoples of hierarchical societies. In these societies, social status informs public identity and controls community involvement. Individuals are pressured to conform to codified behaviors appropriate for their status. Yet human beings who adopt predefined ways of engaging the world have little work to do in seeking out the meaning of their lives. One person simply fills the social slot of another upon his or her death. If meaning is given rather than created (or affirmed), then human existence is unchanged by individual choice. Indeed, "choice" is rendered meaningless, and remembrance is futile (this is the bane of essentialist theories of the self). One way human agents mitigate the possibility of forgetfulness is by creating a personal identity through language. Describing our individual lives in language and framing our personal identity by text, we make ourselves into subjects of our histories. Writing autobiographically, then, springs from the psychological and ontological structure of our being, a structure raised to consciousness by language.²⁴

The Ontological Self and the Rhetorical Self

Several epistemological queries frame the search for the self within autobiography: Who is recounting the life ascribed to us? Who (and what) is the writer? What is the writer's relationship to the text? What kind of subject is the narrator of the autobiographical account? Is the subject wholly literary, or does he

or she gain an ontological status through a connection to the writer? In philosophical autobiography, two distinct views dominate this subgenre, views that I denote the *Inner* self and the *Outer* self. Though I argue that the Inner self and the Outer self emerge naturally through self-narration, philosophers often permit one or the other to dominate their thinking about the self. Moreover, the act of privileging one view of the self shapes the autobiographical account in dramatic ways. Below I describe the Inner self and the Outer self, noting the ontological and the rhetorical dimensions of each.

Speaking ontologically, the Inner self (the writer-self) is a metaphysical entity or prediscursive essence imbedded in the mind or soul of the human being, or a soul per se that exists apart from a body (Greek), or a soul comingled with a body (Hebraic). Described differently, the Inner 'I' is a Parmenidean constant, an absolute and unchanging ego of a writer who is unaffected by the vicissitudes of writing and of life. Viewed through a rhetorical lens, the Inner self is an introspectively accessible ego whose identity bears a one-to-one correspondence with the actions, thoughts, and emotions of the writer-self. Hence, those committed to the Inner view of the self believe it is possible to formulate an absolute, objective literary description of one's actions and beliefs that represents who one *in fact* is. Autobiographical writing through the eighteenth century tacitly endorses an Inner orientation toward first-person writing.

By contrast, the Outer self is a rhetorical subject (an author-subject) that can never possess itself completely, because it continuously thrusts itself into the world within a context of social and literary forces. In contrast to the Parmenidean conception of the Inner self, the Outer self is a Heraclitean ego that lingers in a perpetual state of becoming and is always dependent on the shifting contexts, beliefs, and literary aims of a writer for existence. The Outer self "exists," then, only in two senses: (1) as an embodied (gendered, raced) human being, and (2) as a textually embodied authorial identity. Analyzed rhetorically, the writer's self-ascription instantiates him or her as an author. This act of authorial instantiation creates the thoughts and feelings of the author, thoughts and feelings that adherents of the Inner self believe preexist and underlie the text. From the Outer perspective, thought is language; a prediscursive, prelinguistic cogito cannot exist. Events that authors ascribe to themselves in writing ground their existence in the world and sustain their identities as authors.

If the Inner self and the Outer self represent two extreme philosophical positions on the self (one essentialist, one constructivist), then I aim to strike an Aristotelian mean between the two. I contend that both the Inner and Outer self emerge within every autobiographical text, that is, that there is both an ontological self and a rhetorical subject that inform autobiographical texts. This distinction emerges because the subject of the autobiographical inquiry is simultaneously the object of the inquiry. Thus as the subject examines himself or herself through a rhetorical and a literary lens, the self is bifurcated into two

entities. This bifurcation is both necessary and good, necessary for the sake of self-examination and self-narration, and good because it initiates the Socratic process of self-transformation and invites a higher form of self-unification to emerge. By juxtaposing the writer-self against the rhetorical-subject in this book, I carve out a rich middle ground in which new philosophical accounts of the self may emerge.

The bifurcation of the self within writing—a chasm between one's life as a writer and one's personal and authorial identities—reveals the difference between our actual and our constructed engagement in the world. We can be both selves and subjects, but the identities of these remain distinct. Self-narrated beliefs, emotions, and sensibilities may denote facts about the writer, the temporal being who decides to engage in the act of writing, and who bears the author's name, but they may also connote the authorial existence and identity of another as well, an identity that is independent of the writer's. The author, then, works between two identities: he is the protagonist in a story and the subject of a textual history that may or may not mimic the writer's own experiences. Despite the famous maxim of the Delphic Oracle, "Know thyself," we cannot grasp ourselves and know ourselves in the way that we grasp a cup and know it. We cannot solve the riddle of who we are with propositional knowledge. Nor can we solve it with any model of knowledge that distinguishes the knower from what is known. As we speak and write about our existence, we implicate ourselves in the epistemic dimensions of existence. Our existence constitutes the world, and, as Paul Ricoeur contends, the world constitutes our existence: "Only a being that is a self is *in* the world. . . . There is no world without a self who finds itself in it and acts in it."²⁵ Ricoeur captures the fundamental sense in which we are both ontological and rhetorical beings. We assume a first-person perspective *because* we exist in a linguistically structured environment that operates according to grammatically arranged horizons or limits.²⁶ To be a self, then, is to be a linguistic creature, a point that Ricoeur may have mined from Wittgenstein. Yet the self, conceived as a linguistic creature, does not diminish the ontological ground from which language springs. Indeed, it points to the dual nature that it signifies.

Ricoeur's insights evoke two questions raised at the beginning of this chapter: What does it mean to write about ourselves? And what, if anything, does writing about ourselves reveal? When we speak about ourselves, we invoke an introspective gaze, a retrospective gaze, and what I label an *alterspective gaze*. That is, we gather a sense of ourselves by looking inward, by looking backward, and by looking outward. In hearing the stories of our childhood, the descriptions of our behaviors of youth, we assume the conceptions, beliefs, and preferences that both our perspective and other perspectives constitute. Ricoeur concedes, "The selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree

that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other."²⁷

I have noted previously that the formulation of the first-person perspective varies according to the sets of conditions under which a writer finds himself or herself. Autobiography is a special mode of first-person writing that merges these sets of conditions into one expressive literary form, allowing the autobiography to be both a genre of literature and an interpretation of experience. For although we do not and cannot confront ourselves as others do, we do, as Georg Misch maintains, possess ourselves as beings conscious of ourselves and capable of uttering 'I.'²⁸ We sometimes choose to shed some of the masks that we wear and treat ourselves as an other, a person independent of the being we confront every day. In these instances, the 'I' becomes a 'you,' revealing the I-you characteristic of the self-in-the-world (the linguistic self).²⁹

To be sure, literary conventions liberate and constrain first-person philosophical writing. On the one hand, they offer the philosophical writer methods for self-representation ordinarily unavailable to philosophers.³⁰ On the other, they muddle the view of the self so clearly expressed in philosophical terms, adding ambiguity to texts in which many writers aim for clarity. Accordingly, Misch argues that autobiography and its fluid boundaries "can be defined only by summarizing what the term 'autobiography' implies: the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*auto*)."³¹ By extension, autobiographical writing imposes no particular style or form upon the writer. It simply conveys the fact that the life circumscribed by the writing is the writer's life *in his or her own words*.³²

Yet the rhetorical space in which the 'I' appears reshapes our traditional notion of subjectivity.³³ First, by acknowledging one's audience and adopting a rhetorical stance toward that audience, autobiographers give rise to a rhetorical subject.³⁴ Initially the author's existence is dependent upon the writer's existence (conversely, the writer's existence is not dependent upon the author's existence). But once the author-subject is embodied within a text, he or she will outlive the temporally circumscribed writer in whom the text originated. Moreover, the author-subject may bear little resemblance to the writer herself. Julia Kristeva, Francophone philosopher, psychoanalyst, and feminist, makes this point very simply: "[W]e should remember that the person walking in the street with a driver's license in his pocket is different from the person doing the writing."³⁵ To complicate matters further, the identity and understanding of the author may vary from reader to reader.

A persona that emerges from the rhetorical stance of a writer, the author-subject takes on new characteristics and meanings in the mediating act of reading. Readers gloss different characteristics of the 'I' as they read texts, thereby drawing different conclusions about authors than do other readers. Hence,

while the writer-self is a historical person who exists outside of a text and precedes that text, the author is a figure who exists outside of a text and antecedes it.³⁶ In "What Is an Author?" Foucault's famous exploitation of the writer/author distinction, the author signifies an ambiguously constrained figure:

The author is not an indefinite source of signification which fills a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impeded the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. . . . One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function. (When a historically given function is represented in a figure that inverts it, one has an ideological production.) The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.³⁷

Writing, then, is a public act, a performative and signifying practice, in which the writer-self creates a signifying figure (author-subject) with whom a reader interacts. Thinking through the act of author creation in writing, Foucault notes that writing is "an interplay of signs arranged to the very nature of the signifier. Writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. Writing . . . is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly appears."³⁸ As the subject of a signifying practice, the author-subject exists only within a text; outside of the signifying act of writing, the author-subject vanishes.

Besides creating an author-subject, the act of autobiographical self-narration initiates a hermeneutic event between a reader and a text. I address the issue of interpretation fully in Chapter 4. For now, let me say only that the relationship that the author-subject initiates is significant because it demands direct justification of interpretative acts, thereby forcing the reader to confront the author and himself in the process of arriving at the meaning of a text. By "text," I mean "a group of entities, used as signs, which are selected, arranged, and intended by an author in a certain context to convey some specific meaning to an audience."³⁹ Texts, then, convey meaning not only because they presuppose readers but also because entities that constitute them are signs within a signifying system. Additional interpretative implications of autobiography run in many directions:

There is no final, definitive, or incontestable autobiography, but neither are autobiographies undecided, pure text. They speak a subjectivity that is specifically located, yet open to interpretation, dialogue, and

analysis. . . . In its critical dimension, for reader, writer, and critic, auto/biography works as a form of address.⁴⁰

As Lorraine Code suggests, the identity of the author-subject is mediated by two extra-textual forces: the writer-self, an ontological referent who creates the text, *and* the reader who interprets the text. The meaning of the text is mediated by these same two forces.

Let me restate the three steps that lead to the bifurcation of the self. First, the act of self-narration creates an author-subject (a rhetorical signifier) who stands alongside the writer-self (an ontological referent). Second, self-narration forces the writer-self to examine himself or herself both introspectively and alterpectively: as the ground of being and as an alienated other. And third, by examining opposing perspectives of the 'I,' by yielding to them and submitting to their variations, the writer-self confronts the author-subject, thereby revealing the ontological and rhetorical dimensions of human experience. Hence, as a mode of philosophical exposition, autobiography fosters self-examination through the creation and mediation of an author-subject, a self-creating consciousness. As a genre of literature, autobiography engages readers in an open dialogue about the nature of self-identity and the meaning of texts. To write autobiographically is to embrace both identity and difference in oneself.⁴¹

THE RATIONALE FOR AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

At the beginning of this chapter, I posed a set of questions about the nature and function of self-utterance and self-narration. In response to these questions, I cited the work of Grice and Austin, who argue that humans utter 'I' for five distinct reasons: (1) to make ourselves known and our beliefs understood, (2) to individuate ourselves, that is, to reinforce our unique existence among other 'I's, (3) to distinguish our privately conceived life from the lives others believe that we lead, (4) to discern our own variegated experiences and to realize how these experiences culminate in a single, albeit syncretic, life and, (5) to make our existence transparent both to ourselves and to others.

When we apply the analysis of Grice and Austin to self-narration, we find that autobiographers self-narrate for five reasons: (1) to achieve self-knowledge, (2) to unify the self; (3) to communicate the self to others; (4) to give continuity to their lives; and (5) to explore the relation between the self and the subject. In this section, I evaluate these motivations in the context of philosophical autobiography. I begin with self-knowledge.

In *Patterns and Meaning in History*, Wilhelm Dilthey produces one of the most comprehensive sets of reflections about autobiography to date. Beginning with the claim that autobiographers aim to acquire self-knowledge,

Dilthey argues that we *must* write about ourselves if we are to achieve self-knowledge because knowledge, even of ourselves, depends on the ways knowledge is expressed. Treating self-knowledge as a phenomenological product, Dilthey grounds self-knowledge in a conception of history that informs the arena of human investigation (sometimes by way of autobiography itself):

The root from which everything grows is the tendency, natural to man, to meditate on the past and future, on his joys and sorrows, successes and failures. . . . With some it becomes a chief concern, they inquire systematically into the meaning of their own lives, and often give literary expression to what they find. The result is autobiography.⁴²

Dilthey suggests that the empirical dimension of knowledge is always present alongside the interpretative framework we utilize to understand human life.⁴³ Therefore, human life, part existential, part empirical, differs from nature insofar as the meaning of that life is expressed in original terms. The difference between the human and natural sciences is a difference in form rather than content; a difference in *how* rather than *what* the two disciplines investigate.

H. P. Rickman explains Dilthey's thought further: "For Dilthey, human life is not only meaningful; it is also articulate; it expresses its own meaning which we can understand. In this lies the difference between the studies of man and the natural sciences."⁴⁴ Expression, then, is essential to self-knowledge, since it is only through overt expression that our views of ourselves acquire clarity, stability, or depth. Because an individual's existence is the primary phenomenon of history, autobiography is the greatest form of self-expression. It is also the most profound and deliberate path toward self-knowledge. Indeed, in Dilthey's words, autobiography is "the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us."⁴⁵

Jerome Bruner, Mary Warnock, and other contemporary scholars of autobiography borrow heavily from Dilthey's view. For example, after accepting Dilthey's claim that autobiography is manifest history, Bruner argues for a direct and an explicit link between self-knowledge and truth within autobiography. To know oneself, he argues, one must grasp one's true self, the self that corresponds to the subject of one's interpersonal search, particularly in the case of an autobiographical search.⁴⁶ Similarly, Rebecca Goldstein identifies and articulates the historical intuitions about essence and identity that coalesce with philosophical conceptions of the self and subject. On the one hand, we believe in an ideal representation of ourselves, a nexus of fact and true narration, a representation that we may never know entirely. On the other, we believe in a concrete representation of ourselves, fragmenting and conflicting descriptions that

taken together approximate who we are. Though we may know this representation entirely, Goldstein wonders whether it is right to conclude that this representation is an accurate representation of ourselves.⁴⁷

I submit that both the ideal and the concrete representations of ourselves are partially accurate and wholly incomplete. To know oneself in the fullest possible sense of the phrase, we must set these representations in dialectical opposition, moving from one to the other until a synthesis of selves emerges. Unfortunately, most autobiographers allow one of these intuitions to dominate their writing and to insidiously shape the presentation of the self that he or she produces. Indeed, some writers who regard the self as an “ideal ego” adopt the rhetorical stance of a transcendent, impartial narrator who uncovers an authentic self to which their being-in-the-world refers. Others who regard the self as a “shattered ego” write from the position of an affected, limited narrator, a narrator who constructs a successive story from bits of information that he or she and others tell about himself or herself.⁴⁸

Though both intuitions are problematic, they pinpoint the difficulties that suffuse the autobiographical process: the uncanny relationship we have with ourselves as we seek self-knowledge and pursue self-knowing, the product and process of artful living.⁴⁹ Self-knowledge requires self-narration (a mediating process) as well as an encounter with the ontological and rhetorical modes of our existence. Self-knowing requires an active and intentional encounter with the self as other. Contrary to Dilthey and company, I contend that three modes of reflection, when enacted, make possible self-knowledge and self-knowing: introspection, retrospection, and alterspection. *Introspection* is psychological. It is a turning inward to the memories, experiences, emotions, beliefs, and desires embedded in the psyche. *Retrospection* is temporal. It is a turning backward to the events and encounters that converge to form the life and history we call our own. *Alterspection* is existential. It is a turning away from the psyche and a life history to the alienating author-subject—an ego who emerges through the act of self-narration and constrains the identity of the embodied writer-self.

The enactment of these three modes of reflection (psychological, temporal, and existential) blows open a psychic space in which we stand face-to-face with the ontological and rhetorical dimensions of our being-in-the-world. The reflexive encounter with these dimensions (self-knowing) and the concrete outcomes of this encounter (self-knowledge) generate a literary space in which we reconcile the ontological and rhetorical dimensions of the self. Even if the self-identity we narrate accrues new meaning and significance as readers reflect, look, and interpret the self, the dialectical reconciliation between the writer-self and the rhetorical-subject yields a rich middle ground in which new philosophical theories of the self, self-narration, self-knowledge, and artful living can emerge.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS CONFESSION

Written between 397–400 C. E., Augustine's *Confessions* is the earliest extant autobiography in the Western canon. Augustine models his mesmeric life story after the *pro-Romana* writings of Virgil and Cicero, the Christian letters of Paul, and the Hebrew narratives of the Bible. This rhetorical practice is consistent with the intercultural and intertextual landscape of first-century Rome.⁵⁰ Though I reserve a comprehensive account of his autobiography for Chapter 2, I mention *Confessions* in this context because it exemplifies the first two reasons philosophers write autobiographically: to know the self and to order experiences.

The search for self-knowledge drives Augustine's encounter with himself: "O Lord, you were turning me around to look at myself . . . and in this way you brought me face-to-face with myself once more, forcing me upon my own sight so that I should see my wickedness."⁵¹ Perpetually thinking, doubting, and suffering as his incompatible desires divide him against himself, Augustine grounds his Socratic search in God. The method by which he seeks self-knowledge is confession. As Genevieve Lloyd remarks, "'Confessing' is not really . . . to make himself [Augustine] known to others," but rather, to make it possible for him to know himself and ultimately for others to know themselves.⁵² To this end, he juxtaposes his youthful, concupiscent self against the shamed and humbled self of middle age. These two faces of Augustine's rhetorical self signify the dyadic nature of sin—acts against God that produce both pleasure and pain and split asunder the self, separating humans from God. But the author-subject is not the only self that Augustine confronts in making his confession. Seeking to dispel doubts about the authenticity of his conversion, Augustine qua writer-self confesses not to a temporally and spatially absent audience but rather to a present audience that sees him (and that may judge him) as a man.

Even after his conversion, Augustine remains concerned about "the danger of self-forgetfulness and the corrupting influence of other people who may deflect from the task of self-appropriation."⁵³ To obviate this danger, Augustine grounds the self in the sacredness of God. Steven Glazer describes divine sacredness as a revelation of unity that supersedes the dualism of self and world that we experience daily:

Sacredness . . . grows out of two basic qualities of our experience: awareness and wholeness. Awareness is a natural, self-manifesting quality: it is our ability to perceive, experience, and know. . . . Wholeness is the inherent, seamless, interdependent quality of the world. . . . Wholeness, however, can be cultivated within us by experiencing this nondual quality of the world. Through experiences of awareness and wholeness, we begin to establish the view of the sacred.⁵⁴

Carl Vaught's teleology of wholeness suggests that the quest for the sacred drives us beyond mere awareness of our self-knowable qualities, yet Vaught argues that the quest for wholeness remains unfulfilled because we exist between fragmentation and wholeness. In other words, we may have an intuition or awareness about wholeness (as Glazer describes it), but our experience of wholeness is neither concrete nor permanent. The sacred and the spiritual move us vertically toward wholeness, though we remain partially fragmented.⁵⁵ Augustine bears out this teleological perspective by continuing the movement from fragmentation toward wholeness throughout *Confessions*. In striving for the sacred dimensions of being, Augustine assumes the rhetorical stance of the Inner self.

The Inner self serves many purposes. First, the Inner self represents the self as an undifferentiated spirit or undivided self, a view in keeping with Christian theology. Second, it provides an inherent unity to the self, since it regards the self as a transcendent essence that survives bodily death to rejoin God in the pervasive sacredness of reality. Closely related to this is the third purpose it serves: to place Augustine temporally within the city of Man and ultimately (eternally) within the city of God, creating an identity that transcends both the writer-self and the rhetorical-subject. Fourth, it signifies Christ's call for remembrance, a process made present and complete in the taking of the sacraments, and a completed process of self-discovery, a process exemplified in the stories of Aeneas, the Prodigal Son, the book of Job, and the life of Moses.

Augustine is not alone in his appropriation of the Inner self. Confessional autobiographers must assume the Inner view of the self insofar as they disclose thoughts and actions in order to disclaim them. In these cases, as in Augustine's, writers engage in autobiographical storytelling for themselves, not for their readers. Within their practice of philosophical autobiography as confession, we must confess our lives if we wish to achieve self-knowledge, that is, we must follow this model and reflect introspectively and retrospectively on our actions and beliefs.

In addition to writing for the sake of self-knowledge, Augustine writes autobiographically to know God, and in knowing God, to order and make coherent his experiences according to God's divine plan. This requires some elaboration. The unity of Augustine's writer-self supervenes on the continuity of his experiences, his memories, and his temporal and spatial self-awareness. A similar process of unification applies to rhetorical-subjects as well. Just as self-identity arises from the convergence of psychological, temporal, and existential modes of reflection, writing about oneself is a unification of autobiographical bits of information:

Autobiography necessarily involves a collection into unity, a retrieval of the self from its dispersion into the world. For the autobiographer's need to make sense out of her life requires her to forge connections and establish a sense of development through the stages of her existence. And this must give rise to the fiction of a continuing self that maintains its identity throughout.⁵⁶

By privileging the Inner self wherein the self is the ontological ground of experience and the coordinator of mental states, Augustine invests his first-person narrative with an atemporal and ahistorical presence. He engenders in his voice self-referential reason, reflection, retrospection, and self-awareness. He speaks to future generations; he speaks through and to God.

The point of this brief overview of Augustine's *Confessions* is to show how philosophical and rhetorical aims inform both the process and product of self-narration, respectively—self-ascribing/self-knowing, autobiography/self-knowledge. *Confessions* is an endless resource for understanding how an autobiographer's view of the self feeds his or her rhetorical stance (Inner/Outer) and controls his or her literary expression (the organization of the narrative, i.e., the narrative frame, the diction, the imagery, and the episodes of the autobiography).⁵⁷

The product of Augustine's dialectical process is threefold: (1) *revelation* of his sins, his mistakes, his weaknesses; (2) *knowledge* of himself, God, the nature of memory, time, and space; (3) *transformation* of himself into a Christian, his readers into believers, and God from an abstract, Platonic ideal into a loving and fragile being, fully divine and fully human. These three outcomes dovetail nicely with the tripartite view of self-knowledge and self-knowing that I posed earlier: introspective/psychological, retrospective/temporal, and alter-spective/existential. I will say more about the connections between my view of self-knowing/self-knowledge and self-narration in later chapters. Now I focus on the two remaining motivations for philosophical autobiography.

Conveying the Self to Others

In the previous section I described two philosophical aims that motivate autobiographical prose writing: to know thyself and to organize experience. I described these aims in the context of Augustine's *Confessions*. Now I examine a third objective: *to communicate to others who we are*. I discuss this objective in the context of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions* (1782), a work modeled explicitly upon Augustine's *Confessions*.

Rousseau's autobiography opens with an invocation to the reader. In this invocation he promises to speak nothing but the truth (as long as his memory avails him):

I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself. . . . Let the last trumpet sound when it will. I shall come forward with this work in my hand, to present myself before my Sovereign Judge, and proclaim aloud: "Here is what I have done, and