

An abstract painting in shades of brown, tan, and gold. It depicts a face in profile, facing left. The features are suggested with thick, expressive brushstrokes. The eye is a dark, hollow shape. The nose and mouth are indicated by lighter, more textured areas. The background is a mix of horizontal and vertical brushstrokes, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

T·H·E *Philosopher's* "I"

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND
THE SEARCH FOR THE SELF

J. Lenore Wright

The Philosopher's “I”

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The Philosopher's "I"

Autobiography and the Search for the Self

J. Lenore Wright

State University of New York Press

cover art: Untitled oil painting by Sara D. Cocke. Used by permission of the artist.

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For George McFarland Luckey Jr. (Mac),
professor emeritus of philosophy at Morehead State University,
who taught me that philosophy begins with knowing the self.

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Preface

In part V of “Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot writes, “What we call a beginning is often the end/And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.” The texts I explicate in this book represent ends and beginnings in various ways. As a collection of philosophical autobiographies, they symbolize the end of life’s work, a looking back, a narrative gaze at oneself, a reflective glance at professional achievements. They also represent the burgeoning field of philosophical introspection and self-representation, an analytical scrutinizing of the self and the experience of personhood. As both a literary genre and a mode of exposition, philosophical autobiography exemplifies how beginnings and endings, introductions and conclusions, place boundaries around life, circumscribing the self that one subsequently investigates. Whatever the implications such boundaries occasion, we should remember that the boundaries we posit around us are flexible, that we do not entrench ourselves in solitude by creating beginnings and ends. We are both Inner and Outer beings. People come and go, they move in and out of our lives, they partake in our work, and they help us see what we want to see and what we need to see from inside our fields of vision. This analysis is no different. Many colleagues, professional and personal, have contributed to my understanding of philosophical autobiography, helping me see where I was going and where I needed to go. I am grateful for their assistance and encouragement.

First, I would like to thank three former professors, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Kah-Kyung Cho, and Jorge J. E. Gracia. This project owes much to their scholarly insights and generous spirits. Carolyn’s openness to multiple domains of investigation and diverse philosophical analyses strengthens the critical perspective she brings to philosophy. Her own work integrates multiple viewpoints without undermining the rigor of analytic scholarship. Professor Cho’s erudition transforms continental philosophy as it is generally understood in the United States into the arduous project characteristic of German universities. It was an honor to study under one of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s star students. Jorge’s commitment to accuracy appears in his insistence that one must grasp the presuppositions, the structure, and the concepts of philosophical theories if one is to understand them. He devotes himself to such a view of philosophy,

laboring over ideas and exhibiting a willingness to consider every perspective with grave seriousness.

I must also express gratitude for the support of two colleagues and mentors, Anne-Marie Bowery and Carl Vaught (1939–2005). I had the pleasure of first interacting with Anne-Marie as a student at Baylor University. Because of her novel interpretations of Plato and her excellent teaching, I was able to understand the narrative and dramatic features of Platonic dialogues in new and exciting ways. Her tenacity is unparalleled, and the eye she brings to philosophy captures the nuances of philosophical ideas, nuances that too often remain unnoticed. Our ongoing conversations and collaboration have improved my written work and expanded my philosophical interests in important ways. I value her friendship and collegiality immensely. Dr. Vaught's approach to philosophy raised the level of philosophical investigation and dialogue to new heights. I had the good fortune to sit in on his Augustine seminar at Baylor University in the fall of 2003. It was a highlight of my recent academic experiences. His singular ability to generate a new lexicon and an analytical schema for concrete reflection engendered philosophy with much of its original meaning and thrust. Carl was a philosopher in the deepest sense of the term. I wondered at his ability to not only bridge the analytic and continental divide but also to transform it. In his hands, philosophy became a method for resolving problems and a means for elucidating human experience. I cannot express how grateful I am for his belief in my abilities and his many intellectual contributions to this book. His death has left a void in my life.

I must thank several individuals who contributed in different ways to this book. Amy Antoninka, Christi Hemati, and Sarah Weeks read and edited the manuscript. Amy's training in psychology added much to the psychosocial dimensions contained herein. She has left an indelible impression upon this manuscript. Christi's interpretative abilities helped me refine and clarify many of the analyses within this text. Sarah's reflections on popular culture and autobiography shaped my thinking in significant ways. Amy, Christi, and Sarah are excellent, budding philosophers. I look forward to watching their philosophical growth over the years to come. Also, I would like to thank Sara D. Cocke for permission to use her painting on the cover of this book.

Henry W. Wright, my colleague and husband, has given me years of unconditional support and encouragement. His incessant faith in me has made me who I am today. In addition, his philosophical insights bear upon my analysis in numerous ways. I cannot express my appreciation for his multiple readings and reviews of this book. I would not have completed this project without his support and feedback.

Finally, I must go back to one more beginning and thank my parents, Betty Mullins Womack and Carl Edward Womack Sr., for their support, encouragement, understanding, patience, and love. They were the first to teach me the meaning of commitment, the value of hard work, and the duties to oneself.

Introduction

Like Agathon, the vibrant poet of Plato's *Symposium*, we enact Socratic practices to catch a bit of wisdom.¹ Unlike Agathon, we must bind our search for truth to Plato. His dialogues contain the ideas and allegories that typify foundational metaphysics: the Forms, the Allegory of the Cave, the Divided Line, the Myth of Er. They convey poetical truth as well, such as the mythic view of love recited by the comic symposiast, Aristophanes: a tale of two split-aparts who long for reunion and wholeness. Finally, they elucidate key sociopolitical events and ideas of ancient history. References to military conflicts, historical persons, and celebrated gods abound. Together these threads of philosophy, myth, and history reveal the richness of Plato's insights, a richness expressed most poignantly in his teacher, Socrates.

Socrates never wrote down his philosophical ideas. This simple observation is integral to Plato's characterization of his teacher. As such, it acquires enormous yet ambiguous significance. On the one hand, Socrates' partial illiteracy is unimportant. Within the context of a shared public life—the *agora*, schools of sophistry, religious festivals, performance-driven poetry—Socrates had the requisite audience to advance his philosophical critiques. So he argued. He posed metaphysical questions to his students. He pressed public officials for reasoned beliefs. He sought truth. On the other hand, Socrates' partial illiteracy is paradoxical. He *could* write, and he formed important relationships with writers throughout his lifetime. He scripts poetry prior to the death scene in the *Phaedo*. He offers clear but conflicting views of writing throughout the dialogues. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, he elevates speech above writing by arguing that dependence on the written word weakens memory and dulls thought. Despite his objections, many of his famous students, such as Aristophanes, are writers. And Socrates acknowledges the value of written work in the *Symposium*.² Perhaps most importantly, Socrates' star pupil Plato grounds philosophy in the written word, thereby reconciling *mythos* and *logos* within the confines of truth seeking.

A playwright who aspired to the stature of Sophocles and Euripides, Plato spent his early life writing tragedies. Biographers of Classical Athens tell us

that upon meeting Socrates, Plato burned his plays and pursued truth. Yet his love of wisdom and of Socrates did not spurn his love of writing. He continued to compose dialogues and letters. He wrote about Socrates and his disciples. And he may have written *for* Socrates. After all, Plato teaches us the Socratic Method. He describes the ever-barefoot and often unbathed Socrates. He depicts the snub-nosed teacher who breaks the hearts of young men. Plato preserves much of the life and work of the Western world's first great philosophy teacher. In his skilled hands, Socrates' death becomes a monumental triumph: Socrates died so that philosophy may live. For all of these reasons, the simple fact that Socrates did not write philosophical texts has deep and abiding significance.

Though he cannot save Socrates, Plato helps save Socratic philosophy. He recognizes the risks and limitations of his teacher's methods. Specifically, he foresees that philosophy too may die a tragic death if it remains bound to the Homeric epic, sophistic rhetoric, or Socratic orality. To guard against the demise of wisdom and our pursuit thereof, Plato puts thought to papyrus. His dialogues and letters shift the philosophical paradigm from the oral to the written arena, elevating dialectic as the primary mode of philosophical inquiry. His academy institutionalizes philosophy as a discipline in its own right, a discipline defined by its discursive narrative form. This shift from Socratic orality to written discourse transforms would-be philosophers into philosophers in the richest possible sense of the term.³ As beneficiaries of the Socratic tradition, we owe a heavy debt to Plato.

Thanks in part to the legacy of Plato, we philosophers write. We write to clarify our ideas and to add precision to our arguments. We write to explain concepts that define and frame reality. We write to persuade fellow humans with propositions, analyses, and ideas. In striving to clarify, explain, and justify human existence, we endeavor to express our ideas interpersonally, inviting our audience to listen in and learn like Plato's students in the Academia more than 2,000 years ago.

There is a fourth kind of writing and reflection that is perhaps more compelling than all of the above: autobiographical writing. What I have in mind here is not autobiography per se, a genre whose proliferation in the past decade has overwhelmed even the most active readers. Rather, I speak of autobiographies written by philosophers; individuals such as St. Augustine, René Descartes, Michel Montaigne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre who chose a life of unyielding self-examination. I do not intend to imply that autobiographies produced by nonphilosophers have nothing to teach us. Nor do I wish to imply that autobiography is necessarily philosophical. Some forms of self-narration raise questions that fall squarely within the domain of philosophy. But the recording of those narratives raises literary, psychological, and social queries as well.

What I am suggesting is that the form and content of some autobiographies lend themselves to an explicitly philosophical classification. Some writers incorporate philosophical concepts and language into the recounting of the self and/or their lives. Others write from within the tradition of philosophy; that is, they write as individuals who teach and write philosophy. Their public status as philosophers classifies their autobiographies (along with all written work they produce) as philosophical, even if we rarely acknowledge their self-narrational work as such. I contend that the term *philosophical auto-biography* applies to both kinds of autobiography.⁴

Rather than turning the mind's eye only to the reality beyond them, beneath them, over and above them, autobiographical philosophers consciously and mindfully focus their attention inward and unleash their analytical rigor upon themselves. They explicate the meaning of existence in existential, psychological, moral, aesthetical, and spiritual terms. They investigate personal thought and action as if they are words that carry meaning and texts that import wisdom. They pursue the riddle of the self as vigorously as other philosophical quandaries. For these philosophers, the unexamined self is not worth knowing.

Extending the analysis of Alexander Nehamas in *The Art of Living*, I argue that autobiographical philosophers form a collective of *uncommon*, *idiosyncratic*, and *artful* thinkers who use self-narration as a method of self-examination. Their philosophical *techné* makes them both remarkable and memorable.⁵ Each narrator conveys self-knowledge in distinct ways and under different circumstances, presenting varying and vying methods for self-disclosure within their autobiographical accounts. Despite the significant philosophical and stylistic differences that emerge in their writing, a shared commitment to self-examination via self-ascription guides their work. For each, autobiography is more than an act of personal revelation; it is a mode of philosophical exposition. The act of recording life events and expounding upon the meaning of those events is a philosophical exercise: a process of revelation in which a particular image of oneself emerges *as a result of* one's ontological views of the self and *in response to* the rhetorical forces shaping self-representation.

Because of its dual function, philosophical autobiography necessitates a philosophical analysis (not merely a literary or historical reading). Philosophical autobiographers make implicit use of (and explicit reference to) metaphysical and epistemological positions as they formulate self-representations. The lenses through which they examine themselves—lenses that are shaped by philosophical accounts of the self—reflect distinct philosophical commitments. These commitments are not always apparent in nonphilosophical autobiography. To understand the richness of self-reflection and self-representation within philosophical autobiography, we must identify and evaluate the philosophical implications of first-person accounts of the self. We must unveil the self.

One way in which autobiographical philosophers exemplify the richness of human experience is by writing from the dual position of subject and object. As the *subject* of first-person writing, autobiographers extract and convey the meaning of individuated existence through the uniqueness of their lives. As the *object* of written inquiry, authors present records of their experiences and beliefs apart from the emotional and psychological nuances of their lives. Another way that self-disclosure via autobiography occurs is through the sometimes tacit appropriation of ontological views of the self and rhetorical dimensions of self-identity. Philosophers cannot make unexamined assumptions about representational relations that other autobiographers might be led to make, not if they wish to succeed at living an *artful* or self-examined life. Their personal beliefs about self-identity and their views about the relationship between objects and artifacts shape their written texts in profound ways. Their closeness to the questions raised by self-disclosure in a literary medium adds an additional layer of complexity to the study of autobiography. Hence, autobiographies by philosophers form a unique case study of self-disclosure and identity.

Though my view of the self does not correspond exactly to the constructivist view put forward by Nehamas, my understanding of the autobiographical process is consistent with his perspective on self-individuation, which appears early in the introduction to *The Art of Living*:

The sort of self one constructs as a result of adopting certain theories is not simply a biographical matter. It is, much more importantly, a literary and philosophical accomplishment. . . . It is a philosophical accomplishment because the content and the nature of the self I describe . . . depends on holding views on issues that have traditionally been considered philosophical and not on anything one pleases. It is literary because the connection between those philosophical views is not only a matter of systematic logical interrelations, but also, more centrally, a matter of style. It is a question of putting those views together so that, even when the connections between them are not strictly logical, it makes psychological and interpretative sense to attribute them to a single, coherent character.⁶

Appropriating Nehamas's claim that self-construction is both a literary and philosophical accomplishment, I argue that the kinds of self-mapping that occur within autobiography occur on both ontological and rhetorical levels.

The endeavor to understand what I call *the autobiographing self* initiates a rhetorical and an ontological inquiry: an inquiry into the *subject*, the source of one's identity, and an inquiry into the *self*, the locus of one's experiences. True to its form, philosophical autobiography includes both a first-person literary per-

spective that maps the subject and a philosophically informed account that maps the self. First-person autobiography is the only form of self-inquiry that discloses the dual nature of the self—self qua self-examiner and self qua self-examinee. Ontologically, the self refers to a writer-self; rhetorically, the self represents an author-subject.

The interplay between the rhetorical and the ontological levels of self-representation within autobiography clarifies two features of the human experience: one's relationship to one's self and one's relationship to others. How is this interplay represented in autobiographical texts? The process of first-person mapping generates a distinct authorial voice, one that distances the writer from his or her life experiences, creating a rhetorical space within which a writer may stand and from which he or she may speak. The rhetorical space forms an authorial presence or a *persona* that narrates the text we read. Put differently, first-person autobiographical writing elevates the writer into an author who stands apart from his or her life, and must do so, in order to analyze that life, record it, comment upon it, and ultimately narrate it. Yet the author is only one of two figures in his or her story. Within the writer resides the being who lived the life, who endured the pain and joy of every moment, and the one who has been formed in character and behavior by the lived moments and experiences now appearing in print. Thinking and writing as both objective author and subjective source bifurcates the self into two distinct philosophical presences within the text: a rhetorical self and an ontological self. This bifurcation generates a unique bilateral perspective on the self—an external (Outer) perspective of the self as the referent of particular statements and actions, and an internal (Inner) perspective of the self as the active creator of one's statements and actions.⁷

Though the use of the Inner and Outer self as a framework to explain first-person self-narration is unique to my analysis, it is not the only dualistic framework that can be culled from (or applied to) philosophical autobiography. In *Ecce Homo*, Friedrich Nietzsche returns to the work he began in *The Birth of Tragedy*, depicting a transformed Apollo, the god of reason, and Dionysus, the god of passion, at battle within human society. René Descartes' mind-body dualism figures prominently in *The Meditations on First Philosophy*, a first-person account of Descartes' pseudoscientific philosophical system. In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre deconstructs the conception of humans as *Dasein* taught to him by his teacher, Martin Heidegger, that is, beings thrust into the world and defined by the contingencies to be encountered therein. Instead, Sartre argues that humans comport themselves toward the world in two ways: the *être-en-soi* (being-in-onself) and the *être-pour-soi* (being-for-onself). In *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo speaks metaphorically of himself in the midst of his spiritual struggle as a house divided against itself.

Outside of first-person writing, our contemporary understanding of human sexuality (man/woman), our view of gender (male/female), and the characteristics associated with gender (masculine/feminine) typify our dependence on dualistic systems and binary distinctions. Dualistic modes of thinking circumscribe human experience. But they are misleading. Rather than defying our dualistic tendencies and embracing the complexity of humankind, we succumb to the seductive simplicity of modal opposition and cease investigating the layers of our existence—temporal, psychosocial, spiritual, historical, and metaphysical. Over time, we see ourselves as constructed, rhetorical beings only, rather than as deeply ontological and spiritual creatures. Soon we ignore the uniqueness of each individual's situation within his or her complex culture, choosing to describe human action according to one of several oppositional modes of behavior: good/bad, right/wrong, strong/weak.

With the aim of overcoming dualistic thinking, Carl G. Vaught argues that we must move beyond abstractions of the self. In *The Quest for Wholeness*, Vaught writes, "The quest for wholeness involves a delicate interplay between the individuality we express and the communities in which we participate, and it is the harmonious interconnection between individuation and participation that those who undertake it (the quest for wholeness) must attempt to achieve."⁸ My analysis of the rhetorical self and the ontological self is consistent with Vaught's analysis. The ontological self that attempts to understand the nature and identity of its being in the world stands apart from the rhetorical self whose nature has been autobiographed. The truth about the self is that it is neither Inner nor Outer, neither given nor constructed, but something in between. Like a photographic negative, which when placed in the appropriate chemicals produces a positive image, self-representation divides the self, creating positive and negative images that tell *a* story, but not every story, about one's self. The self is neither the photographer nor the photograph; the self is the process in which the photographic elements converge to form an image. Philosophically informed autobiography challenges us to move beyond dualistic thinking and to theorize about the self anew.

To elucidate the relationship between the self qua rhetorical force and self qua ontological entity, I survey the first-person texts of five philosophers: Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions* (ca. 400 C. E.), René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions* (1782), Friedrich Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (w. 1888; pub. 1908), and Hazel Barnes's *The Story I Tell Myself* (1997). Spanning roughly 1,500 years, these rich and complex autobiographical accounts describe both an Inner and an Outer self. I aim to show that the first three privilege the Inner self, while the last two privilege the Outer self. Yet I also contend that in different ways these accounts attempt to unify the bifurcated self by locating a sense of self *between*

the Inner and the Outer self and by affirming the subject's identity in the world. Comprehensive analyses of these texts as self-representational entities are conspicuously absent from the canon of philosophy. As we move further into a postmodern period of autobiography and memoir, the need for philosophical critiques of self-narration is greater than ever.

Recent scholarship surrounding philosophical autobiography helps fill this lamentable gap. In *The Self Imagined: Philosophical Reflections on the Social Character of Psyche* (1986), Karen Hanson correlates self-imagination and self-representation as she articulates a thoroughly modern conception of the self.⁹ More recently, Michael Mateas and Phoebe Sengers juxtapose everything from Internet writing to personal memoirs to understand how narrative elements of contemporary culture shape intelligence (*Narrative Intelligence*, 2003). George Yancy entitles his recently edited anthology of essays by professional philosophers *The Philosophical I: Personal Reflections on Life in Philosophy* (2004). His collection includes practical advice to students and laypeople about how to live an examined life. And Shlomit C. Schuster's *The Philosopher's Autobiography: A Qualitative Study* (2003) provides an extensive and excellent introduction to philosophical autobiography. An esteemed scholar of philosophy and psychoanalysis, Schuster offers a systematic account of the subgenres of philosophical autobiography. She ends with a set of reflections on "the likelihood for persons to attain different selves through combining philosophical psychoanalysis with narrative writing."¹⁰ Though my own analysis of philosophical autobiography differs significantly from Schuster's, I am both indebted to her work and immensely grateful for it.

In contrast to the aforementioned texts, my analysis shows how the embodiment of the ontological self bears upon the rhetorical subject. This analysis serves four important functions. First, it generates a *genealogy of the self*—an analysis of the self and its development over time. Viewed from the perspective of philosophy, this genealogy provides much-needed continuity to the disparate views of the self within philosophical autobiography. Second, it creates a framework in which to compare self-representations that are historically distant and literarily distinct. Third, it demonstrates different methods for providing continuity to life narratives and unity to the self. Fourth, it fosters an evaluation of self-representation from both an Inner and Outer (ontological and rhetorical) perspective. Previous analyses avoid questions of gender and race associated with contemporary critical theory on self-identity. They fail to offer an account of how gendered individuals who belong to specific classes and races of people with varying degrees of social power experience the world. Nor do they explain how those experiences bear upon metaphysical commitments as well as literary practices. Though I embrace only mitigated constructivist views of the self, I affirm the contemporary literary and philosophical claim that the

embodiment of the writer bears significantly upon his or her work. To illustrate this thesis, I reflect upon the connections among theories of identity, the process of self-narration, and the practice of self-reflection.

Literary subtleties and rhetorical complexities emerge out of the autobiographical accounts that I examine herein. For instance, in teaching Augustine's *Confessions*, Carl Vaught suggests that two Augustines emerge out of the text: "The Augustine who authors the first nine books of the *Confessions* is not the Augustine of the tenth and remaining books of the text. Ten years have passed between the events recorded in the writing of the two parts of the text."¹¹ Yet despite this great divide within his work, Augustine appears to be a "coherent character." Anne-Marie Bowery explains the coherence of Augustine's character this way: the divide created by the temporal gap, and the changes that Augustine undergoes during those ten years, does not mean that there is no relation between the early and late Augustine. Rather, the self-examination that Augustine undertakes in books one through nine enables him to transcend the initially narrow view of the self and see the self in memory, time, eternity, and creation in the latter portions of the text. Vaught and Bowery identify the necessity of delineating the two authorial presences within *Confessions* (and the implications for the self they yield) as we exegete Augustine's view of the self.

Descartes offers a different set of philosophical challenges. In trying to articulate his view of nature as a physical system, Descartes negates the self at the physical but not mental level. Yet he remains ambiguous about the view he presents, creating a smoke screen to cloud whatever truths appear to emerge naturally.¹² Nietzsche goes further than Descartes, adorning contradictory masks that elude his readers rather than merely disorienting them. Who stands behind the mask? Is the man behind the mask the ontological self, a Cartesian "thing that thinks" and not the rhetorical self—the *he* or identity-bearing individual who writes?

The purpose of my analysis is threefold. First, by identifying and analyzing methods of self-examination in first-person philosophical texts, I clarify the role that the first-person plays in self-examination, an examination that bifurcates the self into an Inner and Outer self. Second, in surveying the process of self-examination in written texts, I trace the genealogy of the self—the changing perspective and thrust of the first-person within the genre of autobiography—to shed light on the philosophical assumptions and beliefs absorbed by Inner and Outer views of the self. I expose the influence of such views upon the development of the concepts of the 'self' and 'personal identity' in Western thought. Third, by looking closely at the concept of the 'self' within philosophy, I demonstrate the degree to which human existence is a bifurcated existence, and I offer both historical and contemporary responses to this phenomenon.¹³

My use of the term *self* in this book refers to the Inner, ontological self, the conditions necessary and sufficient to satisfy human existence. I argue that to

understand the self we must begin but not end with an understanding of the metaphysics of individuated human existence. The features that track an individual's existence as a particular individual (facial characteristics, voice and speech patterns, handwriting) coupled with the continuity of experience (memory, self-awareness, coherent narrative accounts) raise metaphysical questions that make a study of identity in autobiography compelling. In addition, autobiographical accounts raise literary, psychological, and social questions that reveal the power of writing to shape subjects and selves. As authors seek individuation through the act of writing, particularly while constructing coherent narratives and unified characters, writing becomes the project of organizing distinct events and actions over time, and thereby arriving at the subject—the *he* or *she*—who is the source of one's identity in the world. Hence, my use of the term *subject* in this book refers to an Outer, rhetorical self, the literary, social, and/or psychological ego represented in texts as the source of one's identity.

The chasm between the rhetorical and ontological selves never collapses completely. Contemporary artists are exploiting the space between these senses of self, harnessing the ambiguity within and using it as a source of creativity and self-exploration.¹⁴ We see this process exemplified in the construction of contemporary art objects, objects that combine traditional art forms, such as still life, with digitized imagery: "Art is out of the box. In the process, it now demands our attention, provokes an individual response and inspires us all to think."¹⁵ We experience it in music, where young singer/songwriters such as Beth Orton cross musical genres to create genres of their own. Orton's unique blend of blues, country, folk, and rock music yields "old-timey songs in a late-night futuristic sound scape."¹⁶ And we see it in the literature of contemporary writers such as Allegra Goodman, A. M. Homes, David Sedaris, and Alicia Erian—writers who "gaze unflinchingly at both the grotesque and the banal in an effort to unearth the truth about the human condition in an increasingly complicated world."¹⁷

I divide this book into four chapters: Chapter 1, "Writing the Self"; Chapter 2, "Bifurcating the Self"; Chapter 3, "Masking the Self"; and Chapter 4, "Transforming the Self." I speak to the issues surrounding autobiography as a philosopher. At times, I direct my comments to other philosophers, those with whom I share a common language. I adopt this rhetorical stance not out of a sense of privilege or feelings of hubris. Rather, I do so out of humility. The lexicon of philosophy, however useful, is limited. My intention in confessing the foundational perspective with which I approach this text is twofold. First, I hope that by revealing the lens through which I view autobiography, readers with varied interests and perspectives will bring their views to bear upon this text in a highly conscious way. As a result, I hope their understanding of autobiography grows and deepens in useful ways. Second, I recognize that examinations of autobiography, regardless of foci, must be cross-disciplinary. The

genre is by nature philosophical, literary, and historical. These aspects of autobiographical texts, aspects held in tension within the text, should be valued and weighed within academic studies. My perspective is only one among many that seeks to elucidate the meaning and significance of autobiography.

Though my focus in this book is on the conception and representation of the self within philosophical autobiography, I begin by laying out the groundwork for a study of philosophical autobiography. First I offer an analysis of why people write autobiographies. My conclusions are fourfold: autobiographical writers seek to acquire self-knowledge; to order and unify experiences; to communicate one's identity to others (e.g., to defend or justify specific actions); and to explore the relationship between writing and understanding (though this fourth reason is explanatory only of recent autobiographies that move away from the Inner-self perspective almost entirely). Next I explain the function of the first-person singular in autobiographical writing. I indicate how first-person perspectives—perspectives in which the author may be simultaneously the source of a narrative perspective and the narrative perspective itself—affect philosophical conceptions of the written subject. Lastly I introduce the concept of 'historical figure,' the figure whose identity emerges out of a number of historical documents rather than one's own autobiography: military records, diaries, journals, biographies, and so on.

In Chapter 2 I describe the processes by which self-examination occurs. I begin by examining the methods of self-examination utilized by philosophers within the aforementioned autobiographical texts. I then examine these first-person texts with an eye toward the concepts that grant each text shape and substance: concepts of the Inner and the Outer self, philosophical views of the self, the features of the rhetorical self, and the function of the first-person. As I analyze each text, I identify and interpret the process of self-examination that defines each thinker's philosophical life. I then distinguish between the Inner self and the Outer self, the bifurcated self of autobiographical writing.

Expressed as an Inner self, the self is an ego, a soul, a mind, or an animating spirit, a prediscursive, transparent originator of meaning and actions. Philosophers often characterize the Inner self as an empirical or a transcendental essence. Central to this conception of the self is the belief that the self individuates itself from other selves through acts of introspection, disengagement, and objectification. In order to "know thyself" one must reflect on the conceived nature of himself or herself, distance himself or herself from that reflection, and scrutinize the object of reflection, the self, to which one is attending. The mind, then, interprets itself and gives rise to various degrees of self-awareness. Augustine, Descartes, and Rousseau model their self-presentations upon this view of the self.

The Outer self is a social or psychological self—a product of language and various discriminating acts and thoughts. Many accounts of the Outer self

regard the self as an authorially constructed subject, the 'I' of our autobiographical texts, rather than the locus of our minds, souls, spirits, or bodies. This view emerges late in the nineteenth century wherein the subject of texts, the referent of the literary 'I,' takes the form of an outwardly socialized, gendered subject. Nietzsche and Barnes both articulate versions of this view.

Next, I describe the features of autobiographical writing central to this investigation, and I offer an interpretation of each of the five autobiographical accounts named earlier. Augustine, Descartes, and Rousseau appeal to God to enforce the authenticity of their accounts. This literary device raises the question of how one's milieu affects one's working concepts and autobiographical choices. If one writes responsively to one's present circumstances and past traditions, as many writers do, it is no surprise that modern and postmodern writers flout early autobiographical techniques to explain or justify their lives. Other shifts in autobiographical techniques include the altered use of gender in self-assessment. Early female writers adopt male pseudonyms, assume alter egos, and appropriate other conventional literary devices to avoid the stigma they might otherwise experience as female writers. Today, women not only write under their own names they also examine themselves in terms of gender, that is, they assess themselves in terms of gender stereotypes and expectations and in terms of the differences they exhibit as they appropriate particular gender roles. I discuss the differences between male and female autobiography in detail in Chapter 4.

In addition to describing the literary features of autobiographical writing, I introduce and analyze the purposes autobiographies serve—confessing, complaining, bragging, accusing, apologizing, explaining, and evaluating. Some autobiographers are confessional insofar as they disclose their actions, thoughts, and emotions in order to purge themselves of a guilty conscience. Others offer the 'I' as a personal perspective on truth. I argue that the literary features of many autobiographies challenge an ontology that presents autobiographies as factual, historical accounts. The claim that autobiographies are factual, historical accounts does not, however, commit one to the view that autobiographies are mimetic accounts of one's life. In Chapter 4 I outline additional challenges to the view that autobiographies are mimetic representations of one's life.

In Chapter 3 I focus upon the threats to self-identity posed by the bifurcation of the self within writing: deception and concealment. I focus direct attention upon self-deception as a problem that autobiography raises but does not always resolve. I define self-deception as the act of prejudicing or paying selective attention to (or the failure to attend to) certain aspects of oneself.¹⁸ Because autobiographical accounts invoke authorial perspectives—perspectives inextricably tied to the texts in which they emerge—our employment of language and literary techniques often leads us to portray ourselves as larger than life. This literary exaggeration can lead to self-deception. In this section, I outline two forms

of deception—*intentional* and *nonintentional*—and explain the conditions from which each arises. Ontologically speaking, self-deception is a relation between a person and a set of false beliefs. Rhetorically speaking, self-deception is a socially construed phenomenon that invokes and places responsibility with others as much as with oneself. It often appears as a consequence of rather than an ignorance about one's situation or life. Nehamas describes and provides several examples of this form of self-deception, including as an example the character Hans Castrop in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*:

As we observe Hans formulate and manipulate his feelings about his neighbors, as we see him first deny and then excuse their behavior on account of their illness, we miss—we should miss, I think, as Hans himself misses—a number of indications of his own state of health, which is a subject of much greater importance to the novel as a whole. . . . [Nehamas continues this analysis on the following page]. We remain deceived about this character who, because our point of view is so close to his, becomes for a long time our own second self. His errors are also errors of our own. And they are not only errors about Hans. They are errors about ourselves as well.¹⁹

I offer an alternative conception of deception in keeping with the phenomenological notion of *self-concealment*. To elucidate the enigmatic nature of autobiographical writing further, I argue that autobiography falls within the domain of both historical and literary genres. Because of its dual function and status, autobiography must satisfy different and sometimes conflicting criteria for justification. Categories of "fiction" and "fact" shape the ontological status and the literary identity of texts significantly. For instance, although autobiographies present themselves as authentic, factual accounts of one's life, the author's sense of style, literary conventions, and poetic license push the limits of autobiographies closer to the genre of novels and thus of fiction.

I also describe the challenges of authentic self-presentation and the interpretation of autobiographical texts. The problems raised by the 'I' of autobiographical texts include self-deception, self-protection, and literary manipulation. By exposing the problems inherent within autobiographical projects, I attempt to show the status and meaning of the 'I' in both the Inner and Outer accounts. For example, an author's autobiography may contradict or leave out the facts of his or her life, a choice that begs the question of truth and thwarts our attempt to distinguish truth from falsity. I argue that philosophers can avoid such difficulties by distinguishing the author from the writer wherein the author is the literary construct, the persona, pervading the text, and the writer is the ontological being who writes the text. Plato provides a useful illustration of this distinction.