Introduction: life-writing and the legitimation of the modern self

Patrick Coleman

The chapters in this book explore conceptions of the self as they emerge from the biographical and autobiographical writing of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. Standard accounts of the period do, of course, discuss the rise of individualism as a key factor in the genesis of modern states. Governments were legitimized, to an increasing degree, by the consent of autonomous citizens, and cultures judged by how well they accommodated the free expression of personal desires. In recent years, however, we have become more aware of the complexities of that history, and, in particular, of how the different and often contradictory experiences of women and other marginalized groups have been glossed over. But beyond the need to recover the past more fully, there are other reasons for re-examining early modern notions of the self as they appear in life-writing. This volume arose in particular from reflection on two features of the contemporary world which we believe can be illuminated by such an investigation.

The first is the ubiquity of "life-writing" itself as a cultural form. Associated a century ago with documentary or chronicle-like accounts of a famous career, this term is now used to encompass the whole range of the autobiographical and biographical narratives which have become so pervasive a phenomenon in our time. Alongside conventional literary works, we find journals, memoirs, diaries, and oral histories of all kinds, from the "witness literature" produced by survivors of totalitarian regimes to television talk-show spin-offs and the scandal-focused biography that Joyce Carol Oates has called "pathography."[1] This proliferation of life-writing has provoked widespread debate about the culture and especially the media that have fostered it. Historical perspective, however, is often missing from the argument. A closer look at the relationship between the first major wave of life-writing which accompanied the explosion of "print culture" in the early modern period may lead to more nuanced judgments about the contemporary scene. Conversely,

our own increased sensitivity to the power of the media should help us modify our often idealized views about the representations of the self put forward by the canonical writers of the Age of Reason.

The neutral pairing of the two words "life-writing" highlights a second important feature of contemporary (auto)biography: the dissolution of preconceived notions about the relationship between the work and the circumstances of which it speaks. The authenticity, consistency, or expressive power of the writing, it would seem, need not depend on the ontological or even chronological priority of the life. Autobiographies and biographies used to portray lives that had run enough of their course for their ultimate significance to be assessed, but today the techniques of life-writing are employed as pedagogical devices to encourage children to imagine lives they might potentially live, or to help adults overcome the restrictive "scripts" of their past.[2] Nor should one make any assumptions about the kind of coherence one should expect of any particular instance. On the contrary, generic distinctions and traditional narrative conventions are often subverted, as in the deliberate refusal of closure in witness accounts of events like the Holocaust, which shake our confidence in the power of any narrative to frame them.[3] Even the apparently basic difference between one's own point of view and that of another may be blurred, as in some memoirs of mental disturbance.[4] In short, today's "life-writing" reflects a postmodern emphasis on the particulars of experience at the expense of generalizing explanatory patterns. The chapters in this volume show that such experimentation with form was a feature of life-writing from very early on, and that the relation between the critique and the construction of normative images of the modern self is, in fact, much more intimate than is often supposed.

This extension of life-writing's scope has prompted contemporary students of the subject to rethink the boundaries of their own disciplines: not just how to interpret the evidence, but what counts as relevant evidence of identity formation. Good historians have always been attentive to the information conveyed by style, genre, and tone, while good literary scholars have never neglected the circumstances of a text's composition and circulation, but what distinguishes the new interdisciplinary approach to life-writing is its willingness to reconsider at every stage the implications of these various elements. Thus, while the chapters in this book begin from a variety of disciplinary starting points, in the practice of each author the aesthetic or architectonic concerns of the critic are not always easy to distinguish from the archival curiosity of the histo-

rian. Certainly both perspectives are essential for anyone attempting to write the life of yesterday's life-writer.

Changing assumptions about the self have not been limited to the forms in which that self is expressed. The very possibility of a "self" in the paradigmatic Enlightenment sense – an autonomous individual, testing rules imposed from without against a sensibility nourished from within, demanding as a matter of right to flourish in his or her own way – has been called into question. This is the second reason why we believe it important to look again at early modern representations of the self. What is new in the current debate is not skepticism about the self's inner coherence. In its modern formulations, the idea of the self has always been colored by skeptical attitudes, from Descartes and his doubts to the ironies of Pascal and Hume. What is now at stake is the legitimacy of focusing on the self as a foundational idea, however conceived. To be sure, Marxists and post-Nietzschean philosophers such as the writers of the Frankfurt school had earlier questioned celebratory accounts of the self's apotheosis as the embodiment of modern freedom in the form of the bourgeois subject. They identified nonetheless with the emancipatory thrust of what Alisdair MacIntyre has called the "Enlightenment project."[5] Today, some postmodern and postcolonial theorists go much further. The Enlightenment project itself, they argue, in the abstract (but in fact Eurocentric) universalism of its concept of human nature, cannot accommodate true respect for difference in a multicultural world. This politics of difference is in turn denounced by conservative thinkers such as MacIntyre (himself a former Hume scholar) who believe it undermines the ideal of a common civic discourse. Yet, far from advocating a return to the Enlightenment, "communitarian" thinkers such as MacIntyre want to repair the damage it caused by reabsorbing the self into the stabilizing web of community and tradition. A postmodern theorist such as François Lyotard would in turn reply that "tradition" is only another story, invented to mask the contingency of the particular.[6] Both sides point to the proliferation of life-writing as a sign of the times that proves their case. But while they disagree in their politics, they share the view that by exploring the multiple determinations of gender, or race, or class, contemporary life-writing presents personal experiences as not just unique, but incommensurable. They cannot be judged by any common standard.

These claims, and the historical assumptions behind them, need to be questioned. Does the postmodern diversification of life-writing really mean the early modern self has been superseded? A closer look at the

life-writing of that past might lead one to argue that what we see now are in fact further manifestations of the latter's protean energy. And is the communitarian critique of the modern self not a by-product of the very Enlightenment it rejects? As Charles Larmore has pointed out, there is something self-contradictory about identifying with unreflective tradition on the basis of a systematic critique of the past.[7] And yet, this gesture, too, is part of our tradition. It occurs most starkly in some of the thinkers, such as Rousseau, Burke, and Herder, who mark the transition between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, and who were well aware of its ambiguities. A similar awareness of the ambiguities of modernity as a whole informs the chapters gathered here. Skeptical about teleological histories of the self – including postmodern narratives of the end of teleology – the contributors to this volume show how a new look at the past can help us rethink the relationship between self and community in today's decentered world.[8]

The chapters included here span the period from the end of the Renaissance to the eve of Romanticism in Western Europe. For our purposes, this period may be defined in terms of three interrelated developments. The first, of course, is the spread of "print culture," that is to say the circulation of mechanically produced texts and images (newspapers, broadsheets, cartoons, and prints, as well as books), beyond the small clerical and humanistic elite of the Renaissance to a broader, unspecialized public. Second, in the wake of the Reformation and various civil and confessional wars, the force of religious and political tradition began to be supplemented by more explicit recognition of the need to legitimize authority through arguments based on premises independent enough of particular traditions to win common consent. Although in practice such consent, whether articulated through political participation or through informal networks of communication, remained the privilege of a small minority, it rested on a theory of universal rationality to which those excluded from participation could appeal. Finally, with the growth of those networks, there emerged, alongside the court and corporations that traditionally represented the community to itself, the domain we now call civil society. With this development came new ways of distinguishing between the "private" and the "public" spheres of life. If in earlier times the lives of kings, warriors, and priests carried exemplary significance by virtue of their roles in the old order, similar value could be claimed for persons whose lives exemplified the importance of unofficial action, as distinct from visible public function, in the life of civil society. Eventually, any life could be seen as invested with

general significance irrespective of its "inherent" social importance. For what was the "public" itself, if not the domain constituted by the self-representations of private individuals in print and other media?[9]

The growth of the publishing industry offered, among other things, greater facility for the anonymous production and underground distribution of all sorts of printed material, and men and women of different social classes were quick to exploit these media in order to test, revise, sometimes reinvent their social, cultural, and sexual identities. The enlightened *Bürger*, the man of feeling, the *salonnière* who figure in traditional cultural history were only a few among many roles imagined and imitated in the writing of the age. At all levels of literate society, from court to coffee-house, new means became available for generating and capitalizing on various forms of personal distinction through the circulation of new fashions of dress or speech, and, also, for integrating individuals of different origins into an ideal community of "civil conversation" based on standards of polite discourse anyone could adopt, and behind which, given an increasingly rapid rhythm of circulation of people and print in major urban centers, anyone could hide.

Given this complexity, it is often difficult to separate creativity from conformity as we study modes of characterization in the early modern period. As the sources of authority became more diffuse, the boundary between authorized representations and the free interaction of individuals asserting or exploring identities of their own devising, and replicating them through a variety of media, became harder to draw. To take a crucial example, new standards of "politeness" applicable to all who wished to participate in civil society came to play a central role in the Western European culture of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.[10] Were these standards intended as ways of disciplining behavior according to a more thoroughgoing inspection of manners, or were they designed to protect the privacy of one's "real" opinions from intrusive inquisition? In some measure, of course, both answers are correct, but finding that measure is a delicate matter. Pinpointing the relationship between institutional and individual agency is an especially challenging task, whether we are considering an event, a text, or the peculiar combination of the two in writers' accounts of their own experiences. Textual analysis needs to be supplemented by other insights, such as those that emerge when we look at the images and objects through which subjectivity is portrayed or projected. This kind of anthropological approach has long been used to study cultures remote from us in space or time and to reconstruct the imaginative world of an

individual when other evidence is unavailable.[11] We are discovering how fruitful it can be to apply a similar approach to a period of European culture until recently considered familiar and commonly interpreted as the period in which the self, in its modern sense, took articulate shape.

The writings discussed here are presented in chronological order, but the various chapters of the book form a number of distinct historical and thematic clusters. A first group of chapters examines the kind of self that is asserted in three important early seventeenth-century contexts of communication: the educational institutions established by the Jesuits; the political arena of court and Parliament in late Renaissance England; and the networks of epistolary correspondence among the members of an emerging international Republic of Letters. Contrary to some recent claims in Renaissance scholarship about a radical break in the concept of the subject around 1600, the authors show how the idea of the self is articulated within a broader picture of social ties. Thus, in his opening chapter, Timothy Reiss shows how Descartes, the emblematic figure of the modern individual, was shaped by an education at the Collège of La Flèche based on rhetorical ideals of communicative interaction. He argues that Descartes's notion of the self was a provisional ideal, a "passage" concept designed as a way station on the path toward a reconstituted political community whose nature Descartes could only glimpse amid the violence of the Thirty Years' War.

Debora Shuger focuses on the ways potentially violent encounters between powerful men in early Stuart England were deflected by the exercise of a wit finely poised between the acknowledgment of subordination and the *parrhesia* of speaking truth to power. Against those who assert the sudden appearance at this time of a self defined by its interiority, Shuger emphasizes how the ethos or character of a man was defined, his "life" epitomized, by what he revealed in speech, and not by a domain of feeling divorced from the externalized expression. Warning us against the temptation to apply anachronistic notions about the coherence of a single "self," she points out in the second part of her chapter that while the word "soliloquy" was used at this time in reference to a kind of private speech, it was in the specific context of communication with God. The interpenetration of this sphere of self-examination and the proud aristocratic self-representation evidenced in the social world would be a slow and complicated process.

Peter Miller's chapter on the erudite antiquarian Peiresc illustrates another aspect of the complexities of the relationship between life-writing and the notion of the self. Peiresc is the first scholar to be

awarded the honor of a biography, but he himself published nothing and gained fame primarily by his tireless efforts to facilitate communication among other scholars across Europe. At the same time, he offered, in the discretion and moderation of his self-assertions (evidenced by his willingness to engage, in an atmosphere of continuing tension following the religious wars in France, with correspondents of different faiths and philosophies), a new model of the self-governing man inherited from the Stoics. Knowledge rather than will was the key to self-government and personal independence, and Miller argues that we find here a crucial source of the ideal of informed politeness which spread in the following century to the citizenry of the Enlightenment public sphere.

The next two chapters offer complementary perspectives on the relationship between public and private concerns articulated in the life-writings of three English women. Mary O'Connor argues that we need to modify the very distinction between private and public if we wish to capture the peculiar situation of aristocratic seventeenth-century women such as Anne Clifford or Anne Dormer. Their domestic lives as bearers of children and managers of households cannot easily be separated from their role in the dynastic politics of their families. By studying these women's intimate relationship with familiar objects of their work and leisure – the sewing needles and cups of chocolate mentioned in passing in their account books, letters, and diaries – O'Connor helps us understand more clearly how women participated in wider networks of production and consumption and how they created spaces of resistance to outside pressures. One might say that O'Connor offers a feminist twist on the idea of "technologies of the self" as defined by Michel Foucault in his last works, based on models of self-mastery used by the leisured men of antiquity.[12]

With the eighteenth-century actress Charlotte Charke, whose autobiography is the subject of Robert Folkenflik's chapter, the challenge of recovering the subjectivity within the represented self is very different. The *Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* is written in a thoroughly extroverted way. It is a public attempt to placate her father, Colley Cibber, himself a man of the theatre, and at the same time it is a farcical "advertisement for myself," as Folkenflik aptly notes. Charke was famous for her cross-dressing on and off the stage, and yet this play with disguise, far from disclosing a secret connection between subjectivity and gender, highlights the speculative nature of any attempt to establish such a connection except at the level of the genre and style of the text itself.

The importance of genre as a framework within which subjectivity

can be articulated is a recurring theme in the next three chapters, which illustrate the search, in mid eighteenth-century France, for new ways of defining the individual's experience of time and memory in relation to family or other genealogical connections. This period has long been identified with an emerging cult of sensibility, but, as Benoît Melançon and Julie Candler Hayes point out, French scholarly investment in the role of "les grands hommes" in the cultural history of their country has too often predetermined the kinds of questions that are asked. Beginning instead by wondering why Diderot did *not* write the autobiography one might have expected from the author of so many personal letters, Melançon compares the formal characteristics of diaries, letters, and autobiographical narrative in order to show how the position of these genres at a given moment define a range of sometimes incompatible options for the writer. This is especially important for France, where generic constraints were felt more strongly than in England, and where stylistic choices were closely linked to questions of cultural status. Diderot's letters verge on autobiography, but he is too attached to the implied presence of a personal addressee to abandon the epistolary mode. Rousseau did, of course, write an autobiography, but he planned to include within, or alongside it, a substantial corpus of letters, and although only some letters were ultimately incorporated in the final version, they underscore the author's preoccupation with evidence and direct communication as defenses against misunderstanding. This reluctance to abandon the link to the other is also found among less literary writers. Elisabeth Bégon, for example, wrote to her son-in-law, away in America, every day during the winter months, when mail service was interrupted. Piling up one next to the other until they could be sent in the spring, the letters almost become a diary, but not quite. A full explanation for the French hesitation on the verge of autobiography will depend on further investigation of other non-canonical texts, but focusing on the tension between generic options in well-known works allows us to glimpse the self in the process of its construction.

Stephen Werner offers another original approach to Diderot's protean self-representations. He contrasts the lyrical mode of personal reminiscence that finds expression in the *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron* with the innovative comic form of life-writing represented by *Le Neveu de Rameau*. If Diderot preferred speaking to others to the self-enclosure that for him may have disqualified autobiography, it was by "speaking through others" that he could draw his self-portrait. While the letters to Sophie Volland present an image of Diderot as a thinking and desiring

subject, ironically it seems that only in the satirical dialogue of the Nephew and the Philosopher, where the lyricism is no longer that of a "moi" or self but a universal music of nature, could Diderot depict that self.

The Abbé de Sade's biography of Petrarch is best known for claiming the poet's Laura as an ancestor of the Sades and thus of the abbé's nephew, the infamous marquis. But as Julie Candler Hayes shows, the three long volumes of erudite commentary (a form not subject to the generic constraints of more literary writing) provided ample room for the abbé's self-representation, in the course of writing the life, not of a reprobate "other," but of the archetypal poet of love. The work shows the abbé as the author of a sprawling family romance, but also as a man of letters for whom the manipulation of the driest documents is invested with his own dreams and desires. Insisting that his work is not a "Life" but only "Memoirs" toward a Life – in this respect, the work differs markedly from such works as Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, with which it might in some respects be compared – the abbé reveals his reluctance to bring the project, and its opportunity for fantasy, to closure.

Felicity Baker's chapter on Rousseau's affair with Madame de Warens and Anthony La Vopa's account of Fichte's adoption of Kantian philosophy probe the relationship between life-writing and what Baker calls the "crisis in symbolic relations" in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Rousseau and Fichte were talented but poor young men, unable to benefit from the patronage networks of the time and looking for alternative means of self-promotion. But they also felt very keenly the need to overcome a deeper alienation from societies which seemed to them to have lost grasp of that elusive "good object," that locus of value which, whether located in a personal God or a moral ideal, could be transmitted as a legacy from teacher to student or from parent to child, and which is vital to the renewal of culture. Understanding what is involved in such transmission in a secular, post-Revolutionary world would become a central issue in Romantic literature and may be one of the driving forces of life-writing since that time. Works like Rousseau's or Fichte's are particularly valuable because they illustrate the challenge of finding appropriate terms in which to undertake such reflection without falling into the nostalgic sentimentality that sometimes overwhelms the writers of a later period.

Looking back on his youth, Rousseau confesses his puzzlement in trying to convey just what it was that made his relationship with Madame de Warens so precious. By accepting Rousseau's account as an

effort to be faithful to an elusive reality and not as evidence of a neurosis all too easily labeled, Baker is also able to recover the exceptional personality of Françoise-Louise de Warens herself. Where Baker focuses on Rousseau's retrospective narrative in the *Confessions*, La Vopa's essay on Fichte follows the young philosopher as he tries to define, in letter, sermon, and essay, the link between his calling and his career – his vocation, in other words, in the full sense of the term. Fichte's endorsement of Kantian solutions to the problem of freedom and necessity, and to the relation between head and heart in matters of belief, needs to be seen in the context of his personal situation in Enlightenment Germany. As La Vopa writes, "there was something intensely personal about Fichte's commitment to an impersonal determinism," and the biographer of such a philosopher must do equal justice to the logic of the personality and to the rigor of the arguments.

The volume concludes, fittingly enough, with two chapters on the ways individual life-stories are rewritten by friends, disciples, the public at large – and by the subjects themselves in their own defense. Anne Mellor studies the competing narratives developed to explain the behavior of Mary Robinson (1758–1800), an actress and poet whose love affairs with the Prince of Wales and then with army colonel Banastre Tarleton were public knowledge. The witty verbal thrusts with which Debora Shuger's Renaissance noblemen defended their reputation would be of no use to a late eighteenth-century woman obliged to conform to bourgeois standards of modesty and confronted, not by a small court audience, but by the manifold productions of the press, by polemics and cartoons freely circulating to a large and varied readership. As Mellor says, Robinson was a celebrity, "a set of visual and verbal public texts." The self-representations she developed in response to her critics are equally complex. Her adoption of numerous pseudonyms suggests that she began to view her identity as itself a kind of performance. How much this was the result of external pressure and how much it might have been a liberating response to that pressure must remain an open question, for the later biographer herself is confined to what evidence the conflicting texts provide.

A painter's life, as Richard Wendorf points out in his study of Sir Joshua Reynolds's posthumous reputation, is written not only in his pictures but in the tools of his trade. Picking up a theme articulated in Mary O'Connor's discussion of domestic objects, and alluded to in Peter Miller's references to the antiquities dear to Peiresc's heart and in Felicity Baker's treatment of Madame de Warens's medicinal plants, Wendorf