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978-0-521-13163-6 - The Language of Autobiography: Studies in the First Person Singular

John Sturrock

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The urge to autobiography reveals itself every day in the stories we tell about ourselves. Literary autobiography is the most highly developed form of this universal activity of self-promotion, a kind of writing practised in the west over many centuries. In this major new study of the western tradition, John Sturrock analyses the means by which more than twenty of the greatest literary autobiographers have gone about their task. The book concentrates on the productive tension between the writer's will to singularity and the autobiographical act itself, which restores by conventional and rhetorical means the harmony between the writer and a community of readers. By attending closely and sceptically to the truth-claims made by autobiographers from Augustine through Rousseau and Darwin to Sartre and Michel Leiris, Sturrock establishes some of the deep, hidden continuities of autobiographical writing, and shows how artful and self-conscious this supposedly most sincere of literary genres can be.

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For Lucy and Oliver, by way of an epithalamium

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The subject of this book has been with me for a dozen years or more, and the writing of it has involved a limited amount of what one of the autobiographers I am concerned with in it typically called ‘auto-plagiarism’ (this was Vladimir Nabokov). I have here re-used or adapted portions of essays published since the late 1970s in a variety of places and I am grateful for the permission to do so kindly given me by: Professor Ralph Cohen of the University of Virginia, the editor of *New Literary History*; the editors of *Scriptsi*, published in the English department of the University of Melbourne; Professor Margaret McGowan and Mr George Craig of the University of Sussex, the editors of the collective volume *Moy qui me voy*; and to Professor Robert Folkenflik, of the University of California, Irvine, and the editors of the Stanford University Press, as the organizer and publishers of a conference on *The Culture of Autobiography* held at Irvine in March 1990, my invitation to speak at which was the clinching incentive to get this book written.