

About Face

About Face:
Depicting the Self in the Written
and Visual Arts

Edited by

Lindsay Eufusia, Elena Bellina and Paola Ugolini

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

About Face: Depicting the Self in the Written and Visual Arts,
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Prosopopoeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name [. . .] is made as intelligible and memorable as a *face*.

—Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-facement”

I approach the self not as an *entity* but as an *activity*, a continual process that gives rise to concepts by which an individual both distinguishes herself from others [. . .] and situates herself in relation to these other[s].

—Jenijoy La Belle, *Herself Beheld*

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PREFACE

The essays included in this volume were inspired by the conference *About Face: Depicting the Self in the Written and Visual Arts*, organized by the editors of this text and hosted by the Department of Italian Studies of New York University from February 28 through March 1, 2008. The conference was generously funded by New York University's Department of Italian Studies, Graduate School of Arts and Science, Graduate Student Council, and by the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò. We would like to express our sincere thanks to all the professors of the Department of Italian Studies at New York University for their support, guidance, and advice in planning the conference and this collection of essays. We would like to thank, particularly, the Chair of the department, Professor Ruth Ben-Ghiat, the then Director of Graduate Studies, Professor Virginia Cox, and the Director of the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, Professor Stefano Albertini. We also wish to thank Jennifer Newman for her excellent translations of the following essays: "Benvenuto Cellini's *Vita*: Autobiography of a Saint?" and "Melancholy Marriage: The Portrait of Giovanni Pascoli in His Wedding Pamphlets."

INTRODUCTION

The process of representing the self ideally culminates in a concrete form, generally written: autobiography; or visual: self-portraiture. The term “autobiography” was first coined in the late eighteenth century to define a literary genre that started to flourish in Europe and in North America with authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Carlo Goldoni, Giacomo Casanova, and Benjamin Franklin. In fact, autobiography has always played an important role in the Italian cultural tradition from the Middle Ages through the present. Life writing was already a common practice during the Middle Ages when it was conceived as a sort of self-examination in light of the intimate relationship of any human being with God. It was also common in the Renaissance when the individual—or the *self*, as it will be defined at the turn of the twentieth century—became central to modern autobiographical narrations not because of the individual’s exemplary moral values or deeds but rather because of the uniqueness of an “ordinary” life.

A similar interplay between the ordinary and the extraordinary and between the object of life-telling and its audience can also be traced in the visual arts, particularly in portraiture. Portraiture attests to the myriad character inherent in depicting a life, for a portrait is necessarily the result of “the interaction of two forces, artist and sitter.”¹ Self-portraiture, when artist and sitter are one and the same, naturally heightens this tension. Its development in early modernity further records self-portraiture’s evolution as a symbol of the growing status of artists, who moved from being regarded as simple artisans capable of documenting the existence of a life (another’s life) to becoming well-rounded intellectual figures of interest in and of themselves who, like writers or philosophers, were uniquely qualified to both record and analyze individual character.

Additionally, in the visual arts portraiture has always been connected to the necessity to create a substitute for something absent. In Leon Battista Alberti’s definition, a portrait’s inner meaning is that of being the re-creation of and surrogate for something perceived as lacking or absent. But, in its effort to bring into being a replacement and to compensate for an absence, the portrait, by its own presence, eventually verifies the existence of a lack.² No form of knowledge—and equally, no form of art—could ever entirely and perfectly reproduce a missing object.³ While

it attempts to fill the gap between the subject and the subject's image, the work of art instead takes on a life of its own to go beyond the subject. The inescapable failure of a full, flawless reproduction can become even more striking when the artist confronts the challenge of reproducing her- or himself. The investigation of the self that self-portraiture thus implies is traditionally linked to the myth of Narcissus,⁴ whose fascination with his own image led him to the irresistible desire to capture the portrait reflected in the mirroring surface of the water. Narcissus' myth epitomizes the quest to wholly possess oneself, to overcome the unbridgeable distance that inevitably separates us from our own self-image. And in the process of self-representation, the surface that reflects our image bears the risk of being transformed into Narcissus' mirror—one in which we drown while we strive to gain possession of ourselves.⁵

Jenijoy La Belle's *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass* (1988) examines women's sense of self in relation to the mirror and mirroring, and her insights are useful in thinking about self-representation more generally. Like any self-image, as La Belle claims, "the mirror is an important tool not just for beholding [one's] face and form or for seeing how the world views [one] as a physical object, but also for analyzing and even creating the self in its self-representations to itself"⁶ and, we would argue, to the rest of the world. One's self-image not simply *is*, it *means*. To use linguistic terminology, the image of the self is both signifier and signified; in La Belle's words, it is not (only) entity, but also activity.⁷ The forcefulness of the mirror image as self-image and mirroring as self-depiction, as La Belle further explains, is in the play between material (body) and immaterial (image), and in the link between revelation and meaning: the mirror appears to show us that which we cannot otherwise see, but also calls into question the fidelity of that image to ourselves, to our "truth." As in any form of self-depiction, the relationship between "original" self and self-image is one of simultaneous recognition and misrecognition, of identification and disassociation. The conversation one has with one's image is, as La Belle says, a "dialogue," not a monologue.⁸

So, is the "me" I see in the mirror or that I create in a work of artistic or literary self-portraiture really me as I am? Does it cease to be "me" once I've created it? Or do both this me and that one now lie in some in-between? As the essays included in this volume reveal, a single, unified answer to these questions does not exist, nor are these three proposals exhaustive of the possibilities that arise in considering the relationship between one's self and one's self-image. What does seem certain is that the process of self-representation operates, as La Belle says of the mirror, as a tool for "self-scrutiny" and for scrutiny of the self, for "ego formation

and deformation.”⁹ The motivation for creating this volume and the scope of the essays included herein is to engage with and explore this sense of the self as a perpetual and shifting “semiotic phenomenon” for examination that depends upon narrative for its cultural and historical articulations: “[i]ndeed, even the knowledge of one’s own self is dependent upon the silent narratives of consciousness, those stories we tell ourselves to become ourselves.”¹⁰

In Paul de Man’s analysis, then, the creation of narratives of the self “deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration. [. . .] [It] deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores.”¹¹ In this sense de Man sees autobiography as a genre intrinsically related to the rhetorical figure of *prosopopoeia*, because it implies a chain of voices and masks that a subject activates—consciously or unconsciously—whenever s/he recounts her/his life experience. The very moment a subject starts a narration with “I,” that subject no longer exists but turns into a fictional construction that blurs the conventions of a literary or figurative genre. Autobiographical narrative, therefore, both destroys and restores an identity and “veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause.”¹²

Moreover, as de Man queries, although autobiography “remain[s] rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by an uncontested readability of his proper name [. . .] are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model?”¹³ Because representing the self involves a process of selection and choice based on mimesis, in many ways to represent the self is, often simultaneously, to create the self and negate the self. Thus the most disquieting but also intriguing feature of self-representation, whether literary or visual, is that every narrative bears with it the risk of transforming the operation of facing one’s self into one’s own defacement.

Furthermore, because the self exists as part of a community, what is highly personal, representing one’s self, becomes invested with social and political meaning when it is translated into a cultural object. As the essays in this volume illustrate, one’s self-image is deeply engaged with the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which one finds oneself (and one’s self). The interdependence of the self and the community remind us how much our sense of ourselves is bound up in our sense of others; as is revealed in the essays herein, at times the relationship between self and other is one of opposition or confrontation. Often, however, it is one of solidarity and camaraderie.

While this volume explores the multifaceted nature of self-representation in relation to Italian culture over the ages—its many and

various forms and formations, its personal, sociocultural, and political relevance—it is intended to inform thinking about the self and self-representation more generally. Though centered on topics related to Italian studies, the essays included offer valuable and thoughtful insight into the discussion at large: what are the stories we tell ourselves to become ourselves, how do we tell them, and what happens to them, and us, in and after the telling?

This exploration begins with Part I, “The Self Before and After: Intertwining Identities,” which examines the development of life writing in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This section looks at the model by which the stories of exemplary lives are recounted, tracing the self’s evolution and articulation through a life-changing experience. Whether the self related in these narratives is considered an individual by the modern sense of the word, or is sublimated into a Christological or Christlike figure, the image of the individual that emerges is invariably bound up in the unique experience undergone, which, however, it is also meant to serve as life-lesson for others.

Nicola Gardini traces the roots of modern autobiography starting from the rupture with the medieval notion of the individual and the emergence of a “science of the individual” in the Renaissance. According to Gardini, the medieval self was “a serial one,” where individual differences had to be dissolved by conforming to the model offered by Christ. In the Middle Ages, difference equated sin. The revolution in the notion of the self which took place in the Renaissance consisted, on the contrary, in proclaiming and defending the distinctiveness of each single personality, with a new emphasis on the private and the lived experience. It is with Petrarch and the rediscovery of the classics from a different perspective that life is no longer seen as a mere path leading to adulthood, but as nostalgia and regret: this is the discovery of a new concept of human time and history. Gardini follows the evolution of the autobiographical genre in literature and art from Petrarch to Alberti, whom he sees as the arrival point of the development of this revolutionary individuality.

Anna Bagorda’s essay offers an overview of the medieval idea of the self by analyzing the multifaceted ways in which Dante recounts his life and journey in the *Divina Commedia*, a work that has become, throughout the centuries, the paradigm for narrating the exemplary life. Moving from the interplay between Dante-poet and Dante-pilgrim, Bagorda explores the nuances of the otherness of the self that Dante creates through the metaphor of the (recounted) journey. Bagorda underlines in particular the inner notion of otherness contained in the spatial detachment that the idea of journey originates and the final catharsis it implies, focusing in

particular on the stories of Paolo and Francesca and Ulysses in cantos 5 and 26 of *Inferno*, and on the poet/pilgrim's heavenly arrival and departure in *Paradiso*.

With Laura Lazzari's essay we move to Benvenuto Cellini's *Vita*, one of the most representative examples of the new Renaissance way of conceiving of life-writing as a cultural and literary trope. Lazzari offers a close reading of the *Vita* focusing on Cellini's attempt to reshape his image in order to transform his public figure from that of a "paladin of the devil" to a "knight of God." She highlights the numerous parallelisms between Cellini's narration of his imprisonment and liberation and Dante's journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven in the *Divina Commedia*, as well as his adaptation of key events of his life to biblical episodes. Through the use of these literary sources, Lazzari argues, Cellini constructs the narration of his life as a process of auto-sanctification in order to invest his persona with the divine, supernatural characteristics that Renaissance culture attributed to the figure of the artist.

Francesca Maria Gabrielli takes us further into the intertwining of the artistic and literary nuances of the autobiographical discourse by investigating the intriguing visual and verbal dialogue between Michelangelo's *Pietà* for Vittoria Colonna and Colonna's Sonnet 87. Gabrielli discusses the central feature of both the sonnet and the drawing—the explicit or implicit bond between Mary and Jesus—in order to demonstrate how the symmetrical and complementary relationship between Christ and the Virgin as portrayed by Colonna and Michelangelo affects the asymmetrical stability of socially instituted gender categories and succeeds in bypassing gender hierarchy. By reading the poem and the drawing in their mutual interdependence, Gabrielli highlights how this problematization of gender categories reinforces the equal and gender-fluid friendship between Michelangelo and Colonna, as evident in the representations of themselves and each other offered by the artist and the poet.

In Part II, "I Am What You Read: Fashioning the Self," we shift to a discussion of modern notions of the self, a self especially immersed in its historical and political context. The historically contingent self examined in the essays included in this section also reveals the deeply self-conscious aspect of self-representation. We cannot help but note the, in the case of these essays, writer's unrelenting awareness of the fact that her or his work would become part of a particular and unique moment of social and political history. As such, the authors' at times mild and at times acute, but always undeniable, cognizance of being contentious voices of urgency in times of national strife insists that we reexamine our sense of both these authors (and their selves) and the times in which they lived and wrote.

The essay by Stephen Marth on Aldo Palazzeschi's *Il codice di Perelà* (1911) offers a discussion on the mutability of the self. Through an examination of the protagonist, Perelà, arguably Palazzeschi's most famous character and known also as the "man of smoke," Marth shows that self-identity often operates as a screen onto which others project their perceptions and expectations. Marth argues that Palazzeschi's amorphous Perelà is neither as insubstantial nor as ephemeral as some critics have claimed, but is, instead, a sort of prescient caricature of perhaps the most famous shape-shifting character of twentieth-century Italy, Benito Mussolini, il Duce, whom Palazzeschi addresses directly in two later works of memoir and reportage.

Franco Baldasso continues the exploration of the ways in which literary persona and historical personage are conflated and distinguished with his essay which discusses the relationship between self and representation of the self in the works of Primo Levi. The inseparability of Levi's life experience and his writing often leads readers to consider his literary works as autobiographical texts. Baldasso does not negate the autobiographical current of the scientist's writing, but examines the points of convergence and divergence that exist between Levi-the-author and his ultimate literary creation, Levi-the-narrator, the spokesperson of his life and writing. The (auto)biographical desire of both Levis, to bear witness to life, results in a unique narrative voice that testifies to the experience of twentieth-century Italian history.

Deena Levy's essay also touches upon the central problem of history and self-representation in her discussion of Elsa Oliva's role in the Italian armed resistance during World War II. Oliva wrote two autobiographical narratives related to that seminal experience: *Ragazza partigiana* (1946 and 1969), and *Bortolina: storia di una donna* (1996). By describing Oliva's personal experience and writing, Levy discusses the limits of official historiography, which still today does not account for the central role played by women during World War II, and the gender issues posed by Oliva's exercise in self-fashioning. As Levy points out, in her narration Oliva is always negotiating her gender identity by appropriating—physically and mentally—both masculine and feminine domains in the conscious attempt to reclaim her courage and active militancy among the Italian partisans and to define her own limits.

With Part III, "Melancholy Me: The Self as a Painful Discovery," consideration of the self and self-representation moves onto a highly personal plain. The essays gathered in this section examine what happens to the self and our notion of it in times of profound psychological trauma. The effects of the advent and diffusion of Freudian psychological theory

heavily inscribe the selves discussed in this section—from the life-altering experiences of individual trauma to those brought about by global crises. Severe psychological and emotional distress, especially when related to loss, often provokes a sense of loss of self or identity that can characterize the survivor's life forever after the moment of the trauma. The survivor becomes, in a sense, caught between the self who underwent the trauma and the self who attempts to move on.

In his essay, Michele Monserrati investigates unpublished poems dedicated to brides and grooms that represent Giovanni Pascoli's modern version of the ancient genre of *nuptialia*. As Monserrati underlines, Pascoli's originality consists in intertwining the homage to the spouses with a background of autobiographical elements. Pascoli's poetic imagination is moved by the desire to celebrate a happy event, but is suddenly drawn to reflect on his own condition of unhappiness and solitude which characterized the poet's entire life since the murder of his father when he was just a boy. Instead of representing a picture and a celebration of the spouses, Pascoli's wedding pamphlets ultimately illustrate the poet's self-representation, a self forever trapped in that defining moment of anguish.

Eleanor Parker examines another life characterized by constant mourning and distress—that of Giuseppe Ungaretti, whose personal tragedies influenced most of his poetical and critical writings. As Parker convincingly points out in her analysis, Ungaretti's poetry is pervaded by a melancholy subjectivity that cannot escape from instances of personal loss—the death of his son and his brother—and historical events—the two world wars. Although already present in his early collections, this melancholia is central to the collection *Il Dolore* (1947), which Parker examines in psychoanalytical terms concentrating in particular on the poem “Tutto ho perduto” and on the cycle “Giorno per giorno.” It is the grief for the absent affections generated by the Freudian oscillation between death and eros that Ungaretti channels through his study of Italian literature and identification with Petrarch and Iacopone da Todi. This melancholy implies a double role of the poet, who is at once the subject in mourning and the melancholy subject coping with his condition through language. By applying Freudian, Lacanian, and Kristevan categories, Parker explores the evolution of Ungaretti's melancholy self through a close reading of his poetical language and imagery, into which life is constantly intruding.

Annachiara Mariani, in her discussion of 1930s Italian theater, explores the ways in which writers articulated a crisis of the self after the publication of the psychoanalytical findings of Freud and in the wake of

the First World War. By comparatively examining the work of the important but less well known Luigi Antonelli alongside that of his more famous friend and collaborator Luigi Pirandello, Mariani illustrates how the calling into question of our sense of the self in the first half of the twentieth century manifested itself on the Italian stage. The individual self that emerges, she argues, is indelibly marked by the traumatic events and exists in a “split” psychological state that cannot be overcome.

Finally, in Part IV, “Facing the Mask: Projecting the Self on Paper and Canvas,” we move to a discussion of the face as both physical entity signifying and metaphor representing the self. The face is often considered a mask which stands between the self and others and is “read” in order for its meaning to be divulged. As such, then, it can be shaped, maybe even altered, in accordance with visual codes that may be deliberately engaged in order to project a certain identity. At times this mask may seem a falsification—one which one’s “true” self may even attempt to reject—and at times it may be, instead, a process of translating what cannot be seen into visual form.

In the realm of Italian-American ethnic literature we have the essay by Yvonne Mattevi which analyzes the autobiographical writings of John Fante. Fante’s work, Mattevi explains, clearly illustrates the impact early twentieth-century sociological attitudes and views on immigration had on an immigrant population’s sense of self, especially in relation to physical appearance. In her in-depth analysis of Fante’s *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), Mattevi examines the protagonist’s negotiation (as representative of the author’s own negotiation) of his Italian-American selfhood in the midst of a society that was openly disparaging of and at times even hostile toward those who did not fit—physically, socially, culturally—into the “All-American” ideal.

Cross-cultural boundaries are also investigated by Margherita Zanoletti in her essay on the Australian painter, Brett Whiteley. Zanoletti traces Whiteley’s formation and travels across Europe to demonstrate how self-depiction is in and of itself a process of citation and translation. No one, perhaps, is more deeply engaged with visual cultural codes than a visual artist and an artist’s decision to transliterate such codes from one culture to another is greatly reflective of the artist’s self. Through insightful comparative analysis of Piero della Francesca’s *Baptism of Christ* and Whiteley’s *Fidgeting with Infinity*, an analysis which incorporates elements of translation theory, Zanoletti reveals that Whiteley’s artistic self-representation, and, arguably, self-representation in general, is a translational act.

PART I

THE SELF BEFORE AND AFTER: INTERTWINING IDENTITIES

CHAPTER ONE

THE WOUND OF BEING ONESELF: IDENTITY AND LIFE-TELLING IN EARLY RENAISSANCE CULTURE

NICOLA GARDINI

During the Renaissance there emerged an unprecedented interest in the specific features, both bodily and spiritual, of individuals. Two paramount cultural and social categories ended up being radically and irreversibly modified: the notion of human time and the meaning of lived experience. In comparison with the Middle Ages, the focus shifted from the destiny of mankind to personal history, that is, to biography.¹ In particular, the development of autobiography in literature, which parallels the diffusion of self-portraiture in art, testifies to what a considerable level of specialisation and rhetorical competence the science of the individual had risen.

This evolution from the general to the specific, which had enormous moral and cultural consequences on the history of the Western world, depended on a number of reasons, not all of which, of course, are of a literary nature. In this essay, it would be impossible to even try to take account of the most important ones. However, for our present purpose, let it suffice to remember that the emphasis on the private and on lived experience which characterises Renaissance literature would have never taken place, at least not in the ways it did take place, if the study of classical antiquity had not furnished alternative psychological models—from Seneca to Cicero, Suetonius, Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius—for the representation of the new individual. In Renaissance autobiography, starting from Petrarch, paganism and Christianity come to clash in a most dramatic way, and there is no real possibility of reconciliation between the two, nor any possibility for either to completely overcome the other. This should be kept in mind. In autobiography, what is at stake is one of the great dilemmas of Western culture: a most excruciating conflict between

impulses towards transcendence and the pull towards what is contingent and casual, between the rule and disobedience.

By “autobiography” I don’t just mean a certain kind of literary writing, a genre—although, of course, an autobiographical genre is obviously there at a certain point and makes itself known by very specific features. By “autobiography” I mean, first of all, a given “idea of the individual self” (not any specific one), on which autobiographies are based but which can also be deduced from other forms of literature, such as lyric poetry, the novella, the epistle, or even those that are most remote from any interest in life-telling. Indeed, the “idea of the self” shines through in all verbal artifacts. It is implicit in any discourse about human beings and society. Each epoch has such an idea. The Renaissance, relative to the Middle Ages, created a new “idea of the self.” This is the novelty: the notion of the individual is no longer at one with the Christian ideal of “maturity” (or “virility”), that is, with the religious paradigm of “moral self-improvement.” In the Renaissance all universal paradigms, such as this one, dissolve and the uniqueness of each person is proclaimed in its stead with revolutionary consequences in all fields of human knowledge and behaviour. Everybody has his or her own nature and is ultimately unchangeable, and such nature, whatever it is, is fulfilled in highly idiosyncratic ways.

Dante is obviously a great representative of the old self-improvement-based psychology. For Dante, just like for Saint Paul, the purpose of every individual is conforming as fully as possible with the model of Christ. In this only lies happiness. Medieval subjectivity, of which Dante is a very good example, is simultaneously a eudaemonistic and mystical doctrine: I achieve happiness in Someone Else. Unhappiness is not admitted. It is sin. I mentioned Saint Paul, but I should also mention Aristotle, whose influence was radical and overpowering. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* happiness is defined as a constant exercise of virtue, that is, of reason and of the highest faculties of the soul (1.7.15).² Such an idea of human happiness deprives history, that is, the past, of all significance, fostering exclusively progress towards moral perfection, that is, future and eternity. The Christian self, imbued with Aristotelian values, aspires to leave his lived experience behind. He aspires to *forget*. Not only does he live in view of the future, but he lives instead of anybody else. In a Christian perspective, everybody is by principle the same, because all men are expected to pursue the same ideal of moral excellence. One is all. The Christian self is a serial one. It acquires status and importance by way of imitation. Saint Paul advised moral mimicry overtly: “I encourage you all to become my imitators” (Cor 4.16); “I should like all men to be like I am”

(Cor 7.7). In such a moral framework passions are punished, because they are considered childish. Indeed, the Middle Ages had a very low opinion of childhood. We all remember that passage in the *Confessions* where Saint Augustine remembers having stolen some pears as a little boy and, after so many years, condemns that playful theft as criminal (2.4).³ Young age is no excuse. What matters is sin, not the identity of the sinner. Human conduct is to be evaluated per se. It is the conduct that conveys certain characteristics to the individual, not the other way round. Saint Augustine, therefore, manages to be very stern also on infants, as is shown in the initial pages of the *Confessions*. A child's selfishness is not more excusable than any other form of selfishness. Nobody is innocent, much less an infant, who does not even have the capability to correct himself: "For in thy sight can no man be clean for his sin; no, not an infant of a day old upon the earth [. . .] So that it is not the mind of infants that is harmless, but the weakness of their childish members" (*Confessions* 1.7). In the light of such an interpretation, some passages of the *Divina Commedia* will reveal their true meaning. Dante is comparing himself to a child—which, to a modern reader, may look like a tender comparison. In fact, he is condemning his moral weakness in purely Christian terms. His irrationality—that is, his dependence on passions—needs to be corrected by reason, which is represented by Vergil. Protracted childhood is bad. Being a man means being an adult, achieving maturity, transcending one's past. From a medieval perspective, something went definitely wrong if one, "[n]el mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" ([w]hen I had journeyed half of our life's way; *Inf.* 1.1),⁴ that is, at thirty-five years of age, is still prey to the passions and has not yet become a man. Nor is it less serious a problem if an old man like Ulysses, on the eve of his death, still desires to learn. Indeed, "virtute" (virtue) and "canoscenza" (knowledge) should be acquired well before senility. Thirst for knowledge is not to stay forever, if faith quenches it in due time. In the Christian ideal, the self-fulfilment of man lies in bending to God's will as soon as possible, that is in staying a child for as little time as possible. Let me quote Saint Paul once more:

until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles (Eph 4.13–14).

To be sure, Jesus did advocate imitation of children as something positive and useful, but, in so doing, he simply implied that children were models of pliability, not of morality. Likewise, Saint Paul dubs his followers

“children” in order to assert his own moral superiority, and bestows more dignified titles, such as “nurse” (Thes 2.7) or even “pregnant woman,” upon himself (Gal 4.19). A child is to be tamed and instructed, and what of him survives in later years is to be repressed, or exposed as a negative example for others.

The Others

We have reached another important point of our discussion, the others. From a pre-Renaissance perspective, the others are everybody I have not become, but could or should become. The others are the passions that my self is expected to oppose or the paragons of virtue that I should comply with. The others are hell or heaven; Francesca or Piccarda; Ciappelletto or Griselda. Here I am wittingly quoting characters that embody abstract moral principles, however individualised they may appear to us. In fact, a truly modern character, such as we readers of novels are used to, that is, a character that is structured on his or her capability to change according to the varying situations of life and to think of himself or herself in time, is to emerge much later. None of Dante’s or Boccaccio’s characters has a sense of his or her past as a signifying dimension in itself, independent from all idea of eternity. None of them has an “autobiography.” In the particular cases of Francesca, Piccarda, and Griselda we may even trace their original conceptions to some philosophical sources. Griselda, whose virtue and patience are generally considered in symmetrical opposition to the vicious life of Ciappelletto, is not so much a correction of whatever vice the reader encounters in the *Decameron* from the first novella on as she is a representative of a fundamental principle of Aristotelian ethics, on which the moral edifice of the *Decameron* rests: happiness. Who is really happy in life? He who knows how to *remain* happy, notwithstanding Fortune’s relentless hostility:

while great and frequent reverses can crush and mar our bliss both by the pain they cause and by the hindrance they offer to many activities. Yet even in adversity nobility shines through, when a man endures repeated and severe misfortune with patience, not owing to insensibility but from generosity and greatness of soul. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.10.12)

Francesca and Piccarda, in their own right, spring from one passage of Aristotle, conflated with Aquinas’ commentary. Aristotle says:

It is then generally held that actions are involuntary when done (*a*) under compulsion or (*b*) through ignorance; and that (*a*) an act is compulsory

when its origin is from without, being of such a nature that the agent, who is really passive, contributes nothing to it: for example, when he is carried somewhere by the wind, or by people who have him in their power. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.1.1–2)

This is the Latin translation followed by Aquinas: “Violentum autem est cuius principium extra tale existens in quo nihil confert operans vel patiens. Puta si spiritus tulerit aliquo, vel homines domini existentes.”⁵ And this is Aquinas’ *paraphrasis*: “puta si spiritus, idest *ventus*, per suam violentiam impellat rem aliquam ad aliquem locum; vel si *homines* dominium et potestatem habentes, expulerunt aliquem contra suam voluntatem” (emphasis added).⁶ The first case clearly applies to Francesca, buffeted by the wind of passion; the second to Piccarda, driven out of the convent against her will. Dante may have appropriated also the word “homines”: “*Uomini* poi, a mal più ch’a bene usi” (Then *men* more used to malice than to good; *Par.* 3.106, emphasis added).

Let’s dwell a bit on the *Decameron*. One obvious feature of this work is that there is a lot of speaking going on. What’s less obvious, but not less essential is that everybody speaks of everybody but themselves. The narrators don’t tell us anything about their lives. We ignore their past. We ignore where they come from. They are simply full of others’ stories and they are happy to tell them to each other. Nor do they seem to infringe any fixed rule in doing so. Indeed, they should not be expected to speak about themselves at all. Life-telling concerns the lives of others. Life-based stories (*novelle*)—not only in the *Decameron* but also in most narrative literature of the early modern period—are social practices resulting in the formation of a collective memory and of publicly shared moral meanings. In such a context no space is admitted for the expression of personal cases in the first person. We may assume that Alatiel’s and Griselda’s lives would have made interesting autobiographies, but Alatiel and Griselda belonged to the “culture of the others,” not the “culture of the self.” Their stories could only be told by someone else. Those were times when you were either a storyteller or the subject of a novella. You kept the account of your own life for yourself and for God.

Only the dead speak of themselves, as Dante’s *Commedia* demonstrates. Such miniaturized autobiographies are possible only because the lives they tell represent what their protagonists are forever. By telling us who they were these protagonists are in fact explaining why they are *where* they are. Their autobiographies are not personal memoirs, but are at one with God’s verdict.

Dante’s or Boccaccio’s emphasis on the lives of others presupposed a condemnation of all writing in which the life of the individual was not

considered in comparative terms. Such a perspective definitely denies autobiography any right to exist. In the *Convivio*, Dante allowed two exceptional situations—"necessarie cagioni" (necessary causes; 1.2.12)⁷—for autobiographical writing—and even in such cases one's life is considered only in relation to that of the others: first, to defend oneself from some accusation, as we see in Boethius' *Consolatio philosophiae* ("acciò che sotto pretesto di consolazione escusasse la perpetuale infamia del suo essilio, mostrando quello essere ingiusto, poi che altro escusatore non si levava"; so that he might excuse the continuing infamy of his exile under the pretext of consolation and thus show himself that it was unfair, since nobody else stood in his defense; 1.2.13); second, to be useful to others, as Saint Augustine does in the *Confessions* ("per lo processo de la sua vita, lo quale fu di [non] buono in buono, e di buono in migliore, e di migliore in ottimo, ne diede essempla e dottrina"; for the evolution of his life, which became better from good and best from better; 1.2.14). Dante's anti-autobiographical attitude appears all the more distinctly when one considers that self-praise was to become an essential trait of Renaissance literary self-portraiture. Pietro Aretino said: "non è errore il laudarsi, a l'uomo di qualche merito, in presenza di chi no 'l conosce, a ciò sapiate chi sono" (One is not wrong if he lauds himself in front of people who are not aware of his merits—that's the only way to make others know who we are).⁸ And, even more characteristically, Benvenuto Cellini stated in the opening paragraph of his autobiography: "Tutti gli uomini d'ogni sorte, che hanno fatto qualche cosa che sia virtuosa, o sì veramente che le virtù somigli, doverieno, essendo veritieri e da bene, di lor propria mano descrivere la loro vita" (All men of all sorts who have accomplished something valorous should write their lives with honesty; 1.1).⁹ To be sure, Dante's *Commedia* is seasoned with protestations of literary prowess. But there's a difference in Aretino's or Cellini's self-praise: Dante's self-celebration served to confer the status of truth on his language. In the Renaissance, self-celebration is part and parcel of the representation of oneself and is independent of all intention to assert oneself as a moral or philosophical authority. The Renaissance artist speaks of his merits exclusively for his own sake.

Petrarch's Reformation

Around the mid-fourteenth century, the Aristotelian-Christian paradigm of happiness received a mortal blow from Petrarch. Indeed, in Petrarch's work, the critique of "maturity" and the emergence of modern autobiography go together. To be sure, one can't really state that a modern

autobiographical genre is born formally, but numerous attempts at self-portraiture in Petrarch's opus point in that direction: the *Familiars*, the *Secretum*, the unfinished "Letter to Posterity," even the *Canzoniere*. In his first sonnet he resorts to an apostrophe which could have easily figured in any of Dante's canticles. Yet, this is not the voice of a dead man. The speaker is a living human being who is not just presenting himself, but is mainly snatching his life from the clutches of the storytellers: "favola fui gran tempo" (I made myself an object of gossip).¹⁰ It should not be neglected that, while announcing his regretful will to reappropriate his own life, Petrarch uses one of the terms with which Boccaccio defines his stories in the Proem of his *Decameron* ("novelle, o favole o parabole o istorie"; novellas, or fables or parables or stories).¹¹ Whether this is true or not, nothing prevents us from believing Petrarch's implying that there was a time when his love for Laura might have made a good subject for a novella.

In the *Secretum* Petrarch disrupts the "teleology of the self" on which Dante built his psychological tower. For Petrarch the past and the present coexist: the wound never heals; no scar ever appears, as is expressed in a beautiful metaphor in the *Secretum*:

Nullum in me adeo vetustum vulnus ut oblivione deletum sit; recentia sunt cuncta que cruciant. Et siquid tempore potuisset aboleri, tam crebro locum repetiit fortuna, ut hians vulnus nulla umquam cicatrix astrinxerit.

[No wound is long enough in me that oblivion has cancelled it; all things that excruciate me are recent. And if something could be abolished by time, still fortune would get there so often that no scar could close the opening wound.] (2.52)¹²

Memory is made to become an essential part of identity. While in Dante everything points to the future and to the ultimate destruction of all memory, that is, to eternity, and the so-called book of memory is but an allegory of Dante's prophetic (anti-autobiographical) mission, in Petrarch the subjective gaze turns back towards history—both personal and common. Petrarch goes as far as to say, in his "Letter to Posterity," that he doesn't like his time and would rather have been born in some other epoch and forget the present: "michi semper etas ista displicuit; ut [. . .] qualibet etate natus esse semper optaverim, et hanc oblivisci, nisus animo me aliis semper inserere" (this present time never pleased me; so that [. . .] I always wished I'd been born in some other time and I could forget this one, striving with my imagination to enter other epochs).¹³ This is a revolutionary statement in two respects: first, it shows a historical awareness

of the past which Dante did not and could not have had; second, it identifies the past with a subjective psychological dimension. Also Petrarch, like Dante, cultivates oblivion, but his head is turned backwards. The desire to be born in some other time is the ultimate representation of retrospectiveness, that is introspection, a descent into the temporal depths of the “self.” The ancient psychological edifice is reduced to smoking rubble. Not for a second does Petrarch stop contemplating the disaster he brought about.

In the *Secretum*, which is an actual mise-en-scène of the author’s sense of guilt for what he did, another important novelty comes to the fore: the pleasure of remembrance (which is to be characteristic of the subsequent genre):

Hoc igitur tam familiare colloquium ne forte dilaberetur, dum scriptis mandare instituo, mensuram libelli huius implevi. Non quem annumerari aliis operibus meis velim aut unde gloriam petam (maiora quedam mens agitat), sed ut dulcedinem quam semel ex colloquutione percepi, quotiens libuerit, ex lectione percipiam.

[So that such a friendly conversation might not vanish, I decided to report it through writing and filled the measure of this book. Not so that this book may be added to my literary works or that I acquire glory by means of it (I have greater plans in mind), but so that I may receive from reading, whenever I feel like it, the pleasure that I once received from the actual conversation.] (Prohemium Incipit)

All apologetic or didactic purpose has dissolved. A new sensibility here appears to be burgeoning. Augustine or Boethius have become obsolete. In the *Secretum*, Augustine, while playing the role of a censoring super-ego, ultimately serves to legitimise, by opposition, a new antithetical model of which Petrarch is the representative: life not as growth to adulthood, but as nostalgia and regret; in a word, life as autobiography. It is from such roots—nostalgia and regret—that Petrarch’s typical indecisiveness results. Indecisiveness and inconclusiveness imply, first of all, a novel approach to human history. In the *Secretum*, Augustine keeps scolding Francesco’s autobiographical impulses. He too uses the verb “forget”: “I securus et propera, nec in tergum deflexeris; preteritorum *obliviscens*, in anteriora contende” (Go steady and fast, and never turn back; *forgetful* of things past, move towards the future; 3.69, emphasis added). But it is not through looking to the future that one can write the story of his life.

A new *principium individuationis* is born: in Dante, it was “will”; in Petrarch, it is “desire without will” (in Dante’s Christian ideal, will and desire should coincide by means of reason). The vanishing of will makes