

**GHOST WRITERS:**

**Theories and Strategies of Communication in the Autobiographies of  
Augustine, Descartes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche**

by

**DOUGLAS GLEN WRIGHT**

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Toronto**

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy University of Toronto, 2001.

**Douglas Glen Wright**

**ABSTRACT:**

Through examining the works of Augustine, Descartes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, this text explores the ambivalence about autobiography as a communicative act. Autobiography is engaged in two tasks at once: the literary representation of the structure and history of a self, and the communication of that self to an outside reader. The agendas, I argue, are almost inevitably in conflict, and in each of the authors I examine here, strategies of literary seduction that actively court public attention alternate with a variety of methods of distancing the author from those very readers. The imagined reader stands as the screen against which autobiographical writing must be projected, but this requirement is deeply at odds with the desire for autonomy that motivates so much of the autobiographical practice. I conclude that in the case of each of the philosophers with whom I am engaged here, a reluctance to accept the necessary involvement of the other in self-identity seriously compromises not only the possibility of communication, but also the task of self-description itself.

My attention throughout is devoted to the intersection between the various explicit theories of linguistic communication presented by these authors and the rhetorical purposes into which these theories are enlisted. It thus draws simultaneously from traditional philosophical techniques of conceptual exegesis and criticism, from psychoanalytic or genealogical analysis (principally Nietzsche, Freud, and Jean Starobinski), and from “reader-response” methods of literary criticism (Wayne Booth).

## **Acknowledgements and Thanks:**

My topic here is autobiography, and this makes me conscious of how potentially endless a list of acknowledgments might be, and in all justice, *should be*. I cannot begin to specify the contribution of those who have been with me the longest --my parents, my brother and my sister, my best friends Ian and Katherine --so I can only thank them for being there for so long and in so many ways.

I can be slightly more precise when it comes to those whom I have come to know during the years in which I have been engaged in this research. Of these, I would like to express my appreciation first of all to the members of my supervisory committee: professors Amy Mullin, André Gombay, and Graeme Nicholson. Many of their suggestions are reflected in the present work; the remainder mean that I need not fear the well running dry for quite some time. But while their advice and critique has helped immeasurably, I am most indebted, and most impressed, by the liberalness of intellectual spirit each has displayed in working with me. Even if I sometimes feared that they were giving me rather too much rope, I always felt free to let the project develop organically, and their faith that something worthwhile would result buoyed my own.

I would also like to thank and acknowledge Dr. John Keller for helping me to see my own involvement in the issues I address here and --tentatively --to work towards a means of making my peace with them. I cannot imagine having written anything at all like this text without our ongoing conversations. Thank you for listening, and, thank you for responding.

And to Julie, my love, I am eternally grateful for your abiding faith, hope, and charity, your endless patience with everything relating to “something I discuss in my thesis,” and for reminding me when necessary of the importance of sleep, proper diet, and relaxation; one does not live by words alone.

☞ My thanks also to Jennifer Gibson, Sandra Raponi, and Ian Gerrie for encouragement and editorial assistance.



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## **A Guide to Referencing:**

I have distinguish between those notes that are purely or principally provided as a means of allowing the reader to locate a work or a specific passage in a work, and those that are discursive, and related in some manner to the present discussion. I have relegated the former --which may often be of no interest to any particular reader --to a set of endnotes after the bibliography at the end of the book, while the latter are given as footnotes at the bottom of the page. Complete information on the various texts to which I refer in either location can be found in the bibliography, and all page references are to the editions listed therein.

In the case of the primary works, I have placed the page, line, or section references in square brackets within the body of the text itself, according to the following format:

### **Augustine:**

For the *Confessions*, book number, followed by section number; I am using Ryan's translation unless otherwise indicated, but the book and chapter divisions are standard in all modern translations. Some editions include a third number in the middle --a chapter division --but it is unnecessary for the location of citations and can thus be ignored.

### **Descartes:**

The standard Adam / Tannery [AT] numbers are provided in all cases; I am using the Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch translations unless otherwise indicated. In the "AT" notations, "VI" refers to the *Discourse*, while "VII" refers to the *Meditations*.

### **Rousseau:**

Page references in the text include first the book of *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* from which the citation is taken, then the page number in the Penguin edition of Cohen's translation. Citations drawn from the *Dialogues* or the *Reveries* will similarly include "Dialogue" or "Walk" number, followed by a page reference. For *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, I am using Masters and Kelly's translation; references to *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* are taken from France's translation in the Penguin edition.

### **Nietzsche:**

References to works other than *Ecce Homo* are provided in the endnotes according the standard format, with work titles abbreviated to their initials (ex. "GS" for *The Gay Science*, "TP" for *Twilight of the Idols*), and sections numbers provided rather than page numbers; the translations are by either Kaufmann or Hollingdale. It should be noted that *WS* --*The Wander and his Shadow* --and *AOM* --*Assorted Opinions and Maxims* --are major divisions of the final edition of *Human, All too Human*, and the reader should look for them in this text.

No consensus has emerged on the optimal means of referencing *Ecce Homo*. I have provided either two or three numbers for each citation. The first number refers to one of the four main divisions in the text (ex. 1 = "Why I am So Wise," 4 = "Why I am a Destiny"), and the second number refers to a numbered chapter within one of those sections. After an initial six chapters, "Why I Write Such Good Books" [3] is further subdivided into the ten sections which review Nietzsche's earlier texts. Hence, where three number are listed, the reference is to a sub-section within one of the review chapters in this part of the book. For example, a reference to the second numbered section in *Ecce Homo*'s discussion of *Daybreak* would be given as [3:4:2].

**For Helen Wright, my grandmother,  
whose memory is very much with me as I write.**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

I have striven to depict a feeling by which I am constantly tormented; I revenge myself upon it by handing it over to the public. Perhaps this depiction will inspire someone or other to tell me that he too knows this feeling but that I have not felt it in its pure and elemental state and have certainly not expressed it with the assurance that comes from mature experience. Someone, I say, may perhaps do so: most people, however, will tell me that this feeling is altogether perverse, unnatural, detestable and wholly impermissible.

Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>

### **1) DIARY:**

At the age of sixteen, I began the practice of keeping a diary.

Its content was at once both highly personal and yet entirely generic, governed by genre expectations that I had not been conscious of having absorbed. Early forays into dating, revelations and insights about my family, a variety of experiments with free-verse poetry, as well as the day to day events of high-school life all made their appearance. But while I approached the project at the time with a pioneering spirit, often surprising myself with the findings of my self-analysis, I now recognize that I was quite a ways away from breaking new ground in either psychology or literature. Nearly every one of my friends, it turned out, had a similar book under their pillow. Like autobiographers before us, we were alike in our pretensions to idiosyncrasy.

If there is something that set my autobiographical project apart from the crowd, it was not the content of the text itself, but rather, the abrupt way in which the diary reached its end. After over a year of writing, my brother happened to remark apropos of some other matter that “no one *really* writes anything without wanting it to be read, at least by *someone*.” With some degree of fear that he was retroactively justifying a certain amount of snooping (he swears this was not the case), I immediately related his aphorism to my own diary writing practice. *Did* I want it to be read, I wondered? And in the very moment of questioning, the answer came in a cold wave of panic, an embarrassment so profound that it could easily have been mistaken for nausea. As I turned the

pages, reading revelation after revelation, a feeling of having made an enormous and potentially very costly *mistake* set in, and would not leave.

Rereading the diary in its entirety that night, I could not imagine anyone whom I would want to read my book, and yet, I was uncomfortably aware that my brother had spoken the truth. Each section now clearly betrayed an address that I had not consciously realized in the act of writing: *she* should really hear this; imagine if my *mother* knew about that!: this is what I want my *friend* to know. But the problem I faced was that with this diversity of intended auditors now showing through, I could not settle on any *one* of them on whom I could sincerely wish the whole of the text. Moreover, I began to suspect that the listener I had in mind was as often as not an imaginary construction rather than any real person that I might ever have known, a sort of idealized composite of friend, lover, therapist, and pastor, only poorly instantiated in any of my real acquaintances. And even this imagined figure seemed to constantly break apart, its at-first singular identity concealing a plurality of auditors, as I required in one moment the sympathy of the friend and in the next the absolution of a priest.

My private writer's crisis was resolved in a private book-burning ceremony the next evening, the only action that seemed to adequately respond to the problem of public readership. My mind filled with images of how such things ought to be done, I set fire to the book and scattered its ashes on the waters of a nearby river (let me call it Lethe, the river of forgetfulness that flows through the underworld). Needless to say, I now regret the loss deeply; I would dearly love to be able to revisit those early experiences as I then understood them. And yet, I continue to believe that my brother was right. For professional purposes I now associate his insight with other authorities, but as Foucault, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and countless others would all agree, writing calls for a reading; it forms itself under the expectation of this complementing process and is (to quote Ricoeur) "only completed in the spectator or reader."<sup>2</sup> Not a great problem for our more prosaic works of course; I

fully intend Revenue Canada to read my tax claim, and sure enough, its possibilities of meaning are only brought out through this act of bureaucratic mediation. But if I have written something "personal" --even if the degree of revelation is as slight as, for instance, that which is implicit in the story I have just told --how do I make sure that what I write gets into the right hands, and *only* the right hands?

"Writing calls for a reading." I have phrased the claim somewhat sweepingly as a universal condition of writing, and I think that it can likely be defended even at this level of generality. Through taking place within a publically established sign-system that transcends and precedes the individual, all acts of writing are immediately complicit in a recognition of otherness: I take it that this is --broadly --the point that Wittgenstein is making in his famous "private language" argument against solipsism. However, my immediate concern is with the more limited phenomenon of a writer's implicit assumption of an audience for any "emotionally-charged" or "revelatory" writing, the kind of writing that one finds in autobiography. In jotting down a phone number on a scrap of paper, for instance, I may well be operating within a public language that implies the presence of *possible* readers, but I am not (I would think) addressing the writing to anyone real or imagined, except perhaps my future self. In contrast, when I wrote an "Ode to loneliness" and "My real feelings about Amanda" in my teenage diary, I believe that I *intended* and maybe even desired a reader, even if it is also true that I was mortified at the thought of any real person actually reading these entries. Such forms of writing are always *addressed*, whether we know it or not.

## 2) Methodical Pluralism:

This is a book about writing for readers. More precisely, it is a book about philosophers writing for readers, and writing in an autobiographical mode not unlike that of my diary. I will be reading the autobiographical texts of Augustine, Descartes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche in order to learn

something about how they wished to be read, that is, about the unique set of dispositional states and cognitive attitudes they wanted us to adopt in order to read their work. While philosophical texts quite often include readers in their narration (“consider the following,” “note, dear reader”...), the goal of this is typically to tell the reader *what* to do, not *how* to do it; it is assumed that we already have at our disposal the requisite skills for reading an essay, a discourse, or even a dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Not so with the authors I am considering here. At least in their autobiographical writings, each is verbose in describing the manner in which they *ought* to be read.

Most frequently, this “how” is revealed in a “whom,” with the authors inscribing within their texts a profile of the sort of person --real, imagined, or anticipated --who will be able to engage their text in the optimal manner, thereby unlocking its latent significance and justifying the labour of its creation. But while I will attempt to establish in each case the kind of reader and the kind of reading that the author desires (not to mention the kinds of readings to which the author is adverse), my purpose here is not to discipline inattentive or ungracious readers by insisting on these authorized protocols. In fact, I will be reading each of these authors very much against the grain of their stated instructions.<sup>2</sup> My interest instead is in exploring the impact of the imagined reader on the act of self-presentation, the manner in which the anticipation of a reader alternately supports and compromises the autobiographical practice. Unlike my younger self, these writers did not burn their books;

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<sup>1</sup>There are exceptions of course; works in the meditational and phenomenological traditions often prescribe very specific modes of reading and view the attainment of the requisite mental state as a principal goal of successful reading. But one can hardly imagine a contemporary journal article on political liberalism, epistemic foundationalism, or the ethics of euthanasia demanding from the reader the sorts of attitudes that we find the autobiographers requesting --charitable love, existential commitment, sympathy, and intrepid braveness.

<sup>2</sup>Nietzsche is a possible exception here. While he devotes enormous attention to describing how he ought to be read, returning to this theme repeatedly even within individual books, at least part of what he claims to want from his readers is evidence of independence: his repudiation of discipleship creates a sort of liar’s paradox, where a wilful opposition to Nietzsche’s desires is --at least officially --a way of living out Nietzsche’s desires. Nehamas’ chapter on Nietzsche in *The Art of Living* is particularly good on this, exploring the peculiar position of “Nietzsche” as a character who is *exemplary* and yet who resists all imitation.



somehow, they managed to reconcile themselves to the thought that what was at first entirely private and personal was about to become public. But in no case does it seem that this reconciliation was an easy matter. Each of the texts I will be examining is run through with signs of grave uncertainty about the kind of reading to which it may be subjected. For while one may insist upon a certain kind of reading, one also knows only too well that readers will be free to do as they please, reading Augustine purely as "literature." Descartes as history, Rousseau as a case study in paranoid delusion, and Nietzsche as "only a poet." And while one can indicate implicitly, or in no uncertain terms, the proper audience for a book, it takes enormous ingenuity to attempt to protect it from those who would listen in without permission, those who will seek to enlist the text in projects of their own devising, and one will almost certainly never entirely succeed in the endeavour.

So this then is the phenomenon that my own text explores, and in which it is of course implicated. To schematize, my question can be broken into three stages, namely: to whom is a given autobiography addressed; how is this reader positioned; and how are inappropriate auditors managed (or mismanaged)? This begins to sound very much like a study of the autobiographies from a literary perspective, and indeed, I will be attending throughout to the various rhetorical features of the texts as they respond to these questions. But there is a psychological set of questions running alongside this literary agenda. From a psychological perspective we might ask: why, if autobiography is so fraught with peril, did these writers feel compelled to engage in the practice? What does autobiography accomplish for them that could not be done elsewhere, more safely, through other means? And what precisely is the "danger" in being read the wrong way, or by the wrong people; to call this a fear of exposure is simply to push the same question back a stage, "a fat word replacing a thin question mark,"<sup>3</sup> as Nietzsche once said, for we might as easily ask why exposure itself is fearful. Fundamental aspects of the human psyche are implicated in both the desire for autobiography and in the resistance to it, aspects that crystalize in the image of the reader, since the

writer / reader relationship comes to stand as a striking instance of the more general self / other dyad. For no matter how vehemently a writer insists that the narration of self discovery, description, or creation is “for myself alone,” the presence of the other-as-reader is never far off: to whom, after all, are these protestations of autonomy made? Under the influence of this problematic, I will be speaking a great deal in what follows about anxieties and ambivalences, needs and desires, projections and internalizations, and thus using the language of depth psychology.<sup>1</sup>

But my own background and training is in philosophy, and since the writers I am reading here were themselves --amongst other things --*philosophers*, a third methodological perspective asserts itself. Theories of memory, language, time, and personal identity are present in the works of each of these autobiographers (both implicitly and explicitly), all but inextricably bound up with the narrative elaboration of their lives. I am interested in the desire for and anxiety about exposure, the profound ambivalence about readership that is displayed in autobiography. But the writers I am studying do not simply register this phenomenon unwittingly in their prose. They are actively engaged in speculation about its nature, theorizing about its source --what it tells us about human nature --and significantly, in describing this human nature in ways that give specific interpretive meanings to these desires and aversions. Rousseau, for example, develops at great length a set of views on the distinction between what he calls *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*, the two fundamental forces in human psychology. While the former entails a robust enjoyment of the exercise of one's capacities and a relishing of what Rousseau thinks of as the “sentiment of existence,” the latter is

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<sup>1</sup>The terms to which I have referred have by now entered into general circulation, but it is through the work of Freud that they attained this status. While I am an enthusiastic reader of Freud's writings, I will not be attempting to provide a detailed psychoanalytic reading of the texts (or the authors) that I am considering here: I will not, for instance, be discussing regression to early phases of sexual development or the resurgence of Oedipal conflicts. Furthermore, I have read Freud very much *after* having read Nietzsche, and my use of the language of psychology likely owes more in the end to this self-described “psychologist” than to Freud. I have provided a detailed discussion of Nietzsche's “genealogical analysis” in my chapter on Nietzsche, but the remainder of this preface should provide the reader with an initial orientation concerning my methodological approach.

(largely) a destructive form of self-esteem derived from the comparison of oneself with others. This interpretation of the structure of affective experience is announced in Rousseau's first philosophical writings, elaborated in great detail in *Emile*, and very much assumed throughout his autobiographical writings. At the same time, Rousseau expresses in these autobiographies what might appear to be an inordinate and exaggerated distrust of his Parisian salon readers. But one cannot conclude on the basis of these remarks that he is obviously a "paranoid" without taking his own theoretical position into account. Or at least, one *should* not. It is a serious, considered, and considerable way of understanding the world, whether we accept it or not, and it has explanatory significance when we consider Rousseau's comments on his relations to civilized society. Psychology and theory are in dialogue here and elsewhere; the affective and the cognitive (to the extent that we can always distinguish the two) are co-constructive of the life depicted in a philosophical autobiography.<sup>1</sup>

An autobiography --like all texts --embodies a unique set of rhetorical structures, stylistic features that are likely to affect its reception by a reader. The question facing the critic is whether to interpret the rhetorical texture of the writing as if it were designed (well or poorly does not matter here) to support the theoretical agenda of the writer, or whether --at times at least --this rhetoric is a sign of the author's psychological disposition at the time of writing. One might ask in this regard: does Augustine choose to employ the sorts of rhetorical structures I will explore in chapter one in order to instantiate and develop a theological program, or does this rhetoric reveal a set of anxieties centred on the problems of readership that control and distort the elaboration of his text? I see no reason to choose between these modes of explanation, as if to suggest that a consciously maintained

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<sup>1</sup>Jean Starobinski --whose work has left a deep impression on my own --takes what I consider to be the optimal approach to the question of Rousseau's paranoid delusions, neither dismissing their importance in order to "preserve" Rousseau for the academy, nor treating Rousseau's later writings as the dismissible epiphenomena of his illness. His position is essentially that nothing "new" enters into Rousseau's world view when he becomes ill, but that the old views become exaggerated, their range of proper application inappropriately expanded: "his personality does not disintegrate but asserts itself more forcefully than ever." [*Transparency and Obstruction*, p. 202. See also "Rousseau's Illness," appended to this volume].

and elaborated theoretical stance is *merely* the dismissible product of a set of desires and anxieties (what we might call the “psychogenetic fallacy”), *or* that these desires and anxieties impact *not at all* on the development of the theories a writer advances, dropping out of the picture once “the rational mind” has assumed control of reflection. While I am sympathetic to the spirit of Nietzsche’s claim that “every great philosophy” is “a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir,”<sup>4</sup> it seems equally true that every great autobiography is informed by the philosophical reflections of its author. I see no need to reduce the one to the other and nothing to gain in terms of exegetical and interpretive power through doing so. This would be to purchase clarity at the price of simplicity. Long before composing the autobiographical works that seem --above all other *kinds* of texts --to require such a mixed analysis, Rousseau himself explains the need for such an approach:

Whatever the moralists may hold, the human understanding is greatly indebted to the passions, which, it is universally allowed, are also much indebted to the understanding. It is by the activity of the passions that our reason is improved; for we desire knowledge only because we wish to enjoy; and it is impossible to conceive any reason why a person who has neither fears nor desires should give himself the trouble of reasoning.<sup>5</sup>

I have presented these modalities of analysis --the literary, psychological, and philosophical - -as if they were utterly distinct, and some may wish to view them this way. My own conception of the task of reading is sufficiently catholic that this trinity of disciplinary perspectives seem to me to be no more than the varying faces of one activity. The “walls” between departments in the contemporary university, I would insist, are only as thick as we feel the need to make them, and where they seem to prohibit interesting lines of questioning, it is permissible, maybe even mandatory, that we ignore them.

### **3) Subjective Responses:**

The cognitive and the affective meet in the language of the text, and this rhetoric can almost always be read in either modality; let us forget for the moment what we know is also true, namely,

that language itself is no mere inert tool of expression, but takes on a life of its own. Grammar, genre expectations, and assimilated narrative structures all exert a powerful force of their own once the writing has begun; witness Descartes' involvement with the meditational genre. Rousseau's with "confession," even though neither is using these traditional forms in precisely the expected way. This is all true, and I will have occasion to comment on it throughout (particularly as I address Descartes), but there is a more pressing and more personal complexity I wish to discuss first. I am interested in the autobiographer's relationship to the reader, the nexus of affect and speculation embedded in the text which responds to the thought of communication. But of course, I am first and foremost one of these readers myself. Before saying anything "scholarly" about these texts which seem so concerned with their readers, I have been one of these readers and reacted in various ways to what I have read. If it is true that one of the hallmarks of autobiographical texts (though it is by no means unique to this genre) is that they tend to be quite active rather than passive in their pursuit of appropriate and *only* appropriate readers, this creates an inescapable hermeneutical complexity. The only texts I have in front of me are those that, if I am correct, are attempting to channel me into certain lines of interpretation or into a specific emotional relationships with their narrators. at precisely the same time as I am attempting to chart out how they are doing so. It is hard to avoid feeling that one is engaged in a game of cat and mouse. The sensation that I sometimes have as a critic of autobiography, the palpable and discomfiting sense that I am somehow an interloper, a disruptive and unwelcome presence in a congregation of the otherwise charitably like-minded, can be seen as, amongst other things, a symptom of the very processes of reader-control that I am exploring. If it were easy to know where one stands with respect to an autobiography, there would be no problem of readership. But it *is* difficult, for at least some of us, and so there is a problem.

While I am wary of becoming entirely co-opted by the texts that I intend to examine, I am, if anything, more concerned about the opposite danger, that of illicitly assuming the position of the omniscient reader, one who can understand a text fully while remaining immune to its rhetorical

engagements. In this light, I am suspicious of such work as that of noted Augustine scholar John O'Meara. O'Meara complains that Augustine scholarship has been marred by the fact that "writers have been too keen to present him from some particular angle" and promises us that he, in contrast, will not seek to "interpret Augustine in terms of any psychological theory."<sup>6</sup> It is easy to be pedantic here, and we know perfectly well what he means; his reading will not, for instance, be devoted to exploring the Oedipal dynamics of Augustine's relationship to his mother, and his introductory remark kindly steers us away if this is the sort of thing for which we are looking, or reassures us if this is precisely what we cannot abide. All the same, there is an uncomfortable air of the "view from nowhere" to his claim; if there is no "particular angle," how does he approach the text at all? Who is O'Meara, reading Augustine? How on earth could someone read an autobiography --especially Augustine's --without a psychological theory of some kind, implicit or otherwise, when the text is at least partly a portrait of its author's emotions, dispositions, reactions, and the interpretations and judgments he passes on these states? Does O'Meara not, instead, simply normalize the psychological assumptions he will inevitably employ, allowing them to stand as "natural" ways of construing his subject?

O'Meara's reading --otherwise so illuminating --seems dated (1965) by his lack of awareness that there is a problem here; the academic / political interest in "situated knowledges" had not yet taken hold. And yet, what is the alternative? A reading that seeks to avoid this form of hermeneutic naivete and instead foregrounds the position of the reader can quickly become *no more than the*

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I have been using O'Meara simply as a representative of an "impartial" or "objective" approach to reading in order to make my point; such readings can seem to be compromised by a belief that it is possible to legislate away the hermeneutic difficulties of interpretation by prohibiting all talk of psychology. But I do not mean to be writing a manifesto on how the "good scholar" must read, and while I disagree with O'Meara's approach "on principle," there also is no doubt a simple difference in our respective "tastes" lying behind this methodological dispute. For while I continue to learn a lot from the O'Meara's of the academy, I have neither the interest, nor --frankly --the *aptitude* for his sort of patient and detailed historical research; my strengths lie elsewhere. But I really should be fighting harder against the urge to universalize my methodological preferences; they are appropriate and even necessary for *my* project, but *not* for every good and useful thing that one might want to say about autobiography.

autobiography of the reader. Amongst other things. I want --like O'Meara --to say something about Augustine here. And about Descartes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. While I have conscientiously prefaced this writing with an acknowledgment of "my angle," I would hope that it is a perspective on a set of *texts* rather than (only) a mirror, and this in spite of the fact that I will in due course quote with uneasy approval Nietzsche's comment that "nobody can get more out of things, including books, than he already knows. For what one lacks access to from experience one will have no ear" [3:1:1]. But where, if anywhere, is the middle ground between Nietzsche and O'Meara?

I do not have a programmatic answer to this question, but I am convinced that the ambivalence I am here experiencing and expressing is not an anxiety that is unrelated to the conclusions I will reach. Each of the authors I am reading is faced with the task of choosing the proper addressee for communication, positioning that prospective reader in the most desirable relation to the text, and controlling --to whatever extent deemed necessary --for the inevitable intrusion of readers who cannot be guided into this preferred position. And it is the disengaged stance of academic scholarship that is, for each of the authors I will examine, a position deeply inimical to the agenda advanced within the text, and thus, it marks out the presence of a reader who is strongly resisted. I will let one example stand for many. A wounded and distraught Rousseau gave up his friendship with the philosopher Condillac when the latter read his recently completed

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Nehamas seems to be asking himself the same question in the introduction to *The Art of Living*: "the historical objectivity I took to be my aim when I first began thinking about the lectures from which this book emerged gradually gave way --only partially, I hope --to a more personal involvement... I slowly realized that I too tried to find in Socrates a model for my own approach to the things that are important to me... I have come to realize that to study the art of living is to engage in one of its forms. That is an interest I discovered only recently, and I am not sure where it is likely to lead me" [p. 15]. I sympathize with this sense of intellectual vertigo, but I wonder why someone so fond of those philosophers who "speak only of themselves" would hope that his own objectivity "*gave way only partially*"? Is the "objectivity" that Nehamas is reluctant to lose not one of Nietzsche's most consistent targets? But while I have chosen to *emphasize* rather than to minimize my "personal involvement" in the texts I am reading here, I recognize that I am caught in the same bind as Nehamas, wanting to acknowledge the subjective and personal nature of my readings without jeopardizing the potential generalizability of any conclusions I will reach.

autobiographical *Dialogues* and insisted on discussing them “merely” as literature: Rousseau lamented, “he spoke about my piece as he would have spoken about a work of literature... but he said nothing of the effect that it had *on him* or *what he thought of the author*... Since then I have ceased to visit him.”<sup>7</sup> To be fair, Rousseau is unusually sensitive, even within such prickly company as that of Augustine, Descartes, and Nietzsche, and this event occurred during the darkest stages of his persecution anxiety, when he was routinely abandoning life-long friends for all manner of perceived slights. But his remark --perhaps *because of*, rather than in spite of his illness --makes the point quite directly. With the possible exception of Descartes (and I will have cause to suggest that we reconsider even here), these are authors who feel a profound loathing for “men of letters,” for intellectual puzzle-solvers who have no personal involvement in the texts they are reading. Both Augustine and Nietzsche praise themselves for having abandoned the academy (“my professorship in lies,” Augustine will say), and Rousseau and Descartes both pride themselves on being “unschoolled,” exaggerating, like Nietzsche, their lack of scholarly reading. Even Descartes, the most abstract and rarefied of the authors I am considering, will have nothing to do with those who refuse to “meditate seriously” along with him, and I take it that his “seriously” implies an existential as well as intellectual commitment. The last thing that any of these authors wants is a disengaged critical commentary on their work. And yet, to state the obvious, I am writing this work as an academic dissertation; am I not, then, the enemy? Rousseau gave up Condillac for his inappropriate response. Will he cease to visit me as well once he notes what I am up to?

#### **4) The Ethics of Reading:**

These then are the two sides of the hermeneutic problem of studying an autobiography. There is no “view from nowhere,” no location from which to undertake a reading that is not affected by the very process of reading, and there is also an enormous difficulty as a scholar --at least, *qua*



scholar --in remaining available for the sorts of relationship that such texts wish to institute; one is always writing from the margins. For many agendas, this two-fold difficulty may well seem irrelevant. A historian can explore the significance of the theoretical content of a text on later intellectual formulations or use it to restore a forgotten context to an argument that clarifies the goals of a writer without thereby requiring an intimate, personal encounter with the author.<sup>1</sup> If these are one's goals, then a somewhat detached view is perhaps permissible, and according to some, maybe even necessary: one's private relationship to the author can recede into the background, or perhaps never become an issue at all. I'm not sure --I will withhold judgment.

But while neutrality may be legitimate for some purposes, for my own agenda, it seems unacceptable. It would be incredibly naive, and a performative refutation of everything I wish to say, if I were to examine the complex positioning of the reader in autobiography, the various ways in which the reader is desired and then refused, without questioning my own status *as* reader, without at least attempting to be clear about whether the text is addressed to me. And here, for me, the hermeneutic problem transforms itself into an ethical one. If the written word always assumes an audience, how am I to know who this audience is? Is this a book for me? Given that the pages within will tell the story of a human soul --the history and psychology of a perhaps dead but once very much alive individual, a most personal kind of testimony --it would be the height of impropriety to listen in where one is not welcome. My friends, lovers, and family members may well keep diaries --some of them do --but I know that these are not for me; whatever the temptation, I recognize the violation involved in peering behind the veil unbidden. But a letter --one written expressly for me --well, that is clearly another matter. "Dear Doug", it begins, or "Dear friends."

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<sup>1</sup>Amélie Rorty's "Witnessing Philosophers" canvasses a vast range of philosophical purposes into which the autobiography of a philosopher might be enlisted, though they are all generally of this kind -- the clarification of historical context. Better historians make better philosophers. And this may well be true --it likely is --but it is a purpose that is extrinsic to the texts themselves. Rousseau certainly did not write the *Confessions* to aid future scholars in the exegesis of *Emile*, nor --more obviously --to clarify the manner in which he influenced Kant.

Is the autobiography an open letter to “Dear friends” amongst whom I may safely include myself, or a diary, a private letter that has gone astray? Perhaps the author will say and spare us this difficult and perhaps ultimately unanswerable question. If the text is addressed to posterity, well then, I am posterity as much as anyone, so with the book in my hands, it seems the text has reached its proper destination. But this will not do; how am I to know that the writer speaks the truth? Is it not at least possible that I --posterity --am not the future that the writer first imagined? Or equally possible, that this future was always no more than a ruse, a fictitious backdrop intended to substantiate what was properly addressed to one of the writer’s contemporaries? Rousseau, for instance, was engaged in a bitter, personal quarrel with Voltaire during the years when he composed his *Confessions*, and this personal quarrel over Rousseau’s moral standing was conducted very much in the public eye through a variety of thinly disguised pamphlets, letters, and essays. At the same time, Rousseau claimed in his autobiography to be writing for the future. Well then, I am clearly living in Rousseau’s future, but might I not simply be the validating arbiter of Rousseau’s speech to Voltaire, a fictionalized audience that somehow became real? Did he really have me, or someone like me, in mind?

Perhaps the issue here will not seem pressing to everyone. It is true that as academics (to name, perhaps, my audience) we are in the habit of drawing on the avowedly private correspondence of historical figures whenever we get the chance; we are archeologists, excavating the buried layers of a past which --we imply by our actions --has no right to oppose the desires of the living. But surely, at times, the immensity of this self-granted privilege should give us pause. A culture once lived under these stones, a person once lived within --or behind --these pages, a world existed through the action of this life. At the least, a certain reverence, a certain reserve, a sensitivity to what is *for us* is in order.

But what form can this take? What does it mean to suggest with Nietzsche that not all books belong in all hands? I believe that this returns me to my initial question; “who is the audience, and what should we do if we are not that audience?” We must, at the least, seek to be aware of whether we are the invited audience or the interloper. If the book addresses us, we are invited to converse with all the decorum but seriousness this normally entails. If it is for another, or for its author alone, we must --if we choose to read at all --allow the text the dignity of speaking in its own way, let its world unfold according to its own logic, and move a respectful distance away before speaking ourselves. And if it is both for us and for itself? A tightrope for readers to walk.

As I indicated at the outset --reflecting on both various theories of writing and on my own experience --I don't believe that an autobiography can ever have *only* its author in mind. A central, psychological motif in each of the texts I am approaching here is the need for judgement. A life is told, but for whom; for what end? Partly, it seems, in order to allow for a response. When Rousseau compares his *Confessions* to the Book of Judgement, this is only the most dramatic, most obvious instance of this uncanny desire of the self to evoke a verdict on itself. This feature is so deeply rooted in the very logic of autobiography that the exceptions to it serve only to prove the rule more effectively: the protestations that the innocence or guilt has been determined *already* inevitably sound shrill and beseeching. One hears the pause afterwards, the space in which the response can have its place; every Narcissus seems to desire an Echo. But if the autobiographical act awaits an answer, if every such text has an audience in mind, this does not mean that it has this audience in mind at all times, and it certainly doesn't mean that it is pleased with just any audience that it happens to find. After finding countless others already, these four authors have now found me, or I have found them. Is it my right to respond, simply because I have been affected by them? Augustine cries to God, Rousseau to a transformed *polis*, Nietzsche to the free spirits of the future: do they want *me* to answer? Will just anyone's answer do?

It is a question I find myself unable to answer to my own satisfaction, and it distresses me that it arises so infrequently in the literature on autobiography. Is it not a little too easy to declare -- should the question even arise --that in virtue of publication, an author has implicitly waived all rights to control over his or her audience? We know by now, thanks to Foucault, to Derrida, and to Ricoeur, that a text will constitute its "author" as a part of an inter-textual and inter-subjective network that the (auto)biographical author will not be able to control; the author inevitably becomes public. I agree, and this "publicity" is at least a crucial part of what the autobiographer seems to want: their names and lives circulating endlessly through the world of literature, they achieve a kind of immortality through publication. But does the wilful relocation of a self into public space justify each and any reception, even when the text itself seems to go to such heroic lengths to discourage and dissuade certain readers? What would an "ethics of reading" look like in this context?

Rightly or wrongly, I feel little hesitation approaching Descartes. Amongst the various authors I am considering here, Descartes is clearly the least vulnerable in his self-disclosure, the "self" that he presents to the reader of the *Discourse* being little more than a *res cogitans*, a thinking substance loosely embedded in a mythic history. Moreover, it is a commonplace by now that our current age is a "Cartesian" one, and an ongoing engagement with Descartes is thus all but inevitable for self-understanding --I cannot work on my own "autobiography" without coming to terms with the legacy of Descartes. In contrast, I *identify* with Rousseau and feel precisely the sympathetic attachment to him that he seems so fervently to desire (when he is not preemptively rejecting it). I do not feel that I am attacking anything from which I am personally exempt when I speak of Rousseau. Moreover, I am least critical in this chapter; there are so few *nice* things said of Rousseau these days that I felt a need to make him as un-neurotic as possible, though there are certain limits in his case to even the best of intentions. And with Nietzsche, one feels almost dared by the text, and by his own reading practices, to try to read into it more than it wanted to say. The great genealogical

critic of *other* lives, Nietzsche makes himself available for the same approach, though one sees him grinning Sphinx-like at each intrepid hermeneut who would try. In fact, where the other autobiographers at least *claim* to speak with candour and sincerity, at least most of the time, Nietzsche explicitly positions himself as a riddle, as a Doppelgänger: “I have a second face in addition to the first. And perhaps also a third” [1:3]. If my chapter on Nietzsche’s autobiography is twice as long as the others, this not because of a unique fixation on his work, but perhaps only because there are twice as many people there to talk about, each daring me to try.

These are mitigating factors: my anxiety does not disappear, but it is at least tempered in these three cases. In contrast, this anxiety is quite pronounced as I read Augustine. I have no share in the divinely inspired “‘charity [which] believes all things’ among them whom it unites.” nor do I feel any great sympathy for Augustine himself, so I am most decidedly not the reader he seems to want. I am instead a part of the risk he took. And so, I am not at all sure that I should be reading the *Confessions*, and yet, with its historical priority and staggering intellectual sophistication, it seems inescapable. Moreover, I obviously find it *fascinating*, though I fear that at times this may be the bourgeois’ fascination with “‘exotic cultures,” or worse, the morbid desire to stare at the scene of an accident. I am reminded of Nietzsche’s relation to Socrates: similarly, I find something “‘unhealthy” in Augustine, and yet --or because of this --I cannot stop looking. It is not that I have not found myself reflected in certain aspects of Augustine’s text; I most certainly have. But the normative polarities are reversed here, for I *dislike* in myself precisely those traits that Augustine finds commendable, and aspire to deepen my attachment to those perspectives over which he laments --for instance, the capacity to depend on others, and to grieve their loss. This is certainly not what he wanted, and so I am clearly not his desired reader, much as I might respect (from a distance) his sincerity and his profound sense of commitment. And so there are significant limits, limits that I will be unable to perceive, on what I can find in the text, and this is no doubt a good thing to keep in

mind; it is the beginning of a kind of apology. Beyond this, I try to imagine myself as speaking out of his earshot, conversing with a community who may approach Augustine from a position more akin to my own than to his, and hopefully continuing to animate the discussion of what Augustine can mean to us.

I have spoken of wanting to maintain an equal priority for the philosophical and the psychological, but I am conscious of not having been entirely successful with Augustine. In my first chapter, he emerges as highly defensive, unreasonably anxious about the outside world, and even *I* am not entirely convinced by my caveats and qualifications, at least some of my first readers took them as rote concessions to academic form, though I would rather think of them as a kind of self-discipline.<sup>1</sup> I have continued to read and reflect on Augustine since writing this chapter, and while I do not disavow the reading I provide in this chapter as far as it goes, it is --in a sense --not complete until the text as a whole is finished. It is in subsequent chapters, when I have read Augustine against his successors, that the positive aspects of his practice begin to arise. By the end of chapter two, and in the introduction to chapter three, where *I* am reconsidering Augustine as a precursor to both Descartes and Rousseau, I begin to provide a much-needed supplementary analysis which shows Augustine's "evasiveness" to be a function of his considered theological agenda. Unexpectedly, by the time I have finished my chapter on Nietzsche, Augustine has reemerged as a comparatively healthy and sensible practitioner of the genre he invented.

I have let each of these accounts stand as they are, preferring to retain a sense of development and history in my text rather than pretending to have arrived at a set of stable and

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<sup>1</sup>I had written "I find it extremely difficult to imagine Augustine intentionally lying in a prayer directed to God, and so I expect that within the limits of his powers, he is more or less telling us the truth as he knows it." "More or less" was underlined by my colleague who wrote in the margin "you don't sound convinced: I think you should take off the kid gloves: Tell it like it is --Augustine's honesty is questionable." I see where the comment would come from, but I really do believe what I said. And yet, there is quite a lot of room for explanation --a whole unconscious world --packed into that closing phrase "the truth as he knows it."

enduring "positions." And this begins to give my text a pronounced autobiographical quality of its own: rather than four discreet studies, or the application of a single thesis to four separate case studies, I have been working through a set of problems that are very much my own through the mediation of a set of writers who reveal different aspects of the problem and respond to it in different ways. Partly, this is in response to a desire for methodological symmetry; I am enthusiastic enough about literary style to want to match my narration to the texts I am considering. But there is more to it than that. It is also a means --though an imperfect one --of responding to the ethical question I have asked myself above. I have been highly critical of each of the authors with whom I am engaged, taking full advantage of the resources they have made available in their autobiographies in order to elucidate various forms of anxiety as they deform theoretical speculation. I find this anxiety interesting --it reflects my own anxieties, the concerns that once led me to burn my diary --and finding it interesting, I have found it in the texts. But there can so readily be an air of scholarly superiority in such a project, a sense that the critic is immune to such craven irrationality. If the commentator does not make at least an effort to meet the texts on equal terms. As Rousseau says, "it is a bad way of reading another man's heart to conceal one's own" [2:84]. I am not writing an autobiography here myself --I am still going to be speaking primarily about others --but in order to quell my concerns about passing judgment from on high on lives that I do not fully understand, it seems necessary (as a matter of ethics, a sign of respect), to acknowledge the particular source of my own readings. For there is an inevitably subjective character to the readings I have advanced, an element which I have made little attempt to minimize; I am assuming that the things that make me uncomfortable might also make others uncomfortable. Why, I ask myself, would I be inclined to privilege pathos over fact in self-narration (as Rousseau does)? Why would I insist, like Nietzsche,

that my proper readers lie only in the future?

I am not, I think, being presumptuous here and naively using myself as the measure of all things; I am quite prepared to accept that others have “found” very different versions of Descartes or Nietzsche through their own subjective responses to the texts, and that these may be perfectly legitimate, reasonable readings that simply respond to different strata in the texts. “I freely state my opinion about all things,” says Montaigne, “even those which perhaps fall outside my capacity, and of which I do not for a moment suppose myself to be a judge. What I say about them, therefore, is meant to reveal the extent of my own vision, not the measure of the things themselves.”<sup>8</sup> I agree. Nor am I overly concerned in the end with whether or not I have found something approaching an accurate, mimetic portrayal of “the things themselves” --the autobiographies that I am reading. For one thing, I’m not at all sure that it makes any sense to speak of “getting it right” when the topic is a person. I am not advocating an undisciplined projection of whatever one chooses onto the text here, for in that case, it would hardly matter on which books one chose to work. This does not fit my experience: there is something about these four authors that makes them profoundly interesting to me, while the work of untold others, whose importance I recognize and respect, and whom I might even wish to study in a *different* way, leaves me cold. So there is something in these books that speaks to me, and under such circumstances, an attempt at faithfulness to the text only makes sense. But I am not interested in historical scholarship for its own sake here. What Descartes thought may

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<sup>8</sup>In acknowledging the “subjective” nature of my project, I am immediately reminded of Rousseau’s unease expressed in an abandoned draft of the preface to his *Confessions*. Why, he wondered, would anyone care to hear so much about the thoughts and feelings of a man who was neither a bishop nor a political ruler? His worry has always struck me as disingenuous (perhaps this is why he removed it), for while he may have been untitled, he already had behind him an internationally successful novel, a highly acclaimed opera, and a prize-winning essay when he sat down to write his autobiography. The real concern was surely not with whether or not he would be read, but with how his readers would respond --not “will they not care to read me,” but (much worse), “will they read me and not care.” I will therefore forgo the labourious defence of reader-response interpretive strategies that I had originally planned and address my anxieties about whether my “responses” constitute “serious” philosophizing privately, and “off-stage.”



be --in a sense-- completely irrelevant today; what *we* think of Descartes, including what we think he thought, may be at least as illuminating and worthy of study. It may tell us about ourselves.

### 5) The Proper Voice:

I say “we” --that it is what “we” think that is important --but there is a problem here. for I have also advocated the appropriateness of exploiting rather than minimizing the subjective element into one’s reading. Does this not mandate that I speak only of myself? And perhaps, as a matter of good conscience, *all* philosophy should be written in this tone, not just the rather marginal subset made up of those of us who study philosophical autobiography. The question has recently been asked by Béla Szabados: “What is the right of passage from “I” to “we”?... What entitles a philosopher to pass from her private autobiographical language to the public language of philosophy?”<sup>9</sup> What indeed. As has been made abundantly clear by several generations of feminist critique, the “we” that is so ubiquitous in philosophy -- “we recognize,” “we cannot help but conclude,” “we would all agree behind the veil,” as well as its 3rd person cousin, “one thinks” and “one sees” --surreptitiously smuggles a great deal of content into the image of the “ideal rational being.” The inventory of biases that may potentially intrude here is familiar by now, at least in its most general outlines; the impersonal voice of traditional philosophizing valorizes reason over passion, individual over community, mind over body, white over non-white, and male over female --but the familiarity of this list does not make it any less relevant.<sup>1</sup> The self-effacing voice of

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<sup>1</sup>The literature that explores these concerns is obviously immense, and my summary of the “feminist” concern here is guilty of the very generalization which, I take it, is the target of the critique. I am at this point merely gesturing toward a body of literature that gives voice to a concern that I share, so as to acknowledge both an influence and a precedent regarding my own work. Without at all wishing to pretend to have an adequate grasp of the literature that might conceivably be classed as “feminist,” I would point the interested reader to both Genevieve Lloyd’s *The Man of Reason* and Lorraine Code’s *What Can She Know?*, as the books that have most directly informed my own understanding of the problem with “impersonal” philosophical narratives.

philosophy. whatever its productive powers, is also a potentially coercive form of address that can imperialistically allow a particular perspective to stand as a normalized view applicable to all rational humanity.

In keeping with this, I had resolved at one point to banish from my writing all persons but the singular first: *I* would speak only as “I,” boldly and bravely taking full responsibility for what *I* had to say, and leaving full room for each and any “you” to take and leave what you please, marking no boundaries around that on which “you” must surely agree with “us.” with “me.” But this simple solution no longer strikes me as credible, a realization that hit me as I was in the middle of a ludicrous process of “search and replace.” transforming by the magic of word processor all we’s into I’s. The plural is there in part because we *do* share common features in our mental sets --our histories, background readings, and intuitive assumptions --and an insistence on the first person can falsely exaggerate one’s independence from this common set of sources. If one cannot know precisely *where* the boundaries are that separate oneself from the other --from any particular other --this does not mean that one is not relying on such a fusion of horizons all the same. A plural stands behind every singular, just as surely as it is an I that speaks for every we.

And this is my other reason for allowing the plural to reassert itself in these pages. The use of the plural expresses not only an assumption of commonality, but also a desire for contact, a desire which fluctuates problematically between coercion and entreaty, but which shows in either form a desire to be read. And I *really do* want to be read. However personal this project may be for me in many ways, however much certain of its goals have been realized in the very act of its composition, I am by no means writing “for myself alone.” Disavowing this desire, saying with Nietzsche “I am not read; I will not be read,” commits me all too readily to the dishonesty that I find permeating and compromising the texts I will be examining here, and I would rather not repeat so obviously the problems I am addressing in others, as if I had learned nothing from all of this effort.

But if I am prepared to acknowledge a desire for readers, “the first and most painful step in the dark and miry maze of my confessions”<sup>10</sup> as Rousseau says, it must be followed by another in

order to be meaningful. In darker, more nervous moments, what I would dearly love is the right to demand of my own readers what Descartes demands of his in the *Replies* to the *Meditations*. How reassuring it would be to require you to “meditate seriously along with me” as I trace out the history of my recent thinking, requiring you to “suspend judgement” until the end of the text, and banning from the outset all “argumentative” readers, those whose disagreements with me reveal only their own limitations --never mine. Or perhaps, somewhat more subtly, I could claim with Nietzsche’s Zarathustra to *encourage* dispute since I do not want mere disciples, while cautiously insisting that only the disputations of “the noble” are to be taken seriously (and does anyone *other* than Nietzsche get to decide who belongs in this league of the elect?). But such claims are singularly incapable of achieving their aims: no one says such things anymore. And moreover, there is a serious price to be paid in making them. In reading the *Objections* to the *Meditations*, it has been clear to everyone *except* Descartes that Hobbes and Gassendi each raised a number of important and probing questions, questions that might well have led to a mutually enriching dialogue. But in disallowing truly substantive dissent --which is an inevitable part of coming to terms with the genuine autonomy of the reader --Descartes foreclosed access to this possibility; having begun in the first person, he recoiled from the second when it did not appear as a rote reiteration, and promptly returned to the private elaboration of his own thoughts. The same could easily be said of Rousseau, and while Nietzsche did not receive enough press for us to readily mark his response to disagreement, the few reviews he did receive (and which he cites in *Ecce Homo*) are either mockingly dismissed or immodestly accepted as confirming his own view of things; it is all but inconceivable to imagine Nietzsche claiming to have learned something from a review.

I would hope to be somewhat more open. I *really would* like to know where people agree, where they disagree, and where their intuitions are entirely different. I began this preface by quoting from Nietzsche’s own preface to “The Use and Abuse of History for Life,” and I fully concur with its first lines; I too have “revenged myself” on a feeling by making it public here, and like the young Nietzsche, I would also like to hear of alternate, and perhaps richer expressions of the same or a

similar thought. But I would rather not preemptively close this door soon after it is opened by anticipating that “most... will tell me this feeling is altogether perverse, unnatural, and wholly impermissible.” Not every difference is a catastrophe. Not all “otherness” refutes the validity of the self. Nor must dialogue be a Hegelian struggle to the death, in which the mastery of one spells the servitude of the other. An autobiography that does not open onto an outside --a *real* outside --is not yet complete.

And so, I await your response.

Doug.

## CHAPTER ONE

### AUGUSTINE: LISTENING IN

“Now, Lord, I confess to you in writing. Let him read it who wants to, let him interpret it as he wants” 9:33

#### 1) Why Confess?

“To whom is a given autobiography addressed; how is this reader positioned; and how are inappropriate auditors managed (or mismanaged)?” This complex of questions receives no ready answer when we confront Augustine’s *Confessions*. The initial problem is that there appear to be at least two separate addressees named in the text, one of whom threatens to displace the other entirely. While Augustine condescends to speak with “the tongue of [his] pen” to those of us who, like him, are dependent on conventional speech acts in order to communicate with each other, the primary addressee of the *Confessions* is God. We so often read the *Confessions* in so many other ways that it is worth remembering this from the outset; the text is in fact written in the form of a prayer, it is a confession made before and to God, prior to its being a profession to others. The first line --the first word even --makes this perfectly clear: “You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised [1:1].

But as a prayer, the *Confessions* faces a theological problem which has been answered in many different ways by many different thinkers; Augustine himself will return to it more than once within his text. If God is timeless and omniscient, why bother confessing in an awkward and incomplete manner the experiences and emotions of which He is perfectly aware? Does God not know in advance each of our confessions, each of our petitions, and hear before we have sung it each hymn of thanksgiving and praise that wells up in the heart? Augustine asks himself, or asks God: “why do I set out in order before you this account of so many deeds?” [11:1].

The answer provided is the same each time the question is raised: “in truth, it is not that you may learn to know these matters from me, but that I may rouse up towards you my own affections,

and those of other men who read this” [11:1]. The text, that is, has an evangelical agenda. And yes, this is one answer, and a hugely important one for Augustine, but all the same it hardly seems like the whole story. For why, we might ask, did Augustine embark on such an unprecedented project in order to accomplish a goal that, however laudable, is in fact quite common? Surely the purpose of the vast array of sermons that Augustine composed was similarly to “rouse up” his affections and those of his audience toward God. If the inculcation of divinely-oriented emotion is the sole purpose of the *Confessions*, it is a purpose which could readily have been achieved through other methods, rather than through the invention of an entirely new genre of literature.<sup>i</sup>

As it happens, there is a supplementary explanation forthcoming in the text. While it is true that God will know the factual contents of the *Confessions* even in the absence of a material text, this is certainly not true of Augustine’s earth-bound readership:

as to what I am now, at this very time when I make my confessions, many men wish to know about this, both men who have known me and others who have not known me. They have heard something from me or about me, *but their ear is not placed close to my heart, where I am whatever I am*. Therefore, they wish to hear me confess what I am within myself, where they can extend neither their eye nor ear nor mind [10:4, emphasis added].

And so, Augustine is killing two birds with one stone; as an exercise in piety and evangelism, he wants to enkindle a more consuming love of God, both in himself and in others, and as the public has

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<sup>i</sup>There is an ongoing debate amongst scholars of autobiography concerning whether Augustine’s text should properly be considered the “first” autobiography. The majority view is that it was indeed the first, but there are two lines of dissent. Some --the purists --argue that it was not an autobiography at all; it is too ideological and programmatic, not nearly comprehensive enough in its biographical detail to allow for independent judgment, and this overtly pedagogical agenda compromises for some its status as “pure” autobiography. Others --the historians --find precedents in the works of others (Marcus Aurelius, for instance), and thus reject instead the claim made about its priority. It is a bewildering debate, seemingly guided by the belief that there is a fixed and definable “thing” that corresponds to each word we invent, such that there could be an objectively correct answer to the question: “who wrote the first autobiography?” But I would assume, in contrast, that one’s answer could express nothing more than an definitional fiat; there is no “natural” description of autobiography that neutrally picks out a unique set of texts from the world of literature. What is not at issue for anyone is that Augustine’s text was at least highly unusual in its time, and perhaps this is best captured in Tzvetan Todorov’s observation: “every great book establishes the existence of two genres... that of the genre it transgresses, and that of the genre it creates” [*The Poetics of Prose*, p. 43].

happened to ask him for a kind of self-accounting, why not tie the two projects together?

But at the same time, it seems clear that as he sat down to write (or more probably, as he paced and dictated), he had a third motivation as well. It is not hard to imagine the forty-year old Augustine feeling a need for a stock-taking in 397 AD when he began the *Confessions*. After years of private intellectual pursuits, and a life of itinerant teaching in different cities each year, Augustine had been quite involuntarily conscripted into the priesthood and in short order installed as a bishop. It is not so much the sheer pace and extent of the changes in his life during the previous ten years that matter here --though this is also remarkable --as it is the manner in which these changes always seemed to lead in directions contrary to those of Augustine's intentions. After a series of highly unsatisfying teaching positions, Augustine had at last landed a coveted teaching position in Milan, the cultural capital of the Roman Empire in 386. But he no sooner had the job which seemed like an answer to his secular prayers than he experienced a dramatic conversion which caused him to give up this lucrative and respectable position.<sup>1</sup> To recover, and to explore the meaning that this event would have for his life, he retreated to Cassiciacum with a select group of friends and relations, an all-too-brief idyll of which he speaks with aching nostalgia in the *Confessions* [9:7-12]. But careers and relationships intervened, and the group fell apart. The next year, while waylaid in the port of Ostia, his mother died, mere months after the two had at last reconciled a lifetime of difference and dispute. He moved back home to Thagaste (presently Algeria) and founded another intimate religious / philosophical community that lasted only slightly longer than the first. Then his son died, his only remaining connection to a twelve year long common-law marriage which he had ended a year or two before.<sup>2</sup> And in 391 --a mere four years after his baptism --he was suddenly elected into

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<sup>1</sup>Augustine actually resigned after his *baptism*, not his conversion, and even then on the grounds of ill-health rather than as a result of his beliefs; he evinces some degree of discomfort in the *Confessions* about the resulting hiatus between his conversion and his resignation.

<sup>2</sup>I am being polemical in calling it a common-law marriage, and somewhat anachronistic, but I find the scholarly tradition of referring to this woman as Augustine's "mistress" is unpleasantly

the priesthood against his expressed wishes. He made the best of it, starting up a *third* monastic community --somewhat larger this time, but still manageably intimate --but within another few years, he was consecrated “coadjutor Bishop of Hippo” in order that he might assist the aging Bishop Valerius. Valerius quite promptly died, leaving Augustine fully responsible for the affairs of the Church in this politically and culturally volatile region.

Driven throughout these peregrinations by a desire for solitary reflection and quiet intellectual conversation with a select company of gifted peers, Augustine found himself instead weighted down with enormous responsibilities of the most practical kind. We can almost hear the questions bubbling under the surface of the text: how did this come to pass? Is this who I am? J. G. Kristo is guilty of gross anachronism in calling it a “mid-life crisis”<sup>11</sup> but Augustine is clearly in a retrospective mood in 397-400 AD.<sup>1</sup> In the pages of the *Confessions*, we see a man explaining retrospectively the hidden logic which makes sense of how an “A” could have led to such a very different “B.” And it is of course divine providence which explains matters: from Monnica’s prophetic dream in book three on,<sup>12</sup> it is clear that Augustine is on a path toward conversion. Only the details remain to be determined. Georges Gusdorf aptly remarks on this score that one of the “deepest intentions” of autobiography is “a kind of apologetics or theodicy of the individual being.”<sup>13</sup>

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dismissive of the woman who was once so summarily dismissed [see 6:25]. The connotations of a twelve-year monogamous relationship are not picked up in the word “mistress” as we tend to use it now, and I am suspicious that this vocabulary is intended to soften the impression made by this most deeply questionable episode in Augustine’s life.

‘Kristo is applying Fowler’s theory of the stages of faith development (which is itself an application of Erikson’s approach to developmental psychology) to Augustine’s text. imposing a pattern that is highly specific to one time and culture onto another that is enormously different. But at the very least, we might question whether a man in his early forties would --in Augustine’s day --have viewed himself as standing at “mid-life.” He did in fact live over thirty years more, but this was hardly to be expected. More significantly, I am not at all convinced that this very modern species of existential malaise, the “mid-life crisis,” would have made any sense to anyone in 397 AD. This is not the place to argue the claim, but I would think that it would have been the Romanticism which arose in the wake of Rousseau that brought about the imperative that we must find and fulfil our idiosyncratic “inner natures,” and that without this, there could be no “mid-life crisis.” As Charles Taylor has so forcefully made clear in *Sources of the Self*, not all modes of self-experience have been available at all times in history.



For someone like Nietzsche this “theodicy of the individual being” --what he calls *amor fati* --is a strictly personal affair, but for Augustine, as also for Rousseau, the justification and explanation of an individual life is played out against a genuine metaphysical theodicy in which change and disorder are contained by a more fundamental order in the universe. True to this, Augustine not only finds in the Divine plan an explanation for the myriad twists and turns in the course of his life, but also a cause to embrace the fact that they have led him to his present position.<sup>1</sup>

## 2) The Double Address:

And so there are a variety of goals lying behind the *Confessions*. There is the act of self-interpretation which imposes or discovers an order in the bewildering events of the life of its author. There is a public self accounting, in response to a request from those who have heard of or from Augustine, but who cannot place their ears next to his heart “where I am whatever I am.” And there is a reverential desire to praise, to confess, and to “rouse up” the heart and mind ever closer to God. Like all autobiographies, the *Confessions* is engaged in several tasks at once, and the lines between these varying agendas are not always easy to draw. But however they are related, and however many other tasks might be seen to reside in the text, it is not at all clear that there is *one* “confession” that accomplishes all of these goals. On the contrary, I think that we can usefully distinguish two confessional modalities operating in or around the text that Augustine provides, the one directed toward his human audience, the other toward God. In due course I will suggest that Augustine cannot entirely keep these addressees apart, and perhaps that he does not altogether want to, but the provisional distinction itself is stated quite clearly at the start of book ten. Immediately after

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<sup>1</sup>There is an enormous philosophical problem here of course: how are divine omniscience and human freedom both possible at the same time? I will not wade into these murky waters here, except to note that it was a problem to which Augustine returned throughout his life, *De Librio Arbitrio* being his most sustained effort at finding a resolution (though his success here is very much open to question).

explaining that the confession is made in order to “rouse up” his own affections *and* those of his readers. Augustine gives us a description of a confession that cannot possibly be heard by his human auditors:

Therefore, before you, O Lord, am I manifest, whatever I may be. With what profit I may confess to you, I have already said. Nor do I this with bodily words and sounds but with words uttered by the soul and with outcry of thought, of which your ear has knowledge... *Hence my confession is made in silence before you, my God, and yet not in silence. As to sound, it is silent, but it cries aloud with love.* [10:2, emphasis added]

[tibi ergo, domine, manifestus sum, quicumque sim. et quo fructu tibi confitear, dixi. neque id ago verbis carnis et vocibus, sed verbis animae et clamore cogitationis, quem novit auris tua... confessio itaque mea, deus meus, in conspectu tuo tibi tacite fit et non tacite. tacet enim strepitu, clamat affectu.]<sup>i</sup>

Let us call this the “divine” confession, in honour of its addressee. From the perspective of his most private inwardness, Augustine speaks in the silent language of love to the only ear that is attuned to such speech, generating a confession that is named within the text, but which stands at least partially outside of it. It is the most pure and perfect speech imaginable --a cry of *love*, uttered by the *soul*, in the language of pure *thought* --the cognitive and affective aspects of psychic life fused in an act of absolute and complete expression. And it is worth underlining the perfection of this speech --made possible by the perfection of Augustine’s divine reader --for each of the authors I will subsequently discuss longs for this secret language of absolute communication, at least some of the time, but attempts to reproduce this comprehensiveness and univocity in an address made to readers who are rather less than divine. Augustine himself would see this as madness, a vain and presumptuous dream, for he is quick to insist that only God could hear such speech: only God could

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<sup>i</sup>The passage is particularly important for my analysis so I have provided the original Latin alongside Ryan’s translation, though I will generally give only the English. I am grateful to Margaret Cameron for providing me with the original Latin, some useful suggestions, and the following alternate transliteration: “Therefore I am open to you, O lord, whatever I might be. And I have already said with what enjoyment/profit/fruit I might confess to you. Nor do I this with words of the body and voice/sound/utterance, but with the words of my soul, and the cry of my thoughts... Therefore my confession, my God, in your sight is made silently and not silently to you; for in respect of noise, it is silent, in respect of affection, it cries out.”

*extract* such speech from the heart. No mere human language could hope to reproduce such a particular, unique, and comprehensive truth about the self, and no mere human reader or auditor could hope to comprehend it even if it *were* available. In virtue of its very perfection it must always be silent, immune from the distortions of any representational medium.

This divine confession is thus not merely an extended and corrected form of the textual confession that has thus far occupied Augustine's energies; the temporal confession in fact appears to be a propaedeutic to the moment when temporal speech drops away and one is directly related to the Divine. The writing of the textual confession is a part of the devotional practice that issues in this silent cry of love. It is part of that very process of "rousing the affections" to God. And yet, it would also be inaccurate to view this divine confession as following temporally on the heels of the textual confession. To see why this is so, it is useful to turn to another moment in the text during which Augustine contrasts physical speech with a "higher" speech that remains silent. In book eleven, Augustine contrasts two biblical reports of the speech of God. In the Gospel of Matthew, the baptism of Jesus is followed by the voice of God calling down from the heavens, proclaiming in words that all could hear, "this is my beloved Son" [Matt. 3:17], while in Genesis, the formative act of creation occurs when the Lord says "Let heaven and earth be made" [Gen. 1:1]. Both modes of speech have their origin in the Divine, and are therefore unquestionably "true," but they are entirely, ontologically distinct. In the former, "the syllables were sounded and they passed away, the second after the first, the third after the second... and silence after the last" [11:8], while in the latter, the speech of creation is pictured as occurring in absolute silence; there was, as yet, no medium through which temporal speech could resound. In the face of this disparity, the temporal speech of God is devalued almost entirely: "the mind compared these words sounding in time with your eternal Word in its silence, and said, 'It is far different; it is far different. These words are far beneath me. They do not exist, because they flee and pass away. The Word of my God abides above me forever'"

[11:8]. In a conclusion which must have struck his Christian contemporaries as audacious, the *words* of God are not even a pale imitation of the truth --through a glass darkly, as it were --but are reduced to *nothing* when set against the silent eternity of the generative *Word*. And this is not merely the case from God's perspective; it is "the mind" --the human mind --that finds the temporal speech of God "far beneath me." The contrast could not be any stronger.

There are two languages then; the sounding and fading of words within time, and the silence which "cries aloud with love" outside of time: "no part of your Word gives place to another or takes the place of another, since it is truly eternal and immortal... you say once and forever all that you say by the Word, who is coeternal with you" [11:9].<sup>i</sup> For Augustine to appropriate for himself this silent speech of creative love is for him a means of gesturing towards an (unspeakable) relation to the Divine, a unity (through love) with God. Denigrating physical speech, which is throughout the *Confessions* the principle image of temporality, Augustine throws himself fully into relatedness to the Divine, "purged and melted clear by the fire of your love" from a state of being "torn asunder by tumult and change" into one in which he "may flow altogether" into God [11:39]. This "unity" with God may in itself be problematic for Augustine,<sup>ii</sup> but at this point, my concern is simply to distinguish in the strongest possible terms this divine confession from the one which is made in time. If I have read him correctly, this silent confession supplements the public confession not merely through allowing us to imagine the unspoken details of his life which may be absent from the written

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<sup>i</sup>It is worth noting here Augustine's entirely Plotinian equivocation between "thought" and "love" as he describes the generative action of *Logos*. God's *fiat lux* --the formative speech of creation --can be described with equal justice as an act of love or as an act of pure thought; the two modalities are not distinct in their highest expression. In his own silent confession, Augustine blends the terms in a similar way: the "outcry of thought" in 10:2 is equally a cry of "love." It is the same verb in each case: *clamore*.

<sup>ii</sup>The last chapter of O'Connell's *The Odyssey of the Soul* provides an excellent discussion of the tension in the *Confessions* between a theory of divine immanence (which O'Connell persuasively traces back to the Plotinian influence on Augustine's early thought), and a more specifically Christian understanding of God as wholly Transcendent. In the *Confessions*, Augustine seems to vacillate between a dream of flowing *into* God (a kind of immanent fusion), and a more modest desire to "cling" to God as to a rock, where the bonds are of love rather than of formal unity. [See also Schlabach, "Love is the Hand of the Soul"].

text, but rather, through suggesting the ontological transformation of redemption, in which the self is oriented as fully as possible toward God, with one foot outside of time and change.<sup>1</sup> It does not complete the text --not for us at any rate --but suggests instead that it *cannot* be completed, since an essential part of Augustine's being exceeds time and language in its silent relation to God. "Whereof one cannot speak," says Wittgenstein. "thereof one must be silent."<sup>14</sup> This is not the silence of inactivity: it is the silence of the most profound and perfect *act*.

### 3) Mandala:

And so, the first confession remains silent, bypassing us altogether in favour of an unspeakable address to God. There are different possible reactions to this of course, but I at least cannot help but feel cheated; I would readily trade in the textual *Confessions* for the chance to experience Augustine's pure affective cry of love, his private experience of prayerful relatedness to God. Next to this, the textual autobiography can only appear to be an empty prelude, a signifier without its promised signified. I "have heard something" of Augustine, like his unnamed correspondents, and would like to know more, but is my ear placed any closer to his heart at the end of the *Confessions* than it was at the beginning if this heart speaks in a language that I cannot hear or understand? How frustrating to be made to want more, and then not to get it.

And yet this effect --my frustration --may not be accidental or unintentional; it is at any rate entirely consonant with Augustine's theories on language and cognition. Written or spoken words cannot in fact teach us anything, according to the theory of language Augustine had already elaborated in *The Teacher* (a dialogue which is deeply indebted to Plato's *Meno*).<sup>15</sup> Language is

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<sup>1</sup>Nietzsche will say in *Ecce Homo*: "to understand anything at all of my *Zarathustra* one must perhaps be similarly conditioned as I am --with one foot beyond life" [1:3].

<sup>15</sup>In *De Magistro (The Teacher)*, Augustine says "This much words can do, to attribute to them as much as possible. They merely prompt us to look for things. They do not show them to us so that we know them" [11.36]; "But as for all the things that we understand, we do not consult someone speaking externally but inwardly the truth that presides over the mind, prompted, perhaps by the words. And it is

indelibly associated in Augustine's mind with temporality, that is, with the fallen state of humanity. Within the opening pages of his work, Augustine follows his striking image of the sinfulness of the infant "pale and bitter in face as it looked at another child nursing at the same breast" [1:11], with his account of the growth of speech through which he "entered more deeply into the stormy society of human life" [1:13]. Language, time, and sin are never far apart in Augustine's thought, each naturally calling the others to mind. In opposition to this constellation, the kind of silence which is productive (rather than simply being the absence of activity) comes to be seen as the very sign of the divine: "you who dwell on high in silence" [1:29]. In redemption, the soul stands on each side of this divide, mortal still, and yet silently and invisibly filiated with God outside of time and change. To his mortal audience then, and from the mortal part of his being, Augustine provides the successive words of the textual confession. The divine confession is quite different. In a mystery which is not accidentally akin to the incarnation, the redemption which occurs *in* time and which issues in this silent confession of love is also a redemption *from* time, at least in so far as the grace of God empowers Augustine to maintain his loving orientation toward the Divine.'

Given this, his text assumes a strictly pedagogical value; it is a means of showing us "from what great depths we must cry unto You" [2:5]. It is a ladder that we must discard once we have reached its goal, and the temporal language with which it is composed is of importance only in so far as it prompts in us (through the mediation of Divine grace) a longing for and recognition of the

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he who is consulted that teaches, that is, Christ who is said to dwell inside a man... [I]t is wisdom that every rational soul consults, but wisdom is available to each soul only as much as each soul is able --on account of its own good or bad will --to receive it" [11.38].

'In this regard, Augustine's otherwise seemingly anecdotal report that Ambrose was a silent reader of the scriptures receives an added resonance: "When he read, his eyes moved down the pages and his heart sought out their meaning, while his voice and tongue remained silent" [6:3]. The significance of silent reading as a new practice in late antiquity is discussed in Mary Carruthers' *The Book of Memory*; Brian Stock's more recent *Augustine the Reader* (1996) provides a detailed interpretation of the status of reading, silent and otherwise, which is more explicitly directed towards Augustine's thought; and Alberto Manguel's immensely enjoyable *A History of Reading* (which I cannot recommend highly enough) provides a more accessible and anecdotal treatment of similar themes in its chapter on Augustine.

authentic Word that resides within. What is required then is that we do not attend overly much to the words themselves, but rather, use them as an occasion for directing our will towards the inward truths that they seek to evoke: “even when we are admonished by a changeable creature, we are led to stable Truth.” says Augustine, provided that these words which sound “outwardly in the ears of men” cause them to “search inwardly” and find “the eternal Truth where the sole good Master [Christ] teaches all his disciple” [11:10]. While the *Confessions* is meant to draw our attention, just as the scriptural text drew Augustine’s attention in his famous conversion scene (to which I will return), our gaze is meant to reflect off of it and back upon ourselves. To read the *Confessions* in order to extract from within its language Augustine’s true relationship to God is to mistake the deeply meditational character of the work; the words of the text are meant instead to evoke a process in the reader whereby our own such relationship is recognized, but for this to occur, it is necessary that our wills be directed inward rather than outward.<sup>1</sup> If we were to remain fixated on the text itself, pruriently fascinated by its various disclosures, it would fail to achieve this objective. Paradoxically then, to succeed in its agenda, the *Confessions* cannot be “too good;” it must be initially enticing, but it must never become satisfying in its own right.

In light of this, I am tempted to read the *Confessions* as having something of the structure of a mandala or a mantra.<sup>2</sup> In various meditational practices, the mandala is used as a sensory image

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<sup>1</sup>Simon Harrison provides an excellent discussion [in “Do we have a Will?”] of the relationship between will and understanding in Augustine which corroborates this point. According to Harrison’s reading, Augustine’s theory of understanding is deeply Platonic rather than Aristotelean in character, meaning that knowledge is construed as immanent in the structure of the mind rather than elicited from the senses. This in turn makes the teacher (or language itself) valuable solely as an occasion for recognition. The will is essential in this process since the learning process is largely self-contained: one must *want* to learn before learning can happen, though that desire is itself always the free gift of God.

<sup>2</sup>The mandala is a visual object while the mantra is a spoken refrain. I have chosen to develop this point through a discussion of the mandala because the text is an object that is presented first of all to the eyes, and because the image of the mandala conveys more directly the idea of an absent centre, but much of what I have to say could be recast in terms of the mantra. For Augustine’s contemporary audience, who may have heard the text recited without ever having read it, the aural image may have been more pertinent.

that distracts the mind from the surrounding world --the objects and events that would otherwise continually elicit its attention. Through an intense focus on the mandala itself, which is crafted so as to draw the eye always towards its centre, the image before the mind gradually fades from perceptual consciousness until it is no more than a vanishing point with no external dimensions. Or alternately, an image of a god is depicted at the centre of the various circles and vortices. In either case, through intense concentration, the mind comes to have no external object before its gaze at all, resulting in a state of openness and attention that (depending on the underlying metaphysical assumptions) allows the mind to attend more fully and completely to itself or to God.

Augustine is hardly a mystic, but the logic of this practice finds a ready home in his text. The world of sensory objects is a constant source of distraction and temptation as Augustine sees it: the mind is continually turned outwards, even though the path to Truth lies in the opposite direction. And it is language that is often the worst culprit in the mis-education of the soul. Augustine's profound misgivings about rhetoric, for instance, are focussed on the sensory allure of language itself: how easily he was led astray by the Greek and Latin playwrights, he recalls, ignoring the manifest nonsense of their stories because he was captivated by the beauty of their prose [1:20-23]. What the meditational words of the *Confessions* hope to do is to exploit this property of language *against* itself, drawing the mind's attention away from other distractions, but then --like the image of the mandala --dissolving before its gaze so that the mind confronts only itself. In more contemporary parlance, the text "deconstructs itself," but the absence or silence it thus reveals is not the icy chill of endless space, but rather, the soul's recognition that it cannot be its own ground. The silence created in the mind by the dissolution of what it took to be its object --in this case, Augustine himself --is the space in which one begins to call upon God. It is the hermeneutic equivalent of the penitent's moment of despair, or of Descartes' whirlpool of confusion and uncertainty at the start of the second



*Meditation*.<sup>1</sup> It is above all the moment when words give way in order for the emergence of something higher.

All of this is revealed perhaps most dramatically in the utterly remarkable description of the "Vision at Ostia." The passage begins in language, a drawn out discourse which had occurred between Augustine and his mother, but which could in another sense be said to have occupied Augustine's entire life prior to this moment. But it is followed by an astonishing ascent: language leads the mind back to the things of the world, which in turn lead the mind to confront itself, and finally, in an moment of revelation, the mind itself is overcome as it opens onto the full presence of God. At each stage, the object of attention and the mode of consciousness that perceives it beckons toward its grounding in the next, until in rapture it finds its deepest source in the Word itself:

When our discourse had been brought to the point that the highest delight of fleshly senses... seemed unworthy... then, raising ourselves up with a more ardent love to the Selfsame, we proceeded step by step through all bodily things up to that heaven whence shine the sun and the moon and the stars down upon the earth. We ascended higher yet by means of inward thought and discourse and admiration of your works, and we came up to our own minds. We transcended them, so that we attained to the region of abundance that never fails, in which you feed Israel forever upon food of truth, and where life is that Wisdom by which all things are made, both which have been and which are to be. And this Wisdom itself is not made, but it is such as it was, and so it will be forever. [9:24]

Here, the historical journey depicted in the narrative sequence of the *Confessions* is mirrored by an intellectual / spiritual journey that passes through various modes of knowing --sense-consciousness, self-consciousness, and an apprehension of the trans-historical truth which undergirds them --to the timeless Wisdom of the Divine plenitude. Time and eternity are brought into relation in the moment of vision, for this vision itself could as easily and as fittingly be described as eternal (how could the

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<sup>1</sup>There is a crucial difference between Descartes' meditator and St. Augustine that I will explore in the following chapter. Briefly stated, where Descartes finds the *idea* of God in the moment of his epistemological despair, Augustine *calls* on God at this point. The mind is not self-sufficient for Augustine, and its uncertainty and despair can only be resolved through a faithful clinging not simply to the *idea* of God, but to God himself.

experience of eternity *end?*), or as occurring within the vanishing confines the *Augenblick*, before Augustine and Monnica collapse overwhelmed “back again to the noise of [their] mouths where a word begins and ends” [9:24].

The proto-Hegelian vocabulary is, if anything, even more pronounced in the remarkable exhortation that follows immediately after. Blending form and content perfectly, Augustine provides a Hegelian-style denigration of picture-thinking and language in a sentence which is physically impossible to read, a sentence in which “Enter into the joy of your Lord” occurs as a kind of cathartic, gasping answer to a question which never clearly emerged. Note the repetition of silence - seven times --until at last God speaks “through himself”:

Therefore we said: If for any man the tumult of the flesh fell silent, silent the images of earth, and of the waters, and of the air; silent the heavens; silent for him the very soul itself, and he should pass beyond himself by not thinking upon himself; silent his dreams and all imagined appearances, and every tongue, and every sign: and if all things that come to be through change should become wholly silent to him --for if any man can hear, then all these things say to him, “We did not make ourselves.” but he who endures forever made us --if when they have said these words, they then become silent, for they have raised up his ear to him who made them, and God alone speaks, not through such things but through himself, so that we hear his Word, not uttered by a tongue of flesh, nor by an angel’s voice, “nor by the sound of thunder,” nor by the riddle of a similitude, but by himself whom we love in these things, himself we hear without their aid, --even as we then reached out and in swift thought attained to that eternal Wisdom which abides over all things --if this could be prolonged, and other visions of a far inferior kind could be withdrawn, and this one alone ravish, and absorb, and hide away its beholder within its deepest joys, so that sempiternal life might be such as was that moment of understanding for which we sighed, would it not be this: “Enter into the joy of your Lord?” When shall this be? When “we shall all rise again, but we shall not all be changed.” [9:25]

Here, temporality and language are briefly overcome, at least as Augustine describes his experience: it will obviously be impossible to accurately reproduce such an ecstatic moment of transcendence within a written text, and Augustine’s impossible sentence seems performatively to allude to this fact, compressing into a single thought far more than the rules of grammar would properly countenance. It is perhaps not surprising that at the end of this passage he adds quietly, and as if incidentally, the disclaimer, “such things I said, although not in this manner and in these words”

[9:25]. The more verbose Augustine becomes, the further he is from capturing his experience of God's nearness, and yet, what options are available *other* than words? Language may inevitably fail to capture what is most important --a point that Augustine is quick to emphasize --but "woe to those who keep silent concerning you, since even those who speak much are as the dumb" [1:4]. But if language is held in suspicion as something that must be overcome, this does not make it entirely pernicious; it is as much a means of our return to unity as it is a symbol and symptom of our fragmentation. Robert O'Connell puts it well:

The soul in its unfallen state directly intuited not only that Light, but the thoughts and affections of its fellow-souls as well. Now, fallen into body and immersed in sense-realities, it must communicate with other souls through the indirect medium of language, gesture, sign, and symbol; its spiritual eye weakened to the point where that Light is too strong for its gaze, it must begin its ascent to vision by accepting the semi-opaque symbolic utterances through which "authorities" point the way back to vision. Both the need for symbolic communication, then, and the soul's initial dependence on "authority," are results of the fall and at the same time instruments for "return."<sup>15</sup>

Language is enlisted in the service of what cannot be said. One of the most prolific writers in history --his biographer Possidius quipped "he lies who says he has read all of his works"<sup>16</sup> --Augustine's endless words gesture incessantly towards silence, and never more so than in the *Confessions*.

#### **4) Evasion?**

Awash in the dizzying heights of Augustine's vision, and overwhelmed by the sublimity of his rhetorical evocation of transcendence, I find I readily lose my bearings. The text is pulling at me, directing my gaze beyond itself toward an ineffable Other. But I have been down this road before, and it is not where I want to go --at least, not now. *My* interest, like Augustine's early correspondents from long ago, is the much more personal and immediate desire to know something about this man, Aurelius Augustinus, and yet the most powerful moments of his prose continually lead me away from him. The silent confession comes to dominate the text in its ever-present absence, while Augustine can slip away into absence himself relatively unnoticed. But what has

happened to the account of the man whom I and others had wanted to know? Has the “rousing of affections” not entirely displaced revealing his heart to his readers as a goal of the text?

I have suggested that Augustine has structured the *Confessions* as a text whose surface allure draws the reader in with a promise of intimacy, but which “deconstructs” itself on deeper involvement, leading the reader into a silence that calls out for God. This is what I mean by referring to it as a pedagogical text, a self-consuming heuristic, or a mandala. But if the *Confessions* is a mandala of a sort, “Augustine” is that mandala himself; if we stop at the surface of the text rather than following the prescribed journey, it is Augustine we will be looking at, a fact of which he seems only too conscious. Is he comfortable being looked at in this manner, spread out through these many pages for the investigation of those who may have very little interest in pursuing the goals he intended? It is one thing for the like-minded to be reading --though I will suggest that Augustine shows signs of trepidation even here --but Augustine would have known that his readers would include the Manicheans, the Donatists, the Pelagians, his fiercest critics, those who would be predisposed to pounce on any aspect of his self-revelation that might serve their own polemical agendas.<sup>1</sup> But through thematizing a division between the written text and the “true” confession, Augustine has neatly shifted the site of his vulnerability away from the public domain and into his silent relationship to God. Our potential judgments of him are preempted by the Divine judgment, and indeed, perhaps tipping his hand a little, Augustine will later cite scripture to this effect: “I will reveal... what I now am... *‘but neither do I judge myself.’* In this manner, let me be heard” [10:5]. It is God alone in this scenario who has the real text in hand, and the judgment of God on this basis

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<sup>1</sup>In fact, Pelagius *did* pounce, making use of a line in the *Confessions* as a part of his attack on Augustine’s brand of Christianity. “Give what you command, and command what you will.” Augustine prays at several moments, and this line became the focal point of a fiery dispute about the necessity for grace in all human action. Both sides were unfair to the other; Pelagius accused Augustine of abdicating personal responsibility in the name of humility, while Augustine was aghast at what he took to be the hubris of Pelagius’ moral perfectionism. I am more inclined to see a difference in emphasis rather than an unbridgeable opposition between the two theologies, though I am certainly more comfortable with Pelagius on this matter.

seemingly preempts any judgment we might wish to make. We are to hear Augustine's revelations, but --whatever he might tell us --we are not to cast judgment on his character; the significance of the text will lie in processes other than that of allowing us to come to know, and consequently assess another discrete human being. To the extent that I begin to cast aspersions on his character --and there are times when I would dearly love to do so --I am, to that extent, failing to see myself reflected in and by the text.

But is it fair to interpret Augustine's opposition of a divine and a textual confession as a defensive gesture, a means of preemptively undercutting the ultimate significance of his various textual disclosures? Certainly it would be naive to suggest that its significance is exhausted through this analysis; in his relentless opposition of language to silence and time to eternity, Augustine does everything he can to direct our attention beyond his own text, to see it as a means through which we might initiate a journey rather than as an independent destination. The absolute priority of the self-God relationship over any and all other forms of relation is far too deeply ingrained in Augustine's overall theological outlook to assume that it could simply be, or only be, a cannily deployed rhetorical strategy adopted within the autobiography. I would suggest instead the more modest thesis that Augustine's denigration of the written word in favour of the silent confession that lies behind it is over-determined, a position that is fully compatible with his theology, but that he is all-too-pleased to insist upon as he writes. It is fitting and appropriate that Augustine should address God in his text, and this practice may service an important theological agenda. But at the same time, the mere presence of this primary address to God --and all the oppositions that devolve from it (which I will explore in what follows) --is enough to seriously affect the distance at which the human reader is held.

Because it runs counter to the interpretations advanced in much of the secondary literature, this is a point that perhaps needs to be underscored, and to do so I will oppose my own reading to

that offered by Jean Starobinski, a writer with whom I am otherwise in near total agreement. Starobinski also sees Augustine as providing two distinguishable texts: “the autobiographical discourse takes form by creating, almost simultaneously, two addressees, one summoned directly, the other assumed obliquely as witnesses.”<sup>17</sup> In common with the overwhelming majority of commentators,<sup>1</sup> Starobinski proceeds to identify the primary address to God with a principle of veracity: “By so openly making God his interlocutor, Augustine commits himself to absolute veracity: How could he falsify or dissimulate anything before One who can see into his innermost marrow? Here is content guaranteed by the highest bail. The confession, because of the addressee that it presumes, avoids the risk of falsehood run by ordinary narratives.”<sup>18</sup> As Starobinski sees it, this primary address shores up the reader’s expectation of a veridical account. And so it does: I find it extremely difficult to imagine Augustine intentionally lying in a prayer delivered to God, and so I expect that within the limits of his powers, he is more or less telling us the truth as he knows it. Sincerity does not equal knowledge --even self-knowledge --but it does obviate the suspicion of intentional distortion. Yet for Starobinski (as also for Paul Ricoeur, in the first volume of *Time and Narrative*), the relationship between the two confessions is not merely unidirectional: not only does the address to God legitimize the textual confessions, but also, the human readership justifies recasting the truth in narrative. “The double address of the discourse --to God and to the human auditor --makes the truth discursive and the discourse true. Thus may be united, in a certain fashion, the instantaneousness of the confession offered to God and the sequential nature of the explanatory

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<sup>1</sup>See Ann Hartle’s *Death and the Disinterested Spectator*, p. 132-138, for an excellent instance of this, but equally the works of O’Connell or O’Meara, and Stephen Spender’s essay, *Confession and Autobiography*. Brian Stock seems to suggest much the same thing in *Ethical Values and the Literary Imagination in the Later Ancient World*: “thoughts are elevated” in the *Confessions* “by the implied presence of God, just as early rhetorical exercises achieve their success through the imagined presence of wealthy patrons like Romanianus” [p. 4]. In later autobiographies, such as Rousseau’s, the appeal to God as a witness may seem hollow, “little more than a conventional figure” Martin Warner suggests, “but in Augustine it is meant with all seriousness; the work is primarily addressed to God, and only secondarily to the edification of men and of himself. Insincerity in this context is of such momentous consequence that it is an ever-present concern” [“Philosophical Autobiography” p.197-8].

narrative offered to the human intelligence.”<sup>19</sup> For Starobinski then, the two confessions are mutually reinforcing, synergistic, with the two addresses responding to the two goals of the *Confessions*: “thereby are reconciled the edifying motivation and the transcendent finality of the confessions.”<sup>20</sup>

To be precise, I do not wish to dispute Starobinski’s account. More strongly, I believe he is right, and his reading opens up certain avenues of interpretation which I find richly suggestive: the view that the dual address makes “truth discursive and discourse true” mirrors quite nicely Augustine’s understanding of Scripture along these lines, where the timeless Word is expressed in the series of words which constitute the Bible. But while he is right, it is also the case, I believe, that he is wrong. The veracity of the textual confessions may be supported by the divine addressee, but the very significance of this veracity is radically undercut by the reference to a supplementary confession, at least in so far as this further confession is distinct from the textual one and appears to be the site of the real action. What we are getting in the *Confessions* may be “nothing but the truth,” but it is hardly “the whole truth” or even its most relevant part.

Starobinski’s mistake, I believe, is to see the two confessions as occurring “almost simultaneously” in the same text. This leads him to focus on the synergistic interaction between the two. In contrast, I have emphasized the different modalities of the two confessions --Word versus words, silence versus sounding and fading --in order to show their incompatibility. The Scriptures constitute an exceptional case, and I will return somewhat later to the various ways in which Augustine sees himself as reenacting the literary task of Moses, but when language is not granted unique and unusual potentials because of direct, Divine involvement, it simply *cannot* equal the private experience of Truth. And indeed, Augustine makes a point of stressing the various silences in his text, the fact that he is engaged in a relationship with God which cannot be recorded. The *prima facie* premise of autobiography, of confession, is that there will be a kind of self-revelation.

and it is thus driven by the attempt to overcome the limitations on communication in the name of transparency and the immediate co-presence of writer and reader; it is traditionally conceived as a way of offering “an opportunity for a sincere relationship with someone else”<sup>21</sup> Starobinski says. Or so the official story goes; I have yet to find an autobiographer who fully desires such absolute proximity. Augustine, at least, appears to invert these traditional goals through his insistence on locating the essential nature of the self outside of the text, even though just as traditionally Augustine’s *Confessions* are taken to be a paradigm instance of the genre of autobiography itself. The text may well speak powerfully of the grandeur of God and the experience of conversion, but it does not speak convincingly about its author as a social being; the particular history of Augustine’s life --his loves, losses, regrets, and aspirations --are made completely subservient to the grand narrative of his fall and return, with no value given within the text to these relations and experiences outside of their direct role in his Augustine’s personal salvation.

##### **5) Listening In:**

But I have gotten ahead of myself here, my frustration with Augustine’s evasiveness spilling out before my argument is fully in place. If it is true that there is a kind of “displacement” going on in the *Confessions*, a process through which the truth is whisked away before we can see it, it is also the case that the structure of displacement is repeated at another level within the text’s manner of addressing its readers. Grudgingly or not, we might well choose to accept that the silent confession will always be inaccessible and attend instead to the available text. But to whom, precisely, is this textual remnant addressed? It remains unclear. I have thus far attempted to distinguish what I have called the divine confession from the temporal / textual one, and this may well create the impression that the written confession is unambiguously directed toward *us*, just as the divine confession is clearly addressed to God, even as it incites us to make a similar confession. What troubles this



straightforward dichotomy is that even the textual confession is written entirely in the form of a prayer directed towards God. Augustine writes within the *Confessions* that certain colleagues and parishioners had encouraged him to undertake a project of self-revelation, but while they are thus *indicated*, this putative audience is never directly *addressed* within the text itself, nor even named; they are present (infrequently enough) in the third person, but never in the second. To take as an example one of the few instances in which this public audience *is* made explicit within the text, consider Augustine's manner of relating the details of a temporary setback in his educational itinerary:

In that year my studies were interrupted, with my return from Madauros, the nearby city in which I had already resided to take up the study of literature and oratory, while the money for the longer journey to Carthage was being raised...

He continues in this vein for several sentences, then asks,

To whom do I tell these things? Not to you, my God, but before you I tell them to my own kind, to mankind, or to whatever small part of it may come upon these books of mine. [2:5]

What is the reader to make of this strange locution, "before you I tell them to my own kind?" It is inevitably disruptive. Augustine, it seems, is addressing God in order to deny that he is addressing God, while failing to address the reader, though he declares that the reader is (at least at this point) his true audience. Is he, or is he not talking to us? If, on the one hand, we take the prayer-structure of the *Confessions* quite seriously, assuming that we are being allowed to listen in on a private conversation, then it will be disconcerting to hear ourselves named within the prayer as the real destination for its various disclosures. In effect, we will have stumbled across our name while reading someone else's mail. On the other hand, we may well have been reading the address to God simply as a structural conceit within a work that has had its human audience in mind from the start.

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'Similarly ambiguous addresses occur on several other occasions in the *Confessions*, as for instance in Augustine's Book Ten declaration, "I confess, not only in your presence but to men also by these writings" [10:3].

such that one could ignore the manifest naming of God as the addressee and assume this position oneself. In this case, the opposition between God and the human audience within this one sentence seems to request that we forsake this interpretive strategy. Augustine cannot have been confessing to me --disguised behind the name of "God" --if he feels it is appropriate to advise God that I may be listening in.

So where does one stand in relation to the *Confessions*? Has the text marked out a place for the reader? I believe that it has, but it is a complex and perhaps not altogether stable location. As it is "for us" we must listen, but since it is not "to us" we are kept at a distance. We are required to watch but not to speak, to be close but not too close, forced into the position of the eavesdropper. To borrow a phrase that Henry Staten applies to Nietzsche, it is an "excluding inclusion."<sup>22</sup> at least in so far as we are inclined to follow the directions of the text and read from a location demarcated by Augustine himself.<sup>1</sup>

It is perhaps tempting to explain away the peculiarity of this form of address as an unintended result of the prayer structure of the text, but I think we should likely pause to consider what all it may be doing for Augustine. After all, there is no reason that he *had to* write the *Confessions* in this manner; he could just as easily have written *both* a prayer and a biography, rather than embedding the one within the other in a single text. Furthermore, as will become clear in the following chapters, Augustine is far from alone in employing such an indirect mode of address in his autobiography. While they do not appeal to God as the primary, inaccessible interlocutor of their texts, both Rousseau and Nietzsche will in their own ways employ similar rhetorical structures, speaking *for* us, but not *to* us. And in each case, I am reminded of the Shakespearean soliloquy --

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<sup>1</sup>This is an important qualification, for depending on the interest which motivates our reading, the positioning of the reader by the text may be altogether irrelevant. A cultural historian interested in depictions of 4th century life in North Africa for instance, is likely to remain outside of the textual economy, extracting from the *Confessions* whatever details may prove illuminating for this project but without seeking to form a relationship of any sort to Augustine himself. I will return to the significance of this distinction in the closing remarks to this chapter.

Hamlet, Lady Macbeth, or Richard III gazing over the heads of the audience and revealing the secret of their inner thoughts to no one in particular, but speaking in a manner totally unlike that in which they could plausibly be thought to speak to themselves. My own musings, at least, are only rarely conducted in iambic pentameter.

It is an interesting question: why do autobiographers tend so readily to circuitous forms of communication? Why do they gaze over our heads as they speak, forgoing the more obvious face-to-face encounter of an "I" writing for and to a "You"? Augustine himself may provide some assistance in answering the question, though I will return to it frequently in the chapters that follow. If it is true that the *Confessions* as a whole has the quality of a "soliloquy in a raised voice," there is a passage within it (which has thus far received little attention) that addresses precisely the desire for this kind of structure in a more limited and localized context. Shortly after his conversion, when he is still in the full enthusiasm of a new-found faith, Augustine immerses himself in the reading of the Scriptures, gravitating most especially to the Psalms. But as he does so, experiencing wave after wave of insight and grace, his former friends the Manicheans come to mind:

With what strong and bitter sorrow did I wax angry at the Manicheans, yet I had pity on them again, because they did not know of those sacraments, those medicines, and raged madly against the antidote by which they could become sane! I wish that they had been somewhere near me at that time, while I did not know that they were there, so that they could see my face and hear my voice as I read Psalm 4 at that time of rest, and perceive what that psalm wrought within me... Would that they could have heard me, while I did not know that they heard me, so that they would not think that I said for their benefit the things that I uttered along with the words of the psalm. For in truth I would not say those same words, nor would I say them in the same way, if I knew that I was being heard and seen by them. [9:8]

Within a text that is itself written to be overheard, Augustine describes (to whom?) his desire to be overheard by those who disagree with him. He could of course engage them directly, and he most certainly did, writing at least thirty-three tracts of varying length against the Manicheans during his lifetime. But such tracts will inevitably appear polemical to those who disagree: the direct address can so readily bring with it a presumption of lying, that the message has been tailored to manipulate

the audience. And this is no doubt true; no matter how strenuously they strive to seem sincere, does anyone fully believe the politician engaged in public debate? The very *effort* to appear sincere, in this context at least, speaks against its own goal. How much more convincing, in contrast, if we were to simply happen on the speaker, to catch her unaware and discover to our surprise that she *really does* believe in private the various views that she defends in public. As Augustine at least sometimes recognized, the confrontational and adversarial quality of his typical writings on the Manicheans was sure to bring about --from this part of his audience at least --the sort of defensive stance that would virtually prohibit the possibility of reflection and openness, the very perspective needed to still the mind and prepare it for the grace of God. But if they could only see his private raptures, only hear him conversing in private with his Lord, surely then they would be moved! Surely then they would see the utter transformation in his life that his faith has brought about, a transformation that cannot have been a mere dissimulating pretense since there is no one to dissimulate in front of. They would, at the least, have cause to reconsider his words, having recognized that they must be heartfelt and sincere.'

And this effect is precisely what Augustine is after in the *Confessions* --a public simulation of private experience that attempts to erase or mask the palpably obvious fact that it *is* public. If successful, this would be to transform the autobiography into diary, the rehearsed public manifesto into a direct, private rendition of Augustine's thoughts. And this returns me to the connection between the divine address and the principle of veracity. From this perspective, it is not so much the case that Augustine's speech in the *Confessions* must be true because he is afraid of lying in front of God --though this may be true as well --as it is the case that we are led through such a rhetorical

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'Descartes and Rousseau both repeat this Augustinian assumption that if their readers could only see directly into the author's mind they would be convinced; disagreement can only arise as a result of poor communication, or a lack of sincerity on the part of either author or reader. None will allow the possibility that a reader could believe the author's testimony, understand his meanings and intentions, and still remain unpersuaded, or (worse yet) simply not care very much. In this respect, none will allow the reader to be truly different from the writer.

structure into a *prima facie* presumption of truth-telling. Just as we might expect self-deception but not actual lying in a diary (why bother?), the *Confessions* too will appear honest in virtue of the fact that it does not seek to engage us directly.

It is a sham of course: to write in a publication that one fervently cherishes the same views in private is not thereby to make the public private and the private public. There is an inflexible law of communication that prevents this: the more fervent and vocal the insistence that one does not have a listener in mind, the more clear it becomes that the reverse is the case. A play within a play still has its original audience in mind: it simply takes less responsibility for this fact than it should. By the time we reach Rousseau, especially in his *Reveries*, these histrionic denials of human readers become almost comic in their wilful ignorance of their own self-contradictory status: "I am alone in the world," says Rousseau, in a carefully crafted, edited and revised piece of writing. Augustine is not quite this absurd. He will still accept the implied presence of readers, even while speaking over their heads, rather than claiming to speak to himself or to God alone. But in this as in so many other ways, he sets the template for subsequent autobiographers. The crucial formula is already in place here: "I am not addressing you. I do not *need* to address you, therefore I must speak the truth."

But there is a mirror-image to this principle that is every bit as important, and which will again turn up reconfigured in the works of Descartes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. If the double address that disguises the publicity of the writing is partly an attempt to convince others of Augustine's veracity, it also serves Augustine's own needs; he is emboldened to speak more freely to the extent that he can "forget" that we are listening in. His problem is not simply that if he spoke the same words to his auditors that he speaks to God, or to his soul, that they would seem like lies in virtue of the presence of this audience. This is all true, but at the same time, he suggests that he would "not say those same words, nor would I say them in the same way" if he were face to face with his auditors. It is not just the Manicheans who need to believe that Augustine does not see them

in order to believe him; Augustine too needs to believe that the Manicheans are not there in order to speak freely.

What does this mean for the *Confessions*? What does this do to my relationship to Augustine? I am perhaps not quite a Manichean, but I am nonetheless --from Augustine's perspective --steeped in sin, "raging madly" against the antidote to what ails me. Does he know I am listening, or is he speaking for my benefit while oblivious to my presence? Is he speaking in the *Confessions* in the manner of his prayerfully extemporaneous commentary on the psalms as he sits in quiet inwardness, or is he using other words, not said "in the same way"? The insistence on the double address suggests the latter, that he knows perfectly well that both friend and foe are potentially listening. And this creates a problem for him, since he would like to speak differently to each of these audiences. Or rather --as I read the text at least --he would like to speak to his friends, the members of his faith community, while excluding those outside of this group. Unlike many other religious writers, Augustine is not primarily interested in building bridges to the outside world. Embattled by heretics, pagans, and rival sects, Augustine is driven to strengthen the bonds within his own community, but his relation to rival views is more concerned with delineating difference than with invitation and rapprochement. Whatever his merits as a theologian and philosopher, he is certainly not a thinker of the olive branch.

The explanation for this is perhaps to be found both in Augustine's unique psychology and in the historical situation of the Catholic Church in late 4<sup>th</sup> century North Africa, and it is not my task to sort out the relative weight of these two sources. For whatever combination of reasons, Augustine is exceedingly suspicious of the heathen masses, his "pity" for them appearing only after he has "waxed angry" and expressed his distrust and hostility. Never does it cross his mind that he might have something to learn from his enemies, that even those who are wrong at the bottom might not be wrong all the way through. While it is routinely said --perhaps *too* routinely --that Augustine had a

profound degree of psychological acumen, seeing deeply into his own soul, it does not seem that he explored this aspect of his emotional life. We might note here that he does not tell us *why* he would have spoken differently if he had seen the tell-tale shadows of the Manicheans falling over his shoulder. Does he know this himself?

There is an interesting question opened up here as Augustine approaches an explicit recognition of his own ambivalence about communication, but it is no sooner raised than it is neutralized. This admission that his communication might at least be *strategic* --which is not to say lying --is rendered moot by a concluding comment that shifts the blame for any distrust and miscommunication squarely back onto the shoulders of the Manicheans: "even if I said them [his private words to God], they would not understand them in the way that I spoke them in your presence, by myself and to myself out of the closest feelings of my mind." Once more, he reaffirms the privacy of his language as he speaks to God, though here we begin to see a refinement of his stance that will have certain consequences which I would like to explore next, for here it is no longer as clearly the case that *no one* can hear his inner thoughts correctly; it is the "they," the Manicheans, perhaps *me*, who cannot understand what he says in "the closest feelings" of his mind, even when they hear it. Even if he were speaking the right way, they are listening the wrong way, and what they think they hear will not be what was actually said. Or so Augustine insists.

#### **6) Augustine as Exemplar:**

So how then does he want to be heard? In what manner should we listen to the closest feelings of his mind? If we do in fact take our directions from Augustine himself, it turns out that there *is* a type of reader that the text actively courts, though it is not a position that we will all feel comfortable adopting. The *Confessions*, as is often noted, is an autobiography which incorporates the biographies of a great number of other individuals; in digressions that range from a short

paragraph to several pages in duration, the lives of such contemporaries as Alypius, Ambrose, and Ponticianus interrupt Augustine's account of his own. While their presence no doubt serves a variety of functions within the *Confessions*, it is next to certain that at least one of these purposes is to provide a set of signals to the reader, an indication by demonstration of how Augustine believes a biography should be read. With this in mind, I would like to briefly examine the structure of the passage in the text that is both the theological pivot of Augustine's life and the location of the greatest density of biography within the *Confessions*, the famous scene of the "garden conversion."

The "conversion scene" in Augustine's narrative actually begins a short while before the crucial afternoon in the garden. On a previous occasion, Augustine had approached his friend Simplicianus, telling him of his fascination with the Platonist texts translated by a certain Victorianus. Simplicianus responds with a lengthy story about Victorianus himself, a celebrated teacher of rhetoric who had been a bitter enemy to the Church up until his eleventh hour conversion to Christianity. Augustine is greatly excited by the story, which brings to his mind St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, and he is left "on fire to imitate him" [8:10]. At this point we enter the garden scene proper: whatever the temporal separation between the events may have been historically, they are made to serve as parts of the same narrative sequence here. On this day, Augustine and his friend Alypius are visited by their mutual friend Ponticianus. Ponticianus is pleased to notice from a book lying on the table that Augustine studies Paul's Epistles, and we are given the story of Ponticianus' conversion, the key moment being his reading of St. Paul. A tale within a tale, Ponticianus himself tells the story of the conversion of St. Anthony, an Egyptian monk, but more significantly, follows this with the story of two of the Emperor's officials chancing to pick

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'The "garden scene," so rich in literary, psychological, and theological significance, has attracted an overwhelming quantity of scholarly commentary; my own reading of it in this section borrows liberally from much of this literature, but is particularly indebted to Lawrence Rothfield's illuminating *Autobiography and Perspective in The Confessions of St. Augustine*.



up the “Life of St. Anthony” and promptly abandoning court for Church. The series of nested narratives --Anthony’s in Ponticianus’ in Augustine’s --are all marked by reading the scriptures or by reading biography, the very scriptures and biographies which Augustine writes into his own life. One reads, one imitates, then becomes a part of the larger story of salvific history, in which scripture and biography merge around the figure of Jesus. The effect is powerful, a dazzling display of rhetorical prowess that I continue to find quite moving in the midst of my theological reservations. It is surely no surprise when Augustine finds himself on the following page reading St. Paul in the garden, but as in Greek drama, knowing the end in advance concentrates our attention on the means.

And what is the effect of these various biographies on Augustine? He gives us quite a detailed picture of his situation as a reader (or auditor) of biography:

Ponticianus told us this story, and as he spoke, you O lord, turned me back upon myself. You took me from behind my own back, where I had placed myself because I did not wish to look upon myself. You stood me face to face with myself, so that I might see how foul I was, how deformed and defiled, how covered with stains and sores. I looked, and I was filled with horror, but there was no place for me to flee to away from myself. If I tried to turn my gaze from myself, he still went on with the story that he was telling, and once again you placed me in front of myself, and thrust me before my own eyes, so that I might find out my iniquity and hate it. [8:16]

Given this description, it is perhaps somewhat misleading in the end to refer to Augustine’s interest in biography as imitative, though this is obviously an element of his practice. While imitation may suggest that the exemplar is maintained as a kind of role model to which the individual seeks to conform, Augustine seems to force the exemplar to conform to an image of his own highest possibilities, his truest inner-self. Rather than modelling his life on an exemplar, he searches (or God searches) within the biography for a narrowly defined image around which condenses a picture of who *he* is. That is, he finds *himself* in what he hears --he is “placed before himself” in listening to biography. Ponticianus tells a story of someone who is not Augustine, and Augustine is faced with *himself*. There is no indication here that Augustine forms or desires to form strong, enduring attachments to the complex personalities behind these narratives, and in fact, his description suggests

that he may not actually have heard much of Ponticianus' story, which continued unabated while Augustine was locked up within his private existential crisis. What is relevant, it seems, is the symbolic potential of another life, reduced to a small group of vibrant images, rather than a holistic comprehension of its various details.<sup>1</sup> Condensed, purified, and made universal in their revelatory power as instances of Divine grace, the lives in the biographies are relocated by Augustine within the history of salvation: Christ begat Paul who begat Anthony, Ponticianus, Augustine, Alypius... The reader of the *Confessions* is invited to form the next link in the chain.

It is in virtue of this quality that some have referred to the *Confessions* as "the story of everyman;"<sup>23</sup> Augustine sets out to tell us more about ourselves than about himself. There is certainly an element of truth to this assertion, even a large element, but Augustine's willingness to cast himself as a *type*, as "everyman," seems to be shadowed by an abiding ambivalence about being particular. Through attention to the epic, universal battles enacted within the *Confessions* --battles in which we may or may not feel ourselves implicated --the specificity of Augustine's life is lost: we see *through* Augustine in the process of seeing ourselves. While O'Meara rightly notes that the *Confessions* was never meant as a "purely personal history,"<sup>24</sup> it is equally true that it was never intended to be a purely "universal" history: at the very least. Augustine promised us a portrait of who he is as an individual. Augustine seems only too willing to hold himself up as a mirror rather than as an object for our attention. and the tightly structured, overtly contrived narration of moments like the

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<sup>1</sup>There are obvious parallels between the process I am describing and what Freud describes as *identification*, particularly the mode of identification which is implicated in the formation of the ego-ideal. For Freud, the child transforms the image of the external father into the internal voice of conscience, an ideal which (at times) can be oppressive and dictatorial in its judgment of the individual, "deformed and defiled... covered with stains and sores." Freud and Augustine clearly interpret the etiology of this process quite differently, the one as a resolution to oedipal conflicts, the other as the action of saving grace, and Augustine is --in comparison --much more attuned to the manner in which guilt may *serve* the long-range goals of the ego, while somewhat blind to its debilitating effects. But the results are less strongly opposed; each would seem to agree that the complex specificity of the exemplar is suppressed behind a narrow set of highly charged images and moral commands.

garden conversion serve this purpose well enough.' But are we expected to believe this story? Things just do not happen this neatly, the key images conveniently in place. In a more detailed autobiography --Bertrand Russell's for instance --a stylized, paradigmatic moment may hide within a series of prosaic events, or may be accepted as, literally, a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. but Augustine's autobiography is *predominantly* comprised of such events, with very little "connective tissue" to tie these moments to a real, recognizable history.<sup>ii</sup> As a result, the events in his life begin to take on a purely symbolic value and an air of unreality (or more benignly, of profound but mythic truth) comes to surround this "exemplary" Augustine. Divorced from the concreteness of his own history and tied to a mythically dramatic series of "great lives," he becomes very much a part of what Nietzsche once called "monumental history:"

Of what use, then, is the monumentalist conception of the past, engagement with the classic and rare of earlier times, to the man of the present? He learns from it that the greatness that once existed was in any event once possible and may thus be possible again... And yet... How much of the past would have to be overlooked if it was to produce that mighty effect, how violently what is individual in it would have to be forced into a universal mould and all its sharp corners and hard outlines broken up in the interest of conformity!<sup>25</sup>

Nietzsche goes on to describe how the few, truncated and aggrandized personalities which surface within such a monumentalist perspective will inevitably "have something strange and supernatural about them, like the golden hip which the pupils of Pythagoras supposed they saw on their master" [or the auditory revelations of Augustine in the garden: "take, and read" sang the invisible children's voices]. "Monumental history deceives by analogies: with seductive similarities it inspires the

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<sup>i</sup>The garden scene is of course the most elaborately structured vignette in the *Confessions*, but the theft of the pears, the vision at Ostia, and the debate with Faustus, to take just the less ambiguous examples, are each scripted around recognizable biblical or classical narratives. Augustine is free to condemn his background in rhetoric as his "professorship in lies," but he clearly has not forgotten the techniques he once taught.

<sup>ii</sup>Rousseau's *Confessions* represents an intermediate position here, containing both an enormous quantity of detail --names and dates, travel plans, etc. --and also a good number of overtly stylized vignettes. Most of the latter are to be found in the first four books of the text, the chapters on which Rousseau lavished the most time and attention.

courageous to foolhardiness and the inspired to fanaticism” [“take, and read” in each biographical narrative, layered, seductive similarities].<sup>26</sup>

But, one might think, surely it is possible to counter the supernatural universality of Augustine’s tendency toward monumentalism. The stories are certainly structured, they may well be greatly embellished, and obviously there is a great deal that we might like to know which is omitted. but if we maintain the belief that there is something at the centre of each vignette that is more or less historical, then can we not simply shrug off the effect of this hallucinatory and seductive rhetoric? I would think not. If we seek to recuperate a flesh and blood Augustine from the text, we encounter yet again a kind of displacement and destabilization that problematizes our access. Once again, it is language that is to blame.

### **7) The Fountain of Truth:**

In previous sections I have analyzed the impact that certain of Augustine’s theories of language and writing have on the reader. Here, as a final element in the complex of distancing strategies at work within the *Confessions*, I would like to examine one aspect of Augustine’s theory of reading. Toward the end of the *Confessions* --a placement that may in itself be significant -- Augustine introduces a very contemporary sounding image of hermeneutic indeterminacy. In one sense, this is little more than an elaboration of the distinction already drawn between divine and temporal speech. Divine speech is univocal; as it is uncorrupted by a passage through any medium, it is present *as itself* rather than as seen through the distorting filter of representation. In contrast, temporal speech, whether written or oral, is a means of representing something which is not directly contained within the speech itself; the “truths” expressed in words lie *outside of* the words. As we saw earlier, the spoken word (including even the spoken word of God) has at best a borrowed truth value, in so far as it calls to mind an inner Word which registers the presence of an absolute truth.

This form of dichotomy is of course quite familiar, both in Augustine's day and in our own. But in a somewhat surprising move, Augustine does not equate the signified truth of a statement with its author's intention. While it is true that he does go to great lengths to establish that Moses --the paradigm of a truthful writer --could have had nothing other than "the truth" in mind when writing the book of Genesis, Augustine ultimately concludes that he cannot know just what it was that Moses intended, and moreover, that it *doesn't matter*:

behold with what confidence I say that in your immutable Word you made all things, visible and invisible. Can I say with the same confidence that Moses meant nothing else than this when he wrote, "In the beginning God made heaven and earth?" I do not see him thinking this within his mind as he wrote those words, in the way that I see this for certain in your truth. [12:33]

Through meditating on the words of Moses, Augustine believes he has come to discern a fundamental truth about the mystery of Creation, but once this truth is realized, the author of the words in question drops out of view. Given his unique status, Augustine is confident that Moses must have had *a* truth in mind at the moment of writing, but this intended meaning is irrelevant to the realization of *a* truth --perhaps a different one --that is catalyzed by the reading of his words. The point is emphasized in a striking metaphor, with the words of Moses becoming the narrow mouth of the fountain fed by the inexhaustible springs of Divine truth:

It is like a fountain, which in its narrow confines is more fruitful and supplies the flow of many streams over wider expanses than any of those rivers which take rise from it and flow through many regions. So also, the account given by the dispenser of your words, which was to provide material for many future commentators, out of a small amount of words pours forth floods of clear truth. From them each man for himself may draw the truth he can attain to concerning these matters, one man this truth, another man that, through their longer and more involved discussions. [12:37]

Augustine would of course never be so presumptuous as to arrogate for himself the sublime privilege of Moses --it is not *his* task to record the sacred, originary words of God --and yet, it is clear that Augustine's understanding of Moses' authorship informs a great deal of his own project. The link between the two is made all but explicit in a later section, wherein Augustine defends his argument that Moses inscribed the possibility of numerous truths within "a small amount of words" by

suggesting that this is precisely what *he himself* would like to do: “Surely I myself --and I speak this fearlessly from my heart --if I were to write anything for the summit of authority, I would prefer to write in such manner that my words would sound forth the portion of truth each one man could take from these writings, rather than to put down one true opinion so obviously that it would exclude all others” [12:42].

Moses’ vocation, like Augustine’s, was to “rouse up” his audience toward God, and it is precisely the indeterminacy of his language which made it so useful in accomplishing this task: God is free to use these words to reveal whatever truth(s) he chooses, at any moment and for any individual. This of course is exactly parallel, and intentionally so I would think, to the manner in which Augustine practices the reading of biography. Were Moses to have fought against the natural polysemy of language by attempting to inscribe *his* intended meaning (and only this meaning) within the scriptures, he would in fact have been drawing undue and distracting attention to himself at the expense of the broader possibilities that his words might otherwise have allowed. It is not Moses, but the *Truth* that we should be seeking in the words of Genesis. “See now how stupid it is, amid such an abundance of true meanings as can be taken out of these words, rashly to affirm which of them Moses chiefly meant, and with pernicious quarrels to offend against charity” [12:35].

Fair enough. However, it seems immediately and strikingly incredible for Augustine --the arch-controversialist --to suddenly discover at the end of his autobiography that a single text can equally and legitimately support a vast range of different interpretations. “It is impossible to reconcile Augustine the indefatigable polemicist with such permissiveness,”<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth de Mijolla suggests, and if this reconciliation is meant to issue in a unified hermeneutic practice, I can only agree. After disavowing the “stupidity” of “pernicious quarrels” over interpretation, Augustine would, after all, spend the next 21 years of his life condemning what he quite comfortably called the

*heresies* of the Donatist and Pelagian understandings of scripture. to say nothing of the Manicheans.' Augustinian "pluralism" --the easy tolerance for a great variety of conflicting textual interpretations - seems to appear quite abruptly and unexpectedly in the *Confessions*, only to disappear again when he is no longer engaged in autobiographical self-disclosure.

As before, the effect of this gesture (as far as the reader is concerned) is to entice us into the text while simultaneously preserving Augustine's anonymity. In a proto-Cartesian gesture, Augustine has affirmed on repeated occasions that he "is" a mind, an "inner man."<sup>28</sup> even if it is true that the exact nature of that mind often remains somewhat veiled and mysterious to him. It is a portrait of this "inner man" that Augustine's contemporaries requested and that Augustine promised. but how can this be done if language does not reveal the inward states of its author? In so far as the *Confessions* refer us to timeless, Divine truths, we *pass through* Augustine in a circuit that leads back to the voice of God in our own souls, just as Augustine bypasses Moses in his discovery of the truth of creation, and bypasses Ponticianus in the discovery of his absolute dependence on God. In contrast, where the *Confessions* tells of the historical contingencies of Augustine's life, we have no way of determining their truth at all, nor of knowing how they are properly to be interpreted. We could not expect the inner voice of truth to register, for instance, that Augustine taught rhetoric in Rome, that he once lost a dear friend, that he was privileged with a vision at Ostia, and yet, it is these sorts of events which cumulatively make up the self-portraiture of the autobiography. Language may well be the only tool available for self-disclosure, but as Augustine has emphasized, it is

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<sup>28</sup>Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo* biography gives a particularly good account of these years of relentless and bitter controversy; even given Brown's obvious fondness for the saint, Augustine is quite far from appearing here as a reluctant combatant. Nor is there any indication that he ever celebrated differences as a sign that God speaks in a unique way to each individual. Gary Wills more recent biography *Augustine* presents a contrast to my own and de Mijolla's view; for Wills, Augustine was forced into polemical activity *against* his inclinations by the failure of his sincere attempts at reconciliation with rival Christian theologies. I am not yet convinced, but Wills' text is certainly interesting and provocative reading.

constitutionally incapable of performing the task; we cannot see through it and into the author's mind where the "inner man" dwells. It may well be true, as Brian Stock claims, that Augustine was "convinced that humans have nothing but verbal or imagistic narratives to work with when they want to talk about their selves," but this does nothing to refute the inevitable conclusion: "he may tell a plausible story, as he does in *Confessions* 1-9, but through the telling he never gets to the bottom of anything that is essential to selfhood."<sup>29</sup> We are left at the end of the *Confessions* with our "ear" placed no closer to "his heart" than when we began. Or at least, this is the case if our hearts are not duplicates of Augustine's own.

In a brief but astonishing outburst, Augustine actually taunts his readers --or at least, a certain class of them --with the realization that he cannot be found within his text. It is a dense, vitriolic passage, and I will number the sentences to facilitate the analysis which follows:

(1) What have I to do with men, that they should hear my confessions, as if they were to "heal my diseases?" (2) A race eager to know about another man's life, but slothful to correct their own! (3) Why do they seek to hear from me what I am, men who do not want to hear from You what they themselves are? (4) When they hear me speak about myself, how do they know if I speak the truth, since none among men knows "what goes on within a man but the spirit of man which is in him?" [10:3]

The distance taken from the inappropriate reader is radically over-determined in this one short passage. Initially (1), Augustine insists on his total independence from the reader. Like God himself, Augustine is offering us a *gift* --yet another means through which we might pursue our salvation --but as he makes perfectly clear, he stands to gain absolutely nothing from those whom he thus places in his debt. There is nothing we can offer Augustine which is of any use to him, and we have no claim whatsoever to his confession. And yet, while the first line brings to mind the image of the munificent gift, the value of this gift undergoes a curious reversal in the third line. Here (3), it seems that an undue interest in the particular details recounted in the *Confessions* may well be distracting us from attending to our own self-examination. In the second line (2), the "slothful"



readers are neatly collected into a “race” of the damned whose defining characteristic is a prurient interest in Augustine. And finally (4), and most significantly, the veracity of the text is explicitly called into question within the text itself; the sort of reader who has at this point been designated as superfluous (1), lazy (2), and ignorant (3), is now left staring at a text which may or may not say anything at all about its author. The moment I forsake the appropriate, symbolic reading of the text, seeking to find Augustine rather than myself within the *Confessions*, the text becomes a “surface phenomenon:” the depth and particularity of the author drops out of sight. There is no access to Augustine for the race of the damned.

The passage is exceptional, and I mean that quite literally. De Mijolla may go somewhat too far in declaring that it is “one of the rare passages of ill will in the *Confessions*.”<sup>30</sup> but it is certainly the most dramatic; something breaks to the surface here which is otherwise contained, or given a more thoughtful and considered expression. And to say that it is exceptional is to suggest at once that it is revealing --Augustine’s profound misgivings about his act of exposure are palpable in this radical rejection of “bad readers” --but also, that this one passage does not provide the unique key that explains the text. We have good reason on the basis of such an outburst to see a sustained discomfort with self-exposure as a constitutive element in Augustine’s writing and to wonder how much this may have contributed to the forms of evasion I have thus far canvassed, but this does not in itself devalue the significance of the theoretical / theological positions which justify a similar reticence. I am suggesting instead that Augustinian privacy and silence is over-determined, the cognitive and affective motivations forming a whole. But the result, however these factors play off of each other, is an extreme position; all but the selected readers are banished from the text.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>There is much that we don’t know about the conditions under which the *Confessions* was composed, but it has seemed likely to many that the tenth book was a later addition to the text, a response to the requests of early readers who wished to know something about the *present* condition of the author; the chronological narrative in books 1-9 ended ten years in the past, and books 11-13 are more theoretical

## 8) The Charitable Solution:

For all that the foregoing seems to suggest an impossible and unbridgeable distance between Augustine and his reader, it is nonetheless true that it constitutes a position marked out within the text which a possible reader might occupy. The implications of reading from this position are of course severe: through the accumulated layers of displacement, the reader is trapped within a maze that continually redirects one away from the author, the motivating source of the interest which initially led to the reading. But while I have chosen to emphasize the aspects of the text that appear to thwart a certain class of readers, it is also true that Augustine offers a privileged path through the maze for his preferred readership, a means not only of discovering *oneself* but also for discovering Augustine. This is not identical to the symbolic, “monumentalist” reading strategy that I outlined in section six above, though it may well be that the members in the two classes are nearly identical. While monumentalist readers forsake the particularity of Augustine’s life in the process of discovering their own, a *charitable* reading has the potential to reclaim this lost context. “Charity” becomes something very much like a technical term in the *Confessions*, its appearance in the text marked by a sense of unusual significance, indicated as often as not by repetition: “Charity, by reason of which they are good men, tells them that I do not lie when I make my confession: it is charity in them that believes in me” [10:3]. Given the enormous convolutions we have already explored concerning the reader’s position in the *Confessions*, it is not hard to see why the apparent resolution to this situation would be announced with a certain fanfare and added emphasis.

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and abstract in character. Augustine complies, to an extent, with an inventory of his current “sins” that is depressing in its banality: he sometimes has erotic dreams [10:43]; he sometimes eats for pleasure rather than strictly “for good health” [44 and 50]; he likes to watch spiders catching flies [57]. However trivial it might seem though, and however much I might wish he had devoted at least *some* attention in his catalogue of self-recriminations to examining how he had treated other people, I think it is true that he did in fact take these passages to be a sincere and revelatory confession, which makes it significant that it is *this* book which contains in its opening sections the vitriolic condemnation of prurient interest.

The significance of charity cannot be overstated here. The term itself appears no less than five times in the opening four pages of book ten, and each time, it is described as the *only* available means for believing the story which Augustine has just told in his biographical chapters. It is charity, and charity alone, which both characterizes the reader desired by the *Confessions* and enables that reader to discover the author. In this sense, charity functions as the inter-social analog to the virtue of faith, the means through which we come to believe in the veracity of the scriptures, and like faith, it is a gift bestowed by the grace of God. Implicitly then, an uncharitable reader is one who has not been favoured by God, and it becomes a form of moral failing to *not* believe Augustine's text --one last rhetorical assault (or insult) from Augustine, which either shames or repulses the unduly circumspect reader.

What exactly does charity mean for Augustine, and what sort of reader does it generate?

Once again, Augustine anticipates the question and provides us with a detailed description:

But with what benefit do they wish to hear me? Do they wish to share my thanksgiving, when they hear how close it is by your gift that I approach to you, and to pray for me when they hear how I am held back by my own weight? *To such men I will reveal myself...* Let a brother's mind love in me what you teach us must be loved, and lament in me what you teach us must be lamented. Let a brother's mind do this, *not a stranger's mind*, not the mind 'of strange children, whose mouth has spoken vanity, and their right hand is the right hand of iniquity.' Let it be that brotherly mind which, when it approves me, rejoices over me, and when it disapproves of me, is saddened over me, for the reason that, whether it approves or disapproves, *it loves me*. To such men I will reveal myself. May they sigh for my good deeds, and may they sigh over my evil deeds. [10:5, my italics]

For all the layers of distancing and obfuscation, Augustine's requirement from his reader is, in the end, quite common and understandable: he wants to be loved, unconditionally. And of course, who doesn't? But as always, it is surprisingly difficult to know what this means for Augustine. There seems to be more than one sense of charity at work in the play of contrasts in this passage. On the one hand, the charitable reader is the "brother" as opposed to the "stranger" (or "strange child" if one prefers the more colourful phrase), and thus, a fellow-member of the Catholic community. In this image, it is a strong bond of sympathy that issues in the "sighs" of emotional connectedness. The

“brother” here seems to be a “friend” who takes a direct interest in the writer’s well-being because of the intimacy that binds the members of the religious community. On the other hand, the charitable reader is also opposed to the uncharitable reader in the nature and mode of his or her manner of judgment; where the uncharitable pick and choose their loved ones at least partly in response to a judgment of the merit of these individuals, the charitable individual Augustine describes reverses this priority, passing judgments only because they *already* love the person in question. Moreover, these judgments themselves seem to be a rather rote affair, a classification of actions and states according to the legislative framework handed down by God rather than on the basis of any direct, personal interest in the praiseworthiness and contemptibility of the target. The reader is to love what God teaches must be loved; no less, and no more.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, it is this second sense of brotherly love which is dominant in Augustine’s thought, as is strikingly instanced by the following passage from one of Augustine’s previous works.

*On True Religion:*

Man is not to be loved by man even as brothers after the flesh are loved, or sons, or wives, or kinsfolk, or relatives, or fellow-citizens. For such love is temporal... Let no one think that is inhuman. It is more inhuman to love a man because he is your son and not because he is a man, that is, not to love that in him which belongs to God, but to love that which belongs to yourself. What marvel if he who loves his private advantage and not the common good does not obtain the Kingdom. [88]  
If we are ablaze with love for eternity, we shall hate temporal relationships. [89]<sup>31</sup>

Once again, the personal and particular drops away once the universal makes its appearance.

Augustine’s strident position in *On True Religion* is echoed in several passages from the *Confessions* as well, most notably and significantly perhaps in the pages that follow his account of having lost a dear friend in his youth:

If you find pleasure in bodily things, praise God for them, and direct your love to their maker, lest because of things that please you, you may displease him. If you find pleasure in souls, let them be loved in God. In themselves they are but shifting things; in

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<sup>1</sup>How very different from Rousseau, who demands that we attend to the fact of his extraordinary difference from others, and to love him because of this.

him they stand firm; else they would pass and perish. In him, therefore, let them be loved. [4:12]

Blessed is the man who loves you, and his friend in you, and his enemy for your sake. For he alone loses no dear one to whom all are dear in him who is not lost. [4:14]

It is a remarkable claim. Augustine is not saying (here) that all losses will be compensated, that there will be a reunion in Heaven, but that with the right kind of love, there will be no loss at all -- "he loses no dear one." Through the mediation of God, love becomes for Augustine what it could otherwise never be --a guaranteed investment. However, while the theme of departicularized love is certainly present, I would suggest that the *Confessions* is far less unequivocal than *On True Religion* in desiring this, and only this, form of attention. The more extreme "generic" conception of love tends to surface --as we might expect --in those passages that have come closest to revealing particularly difficult and painful instances of loss: the dead friend, the dying mother, and the dismissed lover. His position at other times is hardly that of Rousseau, where personal intimacy is of paramount value, but it is at least far more ambivalent. Having written his autobiography, Augustine is sure that he wants a loving / charitable reader and strongly resists all others, but he is unsure whether he wants to be loved because he is "a man" or because he is Aurelius Augustinus. It is hard to imagine, whatever he might claim, that Augustine (or anyone) could write an autobiography on the scale of the *Confessions* without hoping for some particularized response. As O'Connell notes, "we must not envisage Augustine sitting down and first outlining a semi-abstract theory of man, then selecting and forming the episodes of his past to fit, and prove, that theory."<sup>32</sup> I agree. While the text clearly does service Augustine's theological agenda, this is not all it does, and the *command* that the reader love him, couched in a Divine imperative, seems over-determined.

And yet, where there is love, there is always the possibility of both loss and rejection, and Augustine seems acutely aware of this risk. His friend died; he and his lover parted ways. The lesson Augustine drew from both of these experiences was that human relations are painful, and that the cultivation of any degree of attachment or dependence on another is a recipe for heart-wrenching

disaster, since one or the other of you must inevitably leave, even if only by death. "Why did that sorrow penetrate so easily into my deepest being," he says, "unless because I had poured out my soul upon the sand by loving a man soon to die as though he were one who would never die" [4:13]. To manage this risk, Augustine places strict limits on how available he will become for others; all relations become generic, paradigmatic. Indeed, in a work so often renowned for its confessional intimacy, it is significant that the moments of greatest pain and vulnerability are left incomplete, muted and depersonalized by the suppression of any particularizing detail: we might note the conspicuous absence of the names of either the banished lover or the dead friend in a text that is otherwise teeming with proper names. We might also note that in the *Retractions* at the end of his career, it is the strongest formulation of his love for his dead friend that Augustine feels must be deleted:

In the fourth book, after I confessed the misery of my soul at the time of the death of a friend, saying that in some manner our soul had been made one from two, I say: "And therefore perhaps I was afraid to die lest the one whom I had loved so much should wholly die." This seems to me, as it were, a trifling pronouncement rather than a serious confession, although this absurdity may be moderated to some extent by the word "perhaps" which I added.<sup>33</sup>

How sad. The warmest, most touching passage in the text, the one that expresses unmitigated and unmediated concern for another human being, is the passage that the aging Augustine could not allow; *this* --of all passages --becomes "a trifling pronouncement rather than a serious confession." And once more, the friend is not named. So many trivial and passing figures in the story are given names;<sup>1</sup> those who hurt Augustine, or were hurt *by* Augustine are not.

Loss is *approached* in the *Confessions*, but it cannot be given a proper name; it is always and all too quickly relocated within the universal, the generic. It is *time* which is evil, an error of the *will*

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<sup>1</sup>We might note also in this vein Augustine's pathetic need to justify his tears over his mother's death: "If he [the reader] finds a sin in it, that I wept for my mother for a small part of an hour, for that mother now dead to my eyes who for so many years had wept for me... let him not laugh me to scorn" [9:33]. But Augustine's discomfort with loss --with leaving or with being left --hardly needs to be underlined.

which grieves us, and *language* which is so maddeningly unstable and unreliable. It is against these metaphysical abstractions that Augustine will rage, not --or not openly --against the specificity of his own gratuitous and unfathomable suffering. And so, not all of the silences in the *Confessions* are designed to evoke an inward apprehension of the presence of God, I would suggest. There are also those silences that hover around the things that are only partially revealed in the text, those which speak of pains that are not allowed to come out into the open and be recorded.

To ward off any further such experiences of loss, Augustine holds himself in reserve. To justify such silent inaccessibility, he appeals to a theology of silence and solitude. The intellectual and the emotional thus intersect, and since they demand the same thing, the result is what I take to be a grossly exaggerated denigration of temporal life, communication, and personal availability for love. Just as Kant would later demand, categorically, that we respect one another in virtue of our standing as rational beings rather than through any particular personal attachment or Humean sentiment, Augustine has God mediate all human relations, including above all, relations of love. This effectively filters the content of the *Confessions* as it moves en route to its human destination, for it is declared that only a loving orientation --through God, toward Augustine --will cause the text to perform as anything like a revelation of its author. The image, to borrow from Donne, is of a compass, with all commerce between Augustine and his reader mediated by the love of God, without which a chasm inevitably keeps them separate. He broke this rule once, allowing his friend to be a second self; never again. "O madness, which does not know how to love men, as men should be loved!" [4:12], says Augustine. I cannot but agree.

## 9) Confession meets Confession

As is the case for any writer, I am my own first reader as well as the writer of the text that I present to the public. It goes without saying that the previous piece of writing has gone through a

certain amount of revision, partly as I have read and re-thought my own ideas, and partly in response to the suggestions of other early readers. Does this mean that I am by this point thoroughly comfortable with the reading of the *Confessions* that I have just provided? Yes and no. Yes, I think that I have extracted and cast in relief a certain dynamic at work in Augustine's text, a story in which the *Confessions* masquerades as an autobiography of a particular individual --Saint Augustine --only to subsume all legitimate readers within an all-encompassing biography of everyone. It is a strategy that is at once humble, downplaying the significance of its individual author, and yet at the same time, presumptively appropriative, assimilating the reader to the author's own self-understanding (or relegating them to an unredeemed "outside"). It is certainly a pattern that is repeated and amplified in the first-personal works of Descartes that I will explore in the next chapter.

But it is also true that I am sceptical of my conclusions here; they sound to me, on rereading, too personal, too clearly autobiographical. I am not a neutral party to Augustine's text, not a "scholar," if by that we imagine (what I take to be impossible) the disinterested stance of a reader with no affective involvement with the material, a reader not in constant dialogue with the text. In my case, the dialogue seems to have taken the form of a contest, and it is not hard for me to see why. Born into a Christian family, I eventually came to reject the faith of my parents --at least on an intellectual level --as unequal to the sophistication I discovered in the philosophy I encountered as an undergraduate. And yet, just as Augustine tells us that his admiration for the Greeks was tempered by the fact that their philosophies lacked "the saving name of Christ," I have never felt satisfied that philosophy has made good the gap created by that early disavowal. I still long for something --a new faith, or my old faith made new again --and find myself embarrassed that I have yet to outgrow what I am told by those who claim to know is a "nostalgia for presence." And yet, it is precisely this sort of sceptical and spiritual vacuum that is so often described --and not the least by Augustine in the *Confessions* --as the precondition for a recognition of and return to God. I find it impossible not to



see myself implicated in the intellectual and spiritual journey Augustine describes, to which his own conclusions provide one possible resolution; how frustrating to feel that I might yet turn out to be living through a stage in a development that he describes so well, a stage that he transcended. And there is more: Augustine has his Monnica, the enigmatic mother who held her faith and her hope for her son from the outset, the mother who so deeply frustrated the young Augustine by presumptively assuming that his current views were but steps on the way toward the conclusions that she had already reached. My own mother, recently retired, was a minister in the United Church. Does she too have prophetic dreams about me I wonder? How upsetting if she does, and how much more embarrassing if she turned out to be right.

I am certainly not the first to see aspects of my own life anticipated in the *Confessions*, and as I have argued above, a certain vagueness in the text, a lack of precision in Augustine's self-description, fosters precisely this possibility. But this process is usually described by those who speak from within the faith, a situation in which the parallels in life-narratives may be encouraging (just as Augustine himself took inspiration and solace from the "lives" of those before him). In contrast, I find it necessary to resist this merging of identities; I need Augustine to be wrong about me if I am to avoid being cast as the unredeemed prodigal, not yet having seen the light and returned home. I refuse to be his Manichean.

This is certainly more autobiographical than I had planned on being, but it strikes me as necessary. I experience myself as unexpectedly trapped in something of a battle here with the learned Saint, with each of us attempting to interpret the other as writing out of unrecognized needs rather than legitimate understanding. In such a situation, it seems cowardly to turn Augustine's text against him (as in a certain way, I have done here) while denying the experiences and desires that lead me to do so, implicitly inscribing myself in the community of the learned. To do so would be to repeat the very gesture that I find so problematic in Augustine, the suppression of particularity --the

denial that one is inevitably “other” to the reader --that attempts to co-opt the reader.

Again, it is not that I think that I am wrong, nor am I masochistically attempting to undercut the validity of my reading through re-presenting it as (merely) the product of a personal history. Rather, I want to place my reading of Augustine *alongside* his text, in dialogue, rather than above it, explaining it. As I move forward into readings of Descartes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, the process will inevitably become more complex, the dialogue becoming a four-way conversation, to which the reader may either listen in, or establish a fifth position.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DESCARTES AND THE RHETORIC OF PROPHECY

#### 1) Founding Father, Western Hero:

*In order to discover the rules of society best suited to nations, a superior intelligence beholding all the passions of men without experiencing any of them would be needed. This intelligence would have to be wholly unrelated to our nature, while knowing it through and through; its happiness would have to be independent of us, and yet ready to occupy itself with ours; and lastly, it would have, in the march of time, to look forward to a distant glory, and, working in one century, to be able to enjoy in the next. It would take gods to give men laws.*

*Rousseau: The Social Contract.*

Rousseau is not speaking here of Descartes, but rather, of the shadowy figure of the “Legislator” who serves to found his ideal republic. Rousseau’s Legislator is a cowboy, the hero of any number of Western movies: Riding in off the plains, the man with no name destroys the forces of darkness and disorder, proclaims the reign of law, and then has the decency to leave town once more when his work is done. And he *must* leave, for as Rousseau well knew, allowing the Legislator to stay -- allowing him to enjoy executive and judicial powers after he has instituted the law --is surest recipe for tyranny. Rousseau cites with approval the legend of Lycurgus, the fabled founder of Sparta, whose first and only act after drafting the laws was to resign from office.

Many have scoffed at Rousseau’s Legislator, a *deus ex machina* standing in the centre of *The Social Contract*, precisely where one would hope for a detailed, practical program. But there are two things to note in Rousseau’s defence. First, his is a problem with pedigree; consider Rousseau next to Plato, who after dreaming up the ideal state proposed to make it a reality by evicting from the current state all but the children under ten. Faced with such draconian intervention, would we not rather wait for Lycurgus --or for Shane, the Pale Rider, or the Lone Ranger --to ride in with the morning sun? And second, while we might --in a pragmatic tone of voice --belittle Rousseau’s

dream of the Legislator, charging that he is not a real character and thus not a real solution, the mythic quality of the Legislator has not prevented him from appearing throughout history. Whether taking the form of a prophet, politician, or philosopher (and Rousseau at least tried to become all three), many have claimed the rights of the Legislator; some have even claimed the responsibilities.

Descartes is a part of this lineage I will contend. relying for his purposes on the sort of rhetorical self-presentation that allows him access to the authoritative voice of prophecy. I will sketch in the details as I proceed, but consider for the moment simply the more salient aspects of Rousseau's profile of the Legislator as they pertain to Descartes. A superior intelligence? He certainly thought so. And he (literally) wrote the book on the passions --an exhaustive anthropology --while maintaining personally the deepest Stoic reserve and detachment (at least, so he claims). And a sense of destiny, of ushering in changes that would find their fruition in the generations to come? Clearly. But while Descartes fits the character well enough, laying a claim on the rights which go along with this particular voice, it is also true that he shirks the duties that accompany the vocation. Lycurgus abdicates. Shane rides out of town, wounded and perhaps dying in the saddle. And Christ of course suffers a voluntary death in order to burn a new commandment into the hearts of his people. But Descartes remains in hiding, unwilling to pay the price of prophecy. Or so I will contend in what follows.

## 2) Mysterious Stranger:

Can I remember a time before I knew Descartes?

There were sixteen years, perfectly satisfactory, during which I did not know even the name, and another two or three during which he was no more than the hazy figure standing behind the adjective in “Cartesian geometry.” But, can I remember a time when I did not experience myself as an isolated individual, a dissociated centre of consciousness gazing out through a body and into the world? This is more difficult. There may have been such a time --theories differ --but if there were, it was lost to me a long time ago, and years of philosophical reading and research are only beginning to chip away at the feeling that one *has to* live this way, that people have *always* felt like this. Without in the least accepting that Descartes is the sole and complete origin of this thought (and after discussing Augustine, it would be preposterous to think that he is), it remains true that the ideas indelibly associated with his name have been with me since long before I picked up the *Meditations*.

This seems to be the case for a great many of us, and a long line of critics have been eager for some time now to praise or to bury the “father of modern philosophy” --and perhaps in the majority of cases, to do both. And yet, I wish to do neither --at least, not yet. Descartes continues to perplex me. I have no clear sense of the man, of what motivates him, of what he *wants* from me, and without this, I am reluctant to become too deeply engaged with his theoretical ideas. It is not that I am incapable of reaching any conclusions; the valiant efforts of so many apologists have not convinced me, for instance, that the circle in the third meditation is not vicious, that the pineal gland theory is not ludicrous, that he is justified in assuming such transparent access to his mental states.<sup>1</sup> But in the midst of this process of cataloguing my points of agreement and disagreement with the famous

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<sup>1</sup>On this last point, John Cottingham’s analysis has at least given me pause. He argues in *Philosophy and the Good Life* that “Descartes’ account of the mind is a good deal more sophisticated than is suggested by those commentators who imply that the Cartesian mind is a simple transparent goldfish bowl, with ideas swimming around for inspection in the glass container of consciousness” [p. 124]. Contradicting this view, Cottingham insists that “when Descartes moves from the incorporeal mind (the subject of his official metaphysics) to his theory of the embodied human being (the subject of his ethics), he allows, even insists, on a considerable degree of opacity in our self-awareness” [p. 124].

philosopher, I cannot altogether shake the feeling that I'm missing the point, that there has been a critical breakdown in communication. With Augustine or Rousseau, I have a very powerful sense of the person behind the work, and while I am quick to acknowledge that these impressions are highly idiosyncratic, as revealing of who *I* am as of the authors themselves, such pictures do at least provide me with an initial means of relating myself to the texts; I have some sense of why they went to the trouble of writing, and of what they expect me to *do* with it. But Descartes eludes me: I can't seem to form an image of *him*.

Why should this be so? I don't deny that there are intricacies, subtleties, in Descartes' texts. but all the same Descartes is hardly Hegel or Heidegger, where achieving even a basic comprehension of the texts constitutes a not-inconsiderable achievement. We routinely teach Descartes in introductory courses in part because he is --at least by the standards of canonical philosophy --a remarkably clear and accessible writer. There are a thousand ways to make him difficult again, and many of these are quite worthwhile: what led to Descartes, we might ask, what followed from him, and is there an underlying structure to his thought? But the initial comprehension and evaluation should seemingly be fairly quick and clean, a relatively straightforward matter of assessing the argumentation and forming some conclusions. And yet, reading Descartes I often have a kind of response which --as it happens --troubled him a great deal; even when I agree with what he has to say, I do not have a corresponding inner sensation of truthfulness, a "feeling" that "this is right." In Cartesian language, I am persuaded (of some doctrines) without experiencing a concomitant *assent*. And when --more often --I *disagree*, I cannot close the book, cannot "move on" with a sense that this is simply false and therefore irrelevant. As certain of my friends might put it, I can't "get over him."

### 3) A Preliminary, Cartesian Answer: *Persuasio* and *Assensio*

Descartes himself might not have found this too surprising. This sort of thing happens, he

believed, because of the problematic hiatus between the understanding and the will. A judgment, as he tells us in the *Principles of Philosophy* [#34, AT VIII 18], is constituted through both an intellectual apprehension *and* a willful act of assent, and where either is lacking, there will not be a fully-realized belief. Apprehension without assent, without commitment, is not yet knowledge for Descartes, who is surprisingly existentialist on this point. Some form of commitment and internalization --what he calls "*assensio*" --is necessary to complete the work begun in the rarefied realm of the understanding where an intellectual "*persuasio*" occurs. On the Cartesian scheme then, my will and my understanding may have become "unstuck;" the typically tight union between *persuasio* and *assensio* may have been breached.

Once this avenue of explanation is opened, Descartes is quite willing to suggest a number of reasons for the breach itself: a "kind of laziness" [AT VII 23] which compromises attention is the principal cause, but the weight of childhood prejudices and the effect of unruly passions (such as envy of Descartes himself) are also frequently invoked to explain why any one of us might fail to either see or believe in the truths which Descartes has so clearly presented. Though Descartes does - -at times --suggest that the absolute supremacy of the will allows us to perversely withhold assent from even what is clear and distinct,<sup>1</sup> the regular thrust of his program of epistemic hygiene is to warn us away from those factors that will corrupt either the formation of clear ideas or the maintenance of wilful assent. Typically, his position is that a clear and distinct perception is immediately and inevitably followed by the assent of the will. In the *Principles* for instance, Descartes would have it that "the minds of all of us have been so moulded by nature that whenever we perceive something clearly, we spontaneously give our assent to it and are quite unable to doubt

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<sup>1</sup>As in the letter to Mesland of Feb. 9<sup>th</sup>, 1645 [AT IV 173], which states that "it is always up to us to hold back from... admitting a clear truth, provided we think it good to prove the freedom of our will by doing so." Whatever weight one chooses to give this letter, and whether or not it is ultimately consistent with Descartes' published writings, it is clear from the context that Descartes views such a withholding of assent as a marginal case, demonstrative of the powers of the will, but hardly indicative of how we typically form and maintain our beliefs.

its truth" [#43], or again in the *Replies to the Meditations*, "as soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true" [AT VII 144]. Typically, the problem for Descartes is with forming and then maintaining the kind of clear intellectual perceptions that will generate certainty, not with transforming such perceptions into belief. We are always in danger of becoming distracted by new ideas before we have achieved sufficient clarity in our cogitations, or of sinking back into inherited opinions and prejudices even after the truth has been seen. *These* are the principle dangers facing us as doxastic agents, rather than the (merely logical?) possibility of wilful stubbornness in the face of the clearly evident.<sup>i</sup>

To *overcome* the obstacles to this goal, Descartes develops --or discovered --the familiar program of epistemic reform outlined in the *Discourse*.<sup>ii</sup> But while the proper interpretation and ultimate coherence of this method have been matters of perennial debate, I am more interested at this point in what I take to be a corresponding method which is addressed to the reader of the *Meditations*, one which Descartes as the founder of the method could hardly have followed himself. As readers of the *Meditations*, we are (famously) required to "meditate seriously" along with the meditator in the text, shadowing the movements of this character through his various doubts, revelations, and conclusions. While the *Discourse on Method* purports to reveal something of the historical process by means of which Descartes himself arrived at his ultimate conclusions, it is in one sense superseded for the reader by the *Meditations* itself. For the *Meditations* promise not only

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<sup>i</sup>It is interesting to note how seriously this view distances Descartes from Augustine, whose doctrine of the fallen state of the will stresses just how *often* we stubbornly refuse to "assent to" the truth which is right before our eyes. Book Eight --the centerpiece of the *Confessions* --begins with Augustine poised between *persuasio* and *assensio* in what he calls a "monstrous state:" "I was now certain that you are eternal life... all my doubts concerning incorruptible substance, and that every other substance comes from it, had been removed from me. It was not to be more certain concerning you, but to be more steadfast in you that I desired" [8:1].

<sup>ii</sup>At risk of making this celebrated program appear too much like a recipe, it can be summarized in four short steps: clear away all but the clearest of perceptions through hyperbolic doubt; follow this with an intellectual reduction of the objects under consideration to their simplest parts; subsequently recombine these "simples" under the guidance of natural reason; and subject these combined chains of simples to habitual, mnemonic review in order to cement them in the mind in a semblance of unity.



to instantiate the optimal method for truth-seeking but to actually *walk us through* the correct application of this method as it applies to the most fundamental questions of first philosophy.

At least within the domain marked out by the *Meditations* --and this is a large domain indeed --there is no longer a need for independent trail-blazing; Descartes has marked out the path in advance, and we need only follow his directions conscientiously in order to arrive at conclusions as sure and reliable as his own. Moreover, should we do so in all seriousness, with due attention to the connections between each step and the next, we will not only be “persuaded” of the truth (in Descartes’ sense), but will spontaneously find ourselves “assenting” to the resulting conclusions: “if the reader is willing to follow it and give sufficient attention to all points, he will make the thing his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he had discovered it for himself” [AT VII 155].

#### **4) An Ambiguity In The Address:**

One knows all of this. This is what we tell our students in first year when they pick up the *Meditations*, this is what I was told in first year: Descartes insists that we “meditate seriously along with him” rather than simply review the arguments from the security of an impartial distance. How many times have I told students that they must become “genuinely engaged” with the text in order to gain everything they might hope from it, directing them to the numerous passages wherein Descartes actively discourages uncommitted readers: “I would never advise anyone to read it excepting those who desire to meditate seriously with me” [AT VII 9]; “I... require particularly careful attention from my readers... [and] think it fair for me to reject out of hand, and despise as worthless, the verdict given on my work by those who refuse to meditate with me” [AT VII 158-9]. And yet, while I routinely repeat this in the classroom, have I ever *really* meditated seriously along with Descartes? Have you? Has anyone?'

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'One’s answer here will depend in part on what we think it means to “meditate seriously;” I will return to this in more detail in section nine, but I will say here that I have a rather strong, “existential”

Perhaps I should not answer so quickly for others, but I would be most surprised to hear that I alone have been playing false with the text by ignoring its stated instructions. It is an absurdly demanding program if carried out faithfully; if I have followed it at all, it has only been as a watered-down classroom activity that is constitutively incapable of generating any profound existential crises. As an intellectual exercise I have sometimes paused to question the foundations of my beliefs, and more recently, paused again to ask whether or not this is the best sort of question to ask, but I have never felt “as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top” while reading the text [AT VII 24]. Nor have I seen many students gasping for air in the classroom, however intrigued they may be by the thought-experiment. And yet this is how the protagonist of the *Meditations* describes his experience of living out the Cartesian method; the purgative stage of his reflections leaves him floundering, forlorn, and profoundly ill at ease after “unchaining the earth from its sun.”<sup>34</sup> The “meditator,” in short, seems to have much more on the line in the *Meditations* than I do. And yet this is the character with whom I am supposed to identify, at least while reading.

Is this, then, why I experience this curiously tentative quality in my relation to Descartes? I simply haven't followed his instructions, and I am responding exactly as he thought I might? Perhaps. Having never followed his directions, I cannot speak for the results they might have had. But what I would like to suggest is that there are perfectly good reasons for *not* meditating seriously along with Descartes. Descartes' attitude toward his readership is thoroughly ambivalent, and most dramatically so in his most “autobiographical” texts --the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*. On returning to these works with my eyes trained on the problems of philosophical and autobiographical communication, it has amazed me to see how frequently Descartes contradicts himself when speaking about his intended audience. Without noting the tension, he will move over the space of a

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reading in mind. My reasons for this should become increasingly clear as I proceed.

single page from assuring us of a truth that is simple and available to all without the mediation of a long and cumbersome tradition --a strikingly Protestant agenda for a French Catholic --to speaking with an almost Nietzschean degree of elitist disdain for the simple-minded masses who so utterly fail to comprehend his work.

“I do not know whether I should tell you of the first *Meditations* that I had... for they are perhaps too metaphysical and uncommon for everyone’s taste” [AT VI 31], he muses in the *Discourse*. He relents, and does tell us what he discovered, in order that we might “judge” whether the “foundations” he has chosen are legitimate. Or does he? In the preface to the *Meditations*, he retracts and repositions these earlier *Meditations* as being a mere “sample” that was left intentionally incomplete: “[T]he route which I follow... is so remote from the normal way, that I thought it would not be helpful to give a full account of it in a book written in French and designed to be read by all and sundry, in case weaker intellects might believe that they ought to set out on the same path” [AT VII 7]. “Weaker intellects”? But surely the *Discourse* had begun with the democratic insistence that “good sense is, of all things the most equally distributed;... reason is by nature equal in all men” [AT VI 1]?

Sometimes the whole world is his audience, other times only the saving remnant. In his most expansive and benevolent moods, Descartes not only addresses the entire reading public, but also solicits its response. This intensely private philosopher, who moves over a dozen times in as many years in order to preserve his anonymity, is also the philosopher who appends seven sets of commentary and critique to his most famous text. And yet, after soliciting the response, he is strikingly short-tempered and intolerant when there is any significant degree of disagreement.

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<sup>1</sup>In spite of his claim not to have learned much from books, perhaps Descartes had read the following line from Montaigne before composing the *Discourse*: “It is commonly said that the fairest division of her favours that nature has bestowed on us is that of sense. For there is no one who is discontented with the portion she has granted him.” [“On Presumption,” 2:17, p. 219 in Cohen].

descending routinely into mocking *ad hominem*<sup>i</sup> in what Jonathan Rée candidly refers to as his “largely unhelpful and frequently impatient *Replies*.”<sup>35</sup> It is as if there were two Descartes’ --the populist and the aristocrat continually interrupting each other, but each without noticing the other’s presence.”

### 5) Forked Tongues --Saints and Secular Researchers:

There are likely many ways in which to explore this tension. No doubt there is a psychoanalytic story to be told, replete with references to paranoia, dissociative disorders, and delusions of grandeur (if, that is, a figure so often invoked as “the father of modernity” can be said to have “delusions” of grandeur). My approach instead will involve tracking Descartes’ problematic investment in what I have come to think of as the “rhetoric of prophecy.” While Descartes is quite

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‘Examples are endless here --virtually all of his responses to Hobbes are “curt and dismissive in the extreme” (as Cottingham puts it in the translators preface), as is his treatment of Gassendi, addressed as “O Flesh” for twenty pages. Peter France suggests --plausibly I think --that the main purpose in appending this critique to the *Meditations* is that it allows Descartes to present his position as even *less* assailable than we might otherwise have assumed [*Rhetoric and Truth in France*, p.44-5]: it functions not to *open*, but to *circumscribe* debate.

“It is initially tempting to try to resolve this seeming oscillation through reference to Descartes’ language of composition; both were rapidly translated, but the *Discourse* was originally a French text while the *Meditations* were written in Latin. Perhaps then, as the preface to the *Meditations* suggests, Descartes takes himself to be addressing only the scholars in his Latin texts, and feels free to speak more candidly when “all and sundry” are not listening in; he had already warned the masses in the *Discourse* that his method is not for everyone, that middling intellects run an (unspecified) risk in attempting to follow it. But such a neat and tidy distinction will not work, for while Descartes’ valorizes the use of Latin in the *Meditations*, he says quite the opposite in the *Discourse*: “[I]f I am writing in French, my native language, rather than Latin, the language of my teachers, it is because I expect that those who use only their natural reason in all its purity will be better judges of my opinions than those who give credence only to the writings of the ancients” [AT VI 78]. French is here aligned with an unschooled naturalness against the Latin of Descartes’ teachers at La Flèche, and much to the *detriment* of the latter. It is a view that is echoed once again in *The Search for Truth*, where the unschooled Polyander’s chance of finding the truth is at least as good --if not better --than the philosophically erudite Epistemon [AT X 500-3]. And so, while the division of audiences and languages remains the same, the Latin texts being directed to the scholars and the French texts to a popular audience, the relative value of each of these audiences changes radically from text to text. Far from resolving the tension between elitist and populist modes of address, Descartes’ choice of languages merely repeats and compounds the ambiguity; he speaks with a forked tongue in *each* of his languages, alternately addressing and disparaging his audience *du jour*.

rightly identified as a key figure in the professionalization of the sciences and the rise of secularism (perhaps ironically, given his personal beliefs), it is also true that he presents the ideas that will contribute to those developments through the aid of narrative forms originating in the saintly or prophetic traditions. Descartes' reliance on such a mode of presentation provides at least one way of coming to terms with his simultaneous tendencies toward self-aggrandizement and populism. For the figure of the prophet traditionally embodies *both* of these qualities, preaching a gospel of spiritual emancipation which draws attention to our common potential (or common failings), while remaining in the process resolutely unique in virtue of having such an exceptional vocation.

But of course, to read Descartes as a kind of prophet runs contrary to what might be thought of as the "received" view, an understanding of Descartes which places the emphasis squarely on his purported anti-authoritarian tendencies. Descartes, after all, is often credited with breaking the stranglehold of tradition by crediting each individual with the capacity to recognize and discover the truth independently. On this view, Descartes is enormously influential in the development of the objective, impersonal view of research that remains so powerful today. A fundamental axiom of such an approach --enshrined in our practices of "blind review" --is that the philosophical or scientific claims made by *any* individual, regardless of rank or status, have an equal chance of being true or false; at least officially, we claim that an "appeal to authority" constitutes a fallacy of reasoning. If the Newtonian laws of motion are in fact true, on this view, it is certainly not because *Newton* discovered them, but quite the reverse, because in principle *any* of us could have discovered them. For such reasons (and, I think, for others as well), Descartes is decidedly nonplussed to hear from Arnauld that Augustine had employed a *cogito*-style argument similar to Descartes' own on several occasions: "I shall not waste time here by thanking my distinguished critic for bringing in

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<sup>1</sup>In *Saint Augustine and French Classical Thought* [p. 57-67], Nigel Abercrombie provides a detailed review of the relationship between the *cogito* argument in the second *Meditation* and each of the passages in Augustine's writings that could plausibly be considered as a precedent. The most relevant

the authority of St. Augustine to support me” [AT VII 219] is his rather brusque response. For Descartes, Augustine’s anticipation of his own thought neither adds nor subtracts from the evident truth and value of the position, nor would Augustine’s disagreement have given him any reason for pause. It is the position itself which must be assessed, and if it is true, it simply does not matter who has said it, or when.

A saint or a prophet, in contrast, speaks on behalf of an unquestionable authority, presenting us not with hypotheses or interpretations to be debated but with a truth to be pondered, grasped, and lived. Our concern, our decision in the context of prophetic declarations is not with likelihood, reasonableness, or the supporting evidence which adds to the plausibility of the speaker’s claims, but rather with whether or not we are indeed hearing the words of a “true” prophet. This focuses our attention very much on the speaker himself. Where the pronouncements of a secular researcher can and *should* be assessed without reference to the speaker (it is said), the person of the prophet is of ineliminable importance: the genuine prophet speaks only the truth, while the false prophet is entirely pernicious --an agent of the devil. It makes all the difference therefore that we be able to recognize in the speaker the acknowledged signs of a supernatural vocation. When Moses descends from Mount Sinai to deliver the commandments to his people, it is first and foremost *Moses* whom they must assess, not the commandments themselves. If he has heard the words of God, then the commandments are necessarily true --whatever they turn out to mean; if he has not, they are at best irrelevant, and at worst a danger. For though the “truth” or authenticity of the commandments may well be born out in the process of living them, this is a kind of corroboration that can only come about if one is first prepared to accept Moses’ authority and implement his laws; “blind review” of

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passages from Augustine, according to Abercrombie’s inventory, are *De Trinitate*, X.X.14, *De beata vita*, ii.7, *Soliloquia*, II.i.1, and *De libero arbitrio* II.iii.7. Descartes himself does not give us sufficient information to know with any certainty which, if any, of Augustine’s texts he had read, but Abercrombie concludes that it is irrelevant in the end; Descartes’ use of the principle that doubt implies existence is markedly different from the ends for which Augustine employs it in any of the cited texts.

the laws by a body of his peers would make no sense in this context, since it is the self-proclaimed authority of Moses himself that is at issue. One must read *Moses* before reading his laws, searching his life for signs of a special dispensation from God.<sup>i</sup>

In reading Descartes as a prophet, it is the contrast between these two modes of address that I have in mind, in so far as they prescribe radically different degrees of focus on the person of the speaker. And it is *only* this difference; I do not propose to provide a systematic historical examination of Descartes' indebtedness to any specific saints or prophets, though I will make reference to several in what follows. It is the *kind* of speech --its grounding, and the manner in which it positions its audience --that is my concern, not its content, nor Descartes' involvement in the theology which typically undergirds such speech.<sup>36</sup> Even within the confines of this agenda, I do not wish to overstate my thesis. Descartes is clearly not Moses, nor does he present himself as such in any straightforward manner, and while the similarities begin to increase here, it is also true that he is not Augustine or Ignatius of Loyola, both of whom were more proximate points of reference for his work. He is far more ambivalent than any of these authors about how he wants to be heard. But he does borrow --and quite heavily, I think --from the kind of rhetoric that finds its natural home in these writers.

Amélie Rorty has suggested that "the *Meditations* in its final printed form moves us from a world of prefaces addressed to doctors of divinity to a world defined as a community of philosophers and scholars. The meditator's reflective self-transformation from a confused believer to a rational scientific inquirer provides the transition between those two worlds."<sup>37</sup> I am grateful that she has pointed out this curious asymmetry in the text, and it has had a palpable influence on the

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<sup>i</sup>And if we are to trust the tales, such signs are not hard to find; transforming his staff into a snake, making the rivers run red, and parting the Red Sea all testify to Moses connection to the Divinity. Miracles help enormously where credibility is at issue, a point to which I will return towards the end of the present chapter.

development of my own reading, but I am skeptical that the situation is as straightforward as she suggests. Rather than a development (in the *Meditations* or in the *Discourse*), I read Descartes as *continually* involved in both of Rorty's worlds. In his role as "rational scientific inquirer," Descartes insists on the universal and impersonal aspect of his thought; as *all* minds are equal, *anyone* can independently verify his conclusions. In this sense, his *Meditations* constitute an infinitely repeatable experiment for which the *Discourse* serves as a methodological appendix, an explanation and a justification of the procedures that will be used to generate the results. His steps are carefully documented and layed out for the evaluation of the critical eye, and indeed, he actively solicits our investigation of his principles of derivation and of the conclusions thereby achieved. But in another sense, the experiment is most decidedly *not* public or open to inspection, for its data is generated within the privacy of consciousness, and Descartes has done more than anyone in history to close each individual mind off from its neighbours. The primary tool of his analysis is the sensation of "clarity and distinctness;" it is *this* that registers the fact that the decomposition of a complex phenomenon has been carried to its proper conclusion, and that the mind is now confronting "simples." But whatever clarity and distinctness may have arisen within the immediacy of Descartes' own consciousness as he pondered various problems, it does not carry over into its public dissemination. The *Meditations* incorporates a set of objections that are collectively twice as long as the original text, and these are littered with instances of individuals utterly failing to find Descartes' ideas "clear and distinct." And these individuals, we might remember, were hand-picked as the greatest minds of the day, certainly not amateurs, fools, or those unsuited by nature to metaphysical thinking. But when Descartes thus fails to pass an exceptionally well-constituted peer review, he does not for a moment pause to reconsider his claims as a good "scientific inquirer" should. Instead, he invariably assumes that the problem lies not at the level of conception, but rather, in the sphere of communication. Perhaps he has not expressed himself clearly enough, or more typically, perhaps his



illustrious critics are in the end mere captives to tradition and prejudice --like everyone else --and therefore hardly fit to judge his work.

For all that Descartes' name is indelibly associated with skepticism, there is a kind of fundamentalism at work here: Descartes takes his own private sensation of certainty as an absolutely reliable indication of the truth of things, even when others report rather different experiences. Where his physics admits of empirical verification or falsification and is thus a genuinely public program of research, it is hard to imagine what sort of evidence or argument would have struck Descartes as disconfirming his metaphysical insights (rather than simply revealing a flaw in his expression). My point is not that Descartes was monomaniacal and inflexible in his beliefs. There is ample reason to believe that his ideas evolved over time just as much as anyone's, and one assumes that even the hastily dismissed *Objections* must have played a role in this process. But in his public presentation at least, we would never know it; I am not aware of any moment in the published writings where Descartes says "I was wrong, you were right; I have changed my mind accordingly." He speaks always and unflinchingly as one who enjoys a full possession of the truth. Accordingly, he solicits our patience as he attempts to communicate it in various ways, and our rapt and unblinking attention as he does so. But while he asks for our response and corroboration as a good researcher should, he dismisses it when it arrives, for the *enlightened* have nothing to learn from the "all and sundry" whose great privilege it has been to hear the revelation. Like Rousseau's Legislator, Descartes attempts to found a republic of equals, but only by first exempting himself from the commonwealth.

There are two visions of Descartes then: the populist and researcher on one side, and the gifted seer on the other. Contra Rorty, I cannot see an evolution in Descartes' stance. Nor do I see him addressing different audiences in different ways, "preaching" to the masses for instance, while researching with the scholars and pondering with the philosophers; there is no esoteric / exoteric division here that would separate the "deep" text from its surface appearance. Rather, Descartes is

speaking in all manner of ways at once. It is crucial to the success of Descartes' project that he successfully position himself within the context of a prophetic narrative in order to legitimate both the claims he makes for himself and the demands he makes on his readership, even if it is true that these claims often speak quite strongly against such privilege.

My project here is not an attempt at replacing one image of Descartes with another, but rather, the more modest agenda of drawing into prominence a strand of Descartes' self-presentation that is often overshadowed by the more immediately visible image of Descartes-the-scholar. With this accomplished, I would like to suggest that this strain of rhetoric is problematic in Descartes' writing. The autobiographical subject who addresses the reader in the *Meditations* lives on the credit he has advanced himself through the deployment in the *Discourse* of the narrative resources available to a saintly teacher. However, I will argue that he does not fully honour the conventions that typically legitimate this mode of address. And if he does not, there are good reasons for not following him into the existentially dangerous terrain of serious meditation.

## 6) Descartes-as-Prophet:

Not everyone is fit to be a prophet:

*[E]veryone is so full of his own wisdom that we might find as many reformers as heads if permission to institute change... were granted to anyone other than those whom God has set up as sovereigns over his people or those on whom he has bestowed sufficient grace and zeal to be prophets. [AT VI 61]*

Descartes' public debut as a writer occurs in 1637 with the publication of the *Discourse on Method*. Though known for some time already in certain intellectual circles, it is through the *Discourse* that Descartes begins to address himself to the wider world, and as if to acknowledge this fact, he opens his public career with an autobiographical introduction. This in itself is interesting; rather than placing his *work* in the foreground, Descartes chooses instead to introduce *himself*, to tell

us something about the individual who stands behind (or in this case, in front of) the essays that will follow.

It is a bold gesture. Autobiography and memoir are usually reserved as a privilege for the already-famous, and almost always as a task for the *end* rather than the *beginning* of a career.<sup>1</sup> Why should his readership care who he is before he has publicly done anything to command our attention? Compounding the oddity of the situation, the text is --at least officially --published anonymously. It is the autobiography of "someone," but of no one in particular --a man with no name. It is often noted that in spite of its autobiographical appearance (at least in the first chapters), the *Discourse* gives us almost none of the personal detail that we would normally expect in such a genre: there are no references to ancestry, to relationships --in fact, there are virtually no other people *at all* in the *Discourse*, aside from its anonymous author and narrator. And yet, for all of its perplexing anonymity, it remains a kind of autobiography, in so far as it purports to describe at least some aspects of the history of its author rather than simply presenting a set of arguments and conclusions from an impersonal standpoint. If there is something amorphous and ill-defined about the protagonist of the *Discourse*, a figure who emerges in the first pages without any recognizable connection to the world around him, this fact simply echoes a paradoxical insistence on both

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<sup>1</sup>Writing the *Confessions* mid-way through his life, Augustine is an apparent exception to the rule, but the case is not as exceptional as it may at first appear. Though he had yet to compose what are now considered his major works (*The City of God*, *The Trinity*, and the *Confessions* itself), Augustine was already a minor celebrity when he began to compose his autobiography, and, in a sense, it *does* come at the end of one form of his life, conversion to Christianity signalling for him the end of his "worldly" career. It is tempting to read the *Discourse* as similarly documenting a moment of "conversion" from a confused to an enlightened life, with the remaining texts of Descartes' career standing like Augustine's as an unfolding of what was already immanent in that key moment. I will take some steps here towards developing just such a story, but it must be stressed that this would be a story about Descartes' self-presentation in the *Discourse*; it would not by any means be a piece of history or biography.

anonymity and individuality which runs to the core of the Cartesian project.'

Even within the history that Descartes does provide in the *Discourse* --primarily an account of his early education --the detail is extremely sparse. As with Christ, Saint Paul, or Ignatius, we are privy to only the barest details of Descartes' early years. Later intellectual autobiographers like Mill or Russell will typically lay a great deal of stress on the formative educational experiences which ultimately contributed to the development of their own ideas, understanding this biographical history to be a useful tool in explicating their philosophical ideas, whatever other purposes it may have. But while Descartes may well give us a "story" of his thought in the *Discourse*, it is hardly plausible as a *history* of his intellectual evolution; no books are named,<sup>ii</sup> no teachers, and no mentors. To take only the most glaring example, where is Isaac Beeckman in the *Discourse*, a person who we know from independent sources was hugely influential in Descartes' intellectual development? In April of 1619, Descartes had written his early mentor the following flowery tribute: "I shall honour you as the first mover of my studies and their first author. For truly, you alone have roused me from my idleness and recalled to me what I had learned and already almost forgotten... Therefore, if by chance I produce anything of merit, you can rightfully claim all of it as yours" [AT 10:162-63].<sup>38</sup> But in

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Dalia Judovitz puzzles over the same tension: "The modern reader is faced with the problem of explaining Descartes' avowal to remain anonymous [embodied in his maxim, '*he lives well who lives hidden*'], which seems at cross purposes with modern notions of autobiography, conceived as an account of the subject in historical terms" [*Autobiographical Discourse and Critical Praxis in Descartes*, p. 91]. Judovitz reads this tension as instantiating an aspect of Descartes' theoretical agenda; the "autobiography" must "overcome itself" in order to forge an identity between the personal, narrating "I" and the transcendental "I" that is the (universal) subject of knowledge. My own conclusions (which I take to be complementary), concern the grounds for resisting this ambiguous identification.

"Technically, there is one book named in the *Discourse* --Raymond Lully's otherwise forgotten *Ars Magna* --but here the exception proves the rule, for it is presented as an example of a foolish book. The *good* book in the *Discourse* --Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* --cannot be named, and it is introduced not as an influence, but as an example of the dangers of publication and a justification for Descartes' own reticence and secrecy.

spite of this obvious evidence of a profound degree of influence, Beekman is “forgotten” here.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps fitting then that Descartes gives his readers an interpretive option from the outset --the *Discourse* is “a history or, if you prefer, a fable” [AT VI 4] --for the *Discourse* presents an entirely fabulous character who has gained absolutely nothing from his interaction with the outside world.

But while Descartes may be silent about his origins and influences, he is quick to establish that he was at least as clever and accomplished as the most talented of his unnamed peers:

I was at one of the most famous schools in Europe, where I thought there must be learned men if they existed anywhere on earth. There I had *learned everything* that the others were learning; moreover, *not content* with the subjects they taught us, I had gone through *all the books* that fell into my hands concerning the subjects that are considered most abstruse and unusual. At the same time, I knew how others judged me, and I saw that they did not regard me as inferior to my fellow students, even though several of them were already destined to take the place of our teachers [AT VI 5, italics mine]

We are not told exactly *what* Descartes learned, much less from whom, but he finds it appropriate to insist that he had readily mastered the standard curriculum. If Descartes is moving towards establishing himself as an exile, an outsider (like all prophets), he wants it to be clear that his is a *voluntary* exile: he is no mere ignorant reactionary, but an informed and lucid exegete of the old tradition." For it is this insistence on academic credibility within the old regime that adds weight to the subsequent claim that it is empty, that generations of mere rule-following and rule-accumulation

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<sup>1</sup>John Cole suggests that “it is the most serious shortcoming of the *Discourse* as an intellectual autobiography that it effectively obliterates this formative friendship, for it was Beekman who first inspired his more gifted friend with a new way of mathematical-physical thinking and who first exhorted him to write books.” [*Olympian Dreams*, p. 90]

“How very different is Montaigne’s stance, fifty years earlier. In his own “discourse on method” (“*On the Education of Children*”), Montaigne also rejects Aristotle and the Scholastics: “I know that there is a science of medicine, one of jurisprudence, and four divisions of mathematics, and also roughly what their purposes are. I know too, perhaps, how much the sciences in general have contributed to our lives. But as for plunging any deeper, or for biting my nails over the study of Aristotle, the monarch of modern learning, or stoutly pursuing any particular branch of knowledge, that I have never done...There is no child in the middle forms who cannot lay claim to more learning than I, who am incapable of examining him in his first lessons.” But this self-effacement subtly shifts into a critique of the practical value of the scholastic program as insistent as Descartes’ own: “At least I cannot do so in due form and, if I must, [I] am compelled... to pick out some matter of general interest, and to judge his natural understanding by that; to give him a lesson, in fact, that is as strange to him as his lessons are to me.” [1:26, p. 49 in Cohen].

have enervated whatever spirit may once have animated the tradition. While allowing that other philosophers have sometimes given voice to the noblest of sentiments and expressed these with a style and flair far beyond Descartes' own meagre abilities (the denial of rhetorical prowess being perhaps the most ubiquitous of all rhetorical tropes), he concludes the review of his early education with a summary dismissal: the primary value of studying such absurdities is "to know their true value and guard against being deceived by them" [AT VI6]. Again, we are presented with no specific information to corroborate the claim. much less are we invited to peruse these texts ourselves in order to form an independent opinion. It is precisely this omission that infuriated Vico when --ninety years later --he decided to write his own philosophical autobiography in reaction to Descartes:

We shall not here feign what René Descartes craftily feigned as to the method of his studies simply in order to exalt his own philosophy and mathematics and degrade all the other studies included in divine and human erudition. Rather, with the candour proper to a historian, we shall narrate plainly and step by step the entire series of Vico's studies, in order that the proper and natural causes of his particular development as a man of letters may be known.<sup>39</sup>

I sympathize with Vico's complaint, but I'm not sure that it tells against Descartes' project in the *Discourse*. for I doubt that Descartes would have described his task as that of a historian. The history that *is* present in the *Discourse* is there in order to commend the method that Descartes teaches, but since this method is designed to replace the standard curriculum, it would be pointless for Descartes to provide a comprehensive history of his studies. Moreover, like Augustine before him (in *On Christian Doctrine*, a pedagogical text), Descartes seems reluctant to have his disciples read the "pagan" texts that were instrumental in his own intellectual development: both are determined to present themselves not as the *products* of these texts, but as the *cure* for the illnesses they manifest. And after Descartes has discovered and presented the truth, there is no need --and nothing to be gained --by the reader's contracting the same illnesses.'

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<sup>39</sup>Moreover, Descartes seems to treat the act of presenting a view in writing as a sign of respect, already an acknowledgment of its at least partial legitimacy. He will frequently refuse to name or discuss views which he deigns foolish, lest the mere mention of such views, even in the course of refuting them,

Once he has first mastered, then “entirely abandoned the study of letters.” Descartes turns to “the great book of the world,... travelling, visiting courts and armies, mixing with people of diverse temperaments and ranks, gathering various experiences... so as to derive some profit from it” [AT VI 9]. As before, it is a classic trope --the wanderer as the seeker-of-truth. Beyond the saints and prophets, one thinks here of Socrates in the marketplace, or of Diogenes with his lantern. searching for an honest man. And Augustine’s *Confessions*, of course, is entirely constructed around the motif of the search, each geographical move signalling another failed attempt to find the truth that will satisfy. But Descartes fares no better than Augustine, no better with the book of the world than he did with the books of the classroom.<sup>1</sup> He rapidly discovers that the general populace will comfortably endorse beliefs which are, if anything, even more “extravagant and ridiculous” than the teachings of ancients, concluding laconically that “the greatest benefit I derived from these observations was [to learn]... not to believe too firmly in anything of which I had been persuaded only by example and custom” [AT VI 10]. And so, both past and present are rejected in the *Discourse* as no more than an endless proliferation of lies and illusions.

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throw unnecessary temptations in the way of the reader: “I do not wish to reply to such arguments here, if only to avoid having to state them” [AT VII 9]. Of course, even if this caution were warranted in some circumstances, it also sanctions a great deal of arbitrary selectivity; Descartes gets to decide on our behalf what constitutes a *serious* claim, a flexibility of which he takes full advantage in the *Replies* to the *Meditations*.

<sup>1</sup>In *Structure and Meaning in St. Augustine's Confessions*, Frederick Crosson has made the intriguing suggestion that Augustine’s geographical trajectory in the *Confessions* --from Africa into the “cultured” world of Europe and back again --represents a move into the world of false ideas, false teachers, and false consciousness, followed by the “home-coming” return to God and to the self. Descartes’ geographical movements in the *Discourse* do not so neatly parallel his proximity to the truth, but each time he repeats the process of tentatively moving out into the world and then retreating once more into private sanctuary. seclusion is always associated with insight and discovery. It is in fact only through behaving as an anonymous “spectator rather than an actor” in the world [AT VI 28-30] that Descartes seems able to remain in public without compromising his absolute self-certainty. a condition he believed he had met in Holland. Writing to Balzac, he states: “Everyday I go out strolling among the throngs of a great people with as much freedom and ease as you have in the paths of... your estate, and I only heed the men I see with the attention that I would give the trees in your forest or the animals that graze among them” [May 5, 1631].

The significance of this moment in Descartes' text cannot be overestimated. Just as the *Meditations* begins with a hyperbolic purging of the meditator's personal inventory of beliefs, the *Discourse* begins with a comprehensive dismissal of history and precedent. In each case, the ground is cleared of any and all figures who might distract us from the person of the narrator. In the second chapter of the *Meditations*, a ghostly *cogito* emerges from the rubble as the only certainty after the levelling action of hyperbolic doubt, while Descartes himself --or at least, the anonymous "Descartes" of the *Discourse* --stands alone in the second chapter of the *Discourse* as the only figure searching for truth. It is not simply that the narrator in each case places himself resolutely in the foreground: there is no longer any background *behind* him. Only "Descartes," alone in the comedy of a world gone mad.

But all of this has been prelude. We may know very little about the narrator, but we do know from the title of the work that he has promised to reveal a "method for rightly conducting one's reason and seeking truth in the sciences," and so far we have seen only error and obfuscation. Up to this point, the narrator has been a kind of Socrates, wiser than others solely in virtue of knowing that he knows nothing while those around him fail to see their own ignorance. But Socrates sought after the truth in the market-square, a product of mutual recognition, while Descartes is silent, solitary, and inward.<sup>1</sup> With our attention focussed squarely and exclusively on the narrator, Descartes at last relates the moment of revelation. The cadences of hagiography are hardly an imposition:

...on that cold and distant November in 1619, alone in a stove-heated room in the midst of a war --a war whose importance pales and fades next to what is here occurring -- Descartes begins to speak the truth. Thrown back on himself, "forced to become [his] own guide" [AT VI 16], Descartes

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<sup>1</sup>There is a fascinating irony in the contrast that draws into focus just how much these self-descriptions are a matter of "fabulous" representation: the officially garrulous and gregarious Socrates of course never wrote a word, while the solitary and brooding Descartes published many of his works, preserved much of the rest, and responded --in his fashion --to many of the leading academics of his day.



converses with his own soul. With no sage or scroll, teacher or text to mark the way, he speaks to himself of himself, and it is here that he finds the method which will unlock the mysteries of the self and its universe.

### **7) Adapting The Story --The Self-Made Saint:**

Such is one story, but is it the right one? It is hard to know how to read the narrative at this point. On the one hand, Donald Cress may exaggerate the point somewhat by interpolating “a blinding flash”<sup>40</sup> of insight into his gloss on the text, but he is certainly not drawing this line of interpretation out of thin air; all of the traditional narrative cues have been given which suggest that the “stove-heated room” reverie is akin to a moment of religious revelation. But on the other hand, Descartes goes on to describe in the *Discourse* a lengthy process of cultivating and developing the insights gained on this occasion. There are nine years, he tells us, between this significant day in his life and the date at which he began to address himself to the questions of first philosophy, and another eight years between this new beginning and the publication of the *Discourse*. Rather than experiencing a kind of *revelation* --a “blinding flash” as it were --this protracted period of latency appears to locate the event(s) of 1619 as more of a “turning point” in his life, a moment during which he may have experienced an initial, but still inchoate awareness of an approach to the sciences which differed from that which he had previously been employing.

An examination of Descartes’ writings from this time period sheds an interesting light on the historical facts of the situation, but for my purposes, such information must be used judiciously. My interest here, as in other chapters, is with the act of public self-presentation in writing, rather than with constructing a biographical portrait, and these agendas prescribe very different protocols for the use of sources. The *fact* of historical distortion (where it occurs) is important for my concerns, but less in order to “correct” the autobiography as a historian might seek to, than as a means of more

readily locating those aspects of the textual presentation which must have had particular importance to the author. Thus, I have already mentioned the absence of Isaac Beeckman from the *Discourse*, not in order to “set the record straight,” or to accuse Descartes of deception, but rather as a means of underlining the general lack of other figures in the *Discourse*’s self-portrait.

When considering the ambiguity of Descartes’ presentation of the “stove-heated room” tableau, which can seemingly be read in either a religious or a secular modality, there is a similarly illuminating omission. For as we know from Descartes’ writings from roughly this time-period (preserved, thankfully, by Leibniz and in Baillet’s biography), Descartes experienced what he took to be a highly significant series of three dreams in his room in 1619, dreams which do not appear at all when the *Discourse* recounts the day eighteen years later.<sup>41</sup> My interest here is not principally with the content of the dreams themselves, but rather with Descartes’ interpretation of their meaning and significance. At the time, Descartes understood the dreams as reflecting and clarifying the content of the method he was developing, and as validating his then-nascent sense of destiny. There is perhaps nothing particularly remarkable in this as far as it goes, for one need not be a card-carrying Freudian to suppose that we might register the anxieties and expectations that accompany our day’s work when we repeat it in a night of dreaming. What makes *Descartes*’ dreams noteworthy is the surprising fact that Descartes was moved to write them down. As Leon Roth notes, “it is of especial significance that Descartes himself took the whole set of dreams so earnestly as to commit them to writing and to repudiate seriously the obvious suggestion that his ‘enthusiasm’ was due to a previous jollification [drunkenness];”<sup>42</sup> this suggests a far more than passing curiosity. Solidifying this impression, Descartes records that on waking, he immediately made a pledge to visit the shrine of the Virgin Mary at Loretto as a gesture of gratitude. Now this “pledge” may in itself be read in a number of ways, but it begins to suggest quite powerfully that the Descartes of 1619 credited the Deity with inspiring his new sense of vocation, if not quite his discovery of the method itself. At the

very least, it makes it enormously unlikely that when composing the *Discourse* in 1637, Descartes had simply “forgotten” this aspect of his experience eighteen years earlier; if the dreams are not present in the *Discourse*, it is almost certainly because Descartes does not want them to be there.

In their place is the much more subdued reference to “speaking with his soul.” Obviously we can never know his reasons for this omission with any certainty, but it is clear that through suppressing all mention of the dreams he more sharply designates his unaided reason as the sole source of his philosophy: it would have been quite remarkable to find the great philosopher of clarity crediting to the occult illuminations of the dream-world “the foundations of a wonderful science.” whether we construe such dreams as issuing from the hazy operations of an unfocused mind, from the unconscious, or from the gods. And indeed, many of Descartes’ most important readers have found the presence of the dreams in Descartes’ life more than a little embarrassing. Malebranche complained that Baillet’s biography, in which the dreams were made public, was “bound to render him and his philosophy ridiculous.”<sup>43</sup> But in Maritain’s influential reading, the dreams do not make Descartes appear at all ridiculous, but rather they become very serious grounds for criticizing the entirety of the Cartesian project; in these dreams Maritain finds a distilled and crystallized image of what he calls Descartes’ “angelic ambitions” --his desire to attain an absolutely pure and self-certifyingly true form of knowledge without the corrupting influence of the senses.<sup>1</sup> For a good Thomist like Maritain, this is a mad hubris that leads to a grave epistemological error, and even for a non-Thomist like myself, there is cause to wonder at Descartes’ motivations. But as fascinating as I find Maritain’s engaging and illuminating polemic, my interest in the dreams concerns the feature that he does not address, namely, the fact that Descartes suppressed in the *Discourse* the very dreams

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<sup>1</sup>Maritain’s wonderful phrase, “angelic ambition,” is meant to capture the salient aspects of Descartes’ view of reason --“its immediate knowledge of ‘simple natures,’ its innate ideas, its atoms of evidence, its claim to replace syllogism with a succession of discontinuous intuitions, and its quasi-Platonic attempt to reduce demonstration to the transcendental unity of a non-discursive intellection.” [“The Dream of Descartes,” p. 24]

that, as Maritain has so ably demonstrated, were hugely important to him at the time of their occurrence. In the reconsidered history of the *Discourse*, it is clear that while God may have favoured Descartes with remarkable mental acuity and the “grace and zeal” required for a rather special vocation, He certainly has not simply handed Descartes the truth in a moment of revelation, even though this would fit somewhat more easily into the conventional conversion story.

This movement toward self-sufficiency marks a breach of the terms of prophetic self-presentation, for in the stories of Augustine and Ignatius (predecessors who would have been very much on Descartes’ mind), the truth is *received* rather than *found*. For each of these writers, the moment of despair was simultaneously a moment of deep humility in which the self recognizes its total dependence on resources that lie outside of itself. This humility is in turn *preparatory*: the grace of God intervenes when the individual has reached and recognized the limits of fallen human nature. But in retelling the story, Descartes maintains a position of absolute autonomy. Shut up alone in his stove-heated room, he does not receive a gift from the Holy Spirit; he converses only with his own soul, and it is here that he discovers the truths which constitute his secularized self-illumination.'

This pattern is even more vividly present in the *Meditations*, where the role of God undergoes a radical deflation. Where Augustine had insisted that there is no truth or access to truth without the sustaining grace of God, Descartes is satisfied with a God who merely serves to *guarantee*, not *oversee*, the validity of our reasoning processes. As long as reason is satisfied that God must exist (and that this God is not a deceiver), the Deity is summarily relieved of the necessity of any ongoing involvement in the production of truth and certainty. As Gary Hatfield comments,

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'Curiously, Descartes comes very close here to repeating the “Pelagian heresy” which occupied the last fifteen years of Augustine’s life. Denying the reality of original sin, Pelagius had argued for the perfectibility of the individual in *this* life through the cultivation of rational self-control, an optimism (or an arrogance) which Augustine found heretical and abhorrent.

“the autonomy of the meditator is not diminished by his conclusion that the trustworthiness of the natural light derives from its source in God... for that conclusion itself is derived under the aegis of the natural light.... As befits one whose aim was to secure an independent stance for natural science, Descartes never makes the search after truth dependent upon the grace of God.”<sup>44i</sup>

There is a second and parallel difference as well. I have said that for the traditional prophet, illumination comes from outside. Now God himself is obviously the final source of illumination for any potential saint, but the act of reading is also of significant importance in the transformative moment; the written histories contained in the Scriptures or the lives of the saints are almost inevitably crucial in redemption narratives, but they play no part at all in Descartes' account. Augustine, as I have described in chapter one, explicitly experienced conversion through the mediation of a host of such narratives: Paul, Anthony, Ponticianus, and the lives of two unnamed Roman guards, each of which pointed toward the voice in the garden --*tolle, lege*; take and read. Ignatius, similarly, is set on the correct path when he puts down his beloved romances and tales of chivalry in favour of the lives of the saints.<sup>ii</sup> Typically, in rejecting the history of “worldly” wisdom, a space is opened for an alternate, spiritual history, marked out as an endless repetition of the action of salvation, rather than as a linear development, with the whole of Christian history repeated and condensed in the moment during which each new soul is saved. This salvific history stands as the

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<sup>i</sup>John Cottingham is not the only one to see in this the beginnings of 18th century deism: “the general conception of the deity in Descartes is an austerely impersonal one (prefiguring the deistic outlook of the following century): God’s nature is beyond anything we can grasp, and what purposes he may have are forever locked up ‘in the inscrutable abyss of his wisdom’” [*Philosophy and the Good Life*, p.69-70].

<sup>ii</sup>See chapters 4-8 of Loyola’s *Reminiscences* for his description of the role of reading in his conversion. Unlike Augustine, Ignatius does not decisively reject pagan reading for Christian texts, but rather describes himself as alternating between the two types of books indiscriminately at first, only gradually feeling the desire to imitate the lives of the saints beginning to overwhelm his interest in novels of chivalry: “Our Lord was helping him, causing other thoughts, which were born of the things he was reading... For, while reading the lives of Our Lord and the saints, he would stop to think, reasoning with himself: ‘how would it be, if I did this which St. Francis did, and this which St. Dominic did?’” [*Reminiscences*, p.15].

“true” time over and against the directionless march of worldly history, and while it remains invisible to the senses, it is recorded --and even enacted --in the literary histories which contain the exemplars and models for imitation. But Descartes does not exchange one history for another; he does not forsake the fools of the world in order to enter into communion with the saints. “Forced to become [his] own guide” [AT VI 16], he finds the way to the truth “within, through conversing with himself about his own thoughts; he needs no outside resources to pull himself out of the illusions and prejudices of the world. The meaning of his third and most important dream, in which Descartes imagines a completed book of the sciences, is not take and read, but take and *write*. And so, the moment of existential despair which bothers me so much begins to look suspiciously histrionic, the “whirlpool” of self-doubt in the *Meditations* dissipated all too readily, and hardly appearing at all in the *Discourse*.

Part of Augustine’s difficulty in conversion, he tells us, lay in the offense to his pride of following where so many others had gone already --particularly, following where even the fools had gone. Recognizing that his pride was working against him, he attempted to turn it on itself:

I turned to Alypius and cried out to him: “What is the trouble with us? What is this?... The unlearned rise up and take heaven by storm, and we, with all our erudition but empty of heart, see how we wallow in flesh and blood! Are we ashamed to follow, because they have gone on ahead of us? Is it no shame to us not even to follow them?” [8:19]

But there is no one who has “gone on ahead” of Descartes. His revelation is mediated neither by the involvement of grace from above nor by the influence of literary precedent; it is instead the self-caused unfolding of his own immanent potential. He will accept --when forced into it by his commentators --that others such as Augustine himself had already reached many of the same conclusions. And why not --the truth is, after all, universal and simple, and it merely adds luster to Descartes’ own statement of it if other great minds are in agreement. But what he will *not* compromise on is his absolute independence in finding it [AT VI 77]. While the *Meditations* are meant to facilitate *our* access to the truth, there is no text or teacher who served this role for

Descartes. Reading the text, *I* may well feel like an Augustine, put off by the thought of following another's lead, but Descartes' *ex nihilo* discovery of the truth exempts him from any such concerns. In reading Descartes, we are directed neither above him to God, nor through him towards a history. The focus of attention remains always on "Descartes" himself, whoever he might be.

### **8) Privacy and Publication:**

Like all good prophets, Descartes presents himself as a reluctant preacher. Plato had famously suggested in the *Republic* that we should be skeptical of seers who seem too willing to promote themselves as such, since the most natural sign of insight is a desire to retire into quiet contemplation.<sup>1</sup> Descartes' allegiance to this maxim seems almost over-determined. He has, he assures us, no desire whatsoever for the fame or glory that would follow if he were to publish.<sup>2</sup> Nor does he need us to corroborate his insights, since (in spite of some initial and rather rote disclaimers) he is already quite certain that he possesses the truth. And though --given his research interests --he is at times tempted by the prospect of enlisting "the best minds to try to make further progress by helping with the necessary observations" [AT VI 63], "many occasions for wasting time would undoubtedly arise" [AT VI 68] if he had to respond to his readership.

In fact, the entire sixth chapter of the *Discourse* is a rambling internal monologue on whether or not it is worth the trouble of publishing at all, and Descartes presents himself as far from convinced that it is as he vacillates back and forth. And yet, whatever he may say here about his reservations, he is caught in a performative contradiction; he is voicing these sentiments in a work which --as we read it --*has* been published. In one sense then, the discussion is all strangely

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<sup>1</sup>*Republic*, book VII, 520c. Augustine, for instance, had desperately wanted to spend his time in contemplative retreat at Milan [*Confessions*, 6:14], and even post-conversion, he was far from eager to be enlisted into the priesthood.

<sup>2</sup>Descartes almost certainly "protests too much" on this count, repeating the claim that he is not concerned with fame at least four times in the *Discourse* alone.

irrelevant; nothing hangs on this internal debate. in so far as we know that no matter how frequently he changes his mind, he must ultimately conclude in favour of publishing the book we are currently reading. The discussion of *whether* to publish is in fact a discussion of *why* he is publishing; he is not so much recording the history of his reasoning on this question --in spite of the pretense --as he is guiding the reader into approaching his texts in the correct manner. For like each of the writers I am addressing, Descartes does not want simply to send his books out into the world to fare as they might, allowing *us* to make of each what we will. Instead, he is engaged at this point in the impossible (if completely understandable) task of attempting to control the manner in which his work will be received, guiding or even coercing us --and where is the line? --into the dispositional state that he believes will produce his desired outcome. Frustrated by the unpredictable autonomy of the reader, Descartes does whatever he can to delimit it.

It is the faintly prophetic cadences in his rhetoric as much as anything that furthers this agenda and helps to minimize his concerns. For in virtue of speaking to us as prophet rather than as scientist, Descartes can reverse the order of dependence that would typically arise from publication. While *prima facie*, the act of publishing suggest that the writer *wants* something from the reader --a response of some kind, a reaction --Descartes assures us that he personally has nothing to gain from the world through publication; he can achieve most of the benefits which accrue from a public readership simply through writing "as-if" to publish, simulating internally what would otherwise have been a public debate [AT VI 66]. And since he has found this ingenious way to get what he needs from us without soliciting our actual involvement, we are of no further use to him, and our reactions to his texts are therefore of no consequence.

Instead, it is *we* who will suffer if we read him poorly, and posterity that would suffer if he remained silent. The method which has come to him alone in the stove-heated room, Descartes insists, has already generated such wonderful results that he is *obligated* to overcome his natural reticence and share it with the world. And here Descartes repeats the Platonic model again.



returning to the cave once more after having seen the truth. For while the enlightened intellect may crave solitude and contemplation, the perfected soul is simultaneously imbued with the “generosity” which issues in virtuous action. Like the suffering Buddha remaining among us after his enlightenment, Descartes presents himself as entirely self-sufficient but morally obligated (against his purely private instincts) to reveal the truth to a population mired in illusion and false belief. Not *his* welfare, but *ours* is at stake, his own enlightenment having been accomplished already. One does not have to listen too hard to hear the religious cadences as he describes the essays appended to the *Discourse*:

I believed that I could not keep them secret without sinning gravely against the law which obliges us to do all in our power to secure the general welfare of mankind. For they opened my eyes to the possibility of gaining knowledge which would be very useful in life, and of discovering a practical philosophy which might replace the speculative philosophy taught in the schools. Through this philosophy we could know the power and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies in our environment... and thus make ourselves, as it were, the lords and masters of nature. [AT VI 61-62]

The content of the vision has changed decidedly, but in this passage Descartes is every inch the prophet, seer, or saint; his eyes having been opened by a vision, he is obliged to take command of “the general welfare of mankind.” promising us that in following where he leads we will gain undreamt of power over the very elements --fire, water, air, the stars... --becoming virtually like gods ourselves. “lords and masters of nature.”<sup>i</sup> Running alongside the story in which Descartes-the-scientist dreams of instituting a team of cooperative researchers --and again, I do not deny for a moment that this story is certainly “there” --there is also a narrative in which Descartes-the-Master offers up the (previously) occult practices that promise enlightenment to a select populace of disciples.

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<sup>i</sup>This, curiously, is precisely what the serpent in the garden once promised Eve: truth as power and control rather than truth as salvation. It seems to have been a common heresy in the 17th century, as instanced in Francis Bacon’s claim that “the true and lawful good of the sciences is none other than this: that human life should be endowed with new discoveries and powers.” [*Novum Organum*, 1:81]

### 9) The Prerogatives of the Prophet:

It is the prerogative of the prophet to impose demands on an audience that would seem outlandish and presumptuous if they were made by a normal person. Some of his demands, it is true, fall within the scope of what a researcher might ask for, then as now. Descartes' readers are charged in the *Discourse* with applying his method to other fields of inquiry, filling in the details which Descartes as a finite being does not have the time to get to. At the same time, he sounds thoroughly modern in suggesting somewhat elliptically that his readers might feel motivated to contribute towards his research expenses. And most importantly, Descartes' faithful readers are asked to further the advancement of the sciences through helping to "prevent unwelcome visitors from wasting his time" [AT VI 73]. All of which is to say, he wants a permanent sabbatical, and a good supply of research assistants.

But while this assignment of duties to the readers may seem vaguely presumptuous, it is, in the end, only the standard request for time and money, very much the sort of thing for which we still file grant applications today. It is in the *Meditations* that Descartes makes the fullest and most problematic use of the credit he has advanced himself through the *Discourse*. In both the preface to the reader and again in the *Replies*, Descartes is quite insistent, as I have already noted, that the *Meditations* be read in the appropriate manner. "I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions" [AT VII 9]. Nor is this simply "good advice," appropriate for any serious philosophical reading. The *Meditations* themselves, Descartes tells us, have been composed quite consciously in a particular style, such that they *must* be addressed in this manner, a fact indicated by the very title of the work:

This is why I wrote "*Meditations*" rather than "Disputations", as the philosophers have done, or "Theorems and Problems", as the geometers would have done. In so doing, I wanted to make it clear that I would have nothing to do with anyone who was not willing to join me in meditating and giving the subject attentive consideration [AT VII 157].

This style, which requires these unusual protocols of reading, is what Descartes calls the “analytic” as opposed to the “synthetic” or “geometrical” approach, and though the precise distinction between the two methods is notoriously slippery, the characteristic differences which concern me here are fairly accessible. The hallmark of analysis, as Descartes uses the term, is “attention:” over and over again, Descartes insists that we must be *attentive* to each moment in the text if we are to read it successfully. But of course, this is uninformative as it stands, since presumably we will get more out of any text if we are “attentive” as we read it. It is the contrasting term that begins to specify what is being asked of us, for as often as he insists on an *attentive* reader, Descartes angrily denounces the *argumentative* reader. By way of illustration, Descartes suggests that the philosophers of his day have long since lost their ability to engage an analytic text because they are incessantly preoccupied with finding fault in all they read, disagreeing merely sportively, or for the sake of demonstrating their intellectual dexterity.

But while Descartes’ frustration with his contemporaries on this count is all too understandable, it seems to fit uneasily within his particular project, for how can the great philosopher of doubt, the writer who has pushed skepticism to such extraordinary lengths, censure his readership for critically assessing his various claims with every tool at their disposal? The reason he gives Mersenne in the *Replies* is that the *Meditations* constitute a special case. Unlike other texts, his book already contains within itself the highest possible degree of doubt:

the arguments in respect of which I ask my readers to be attentive and not argumentative are not of a kind which could possibly divert their attention from any other arguments which have even the slightest chance of containing more truth than is to be found in mine. Now my exposition includes the highest level of doubt about everything, and I cannot recommend too strongly that each item should be scrutinized with the utmost care, so that absolutely nothing is accepted unless it has been so clearly and distinctly perceived that we cannot but assent to it. By contrast, the only opinions *I want to steer my reader’s minds* away from are those which they have never properly examined -- opinions which they have acquired not on the basis of any firm reasoning but from the senses alone. So in my view no one who *restricts his considerations to my propositions* can possibly think he runs a greater risk of error than he would incur by turning his mind

away and directing it to other propositions which are in a sense opposed to mine and which reveal only darkness [AT VII 158, emphasis added].

This is certainly a bold and presumptuous explanation; the caution and reserve, which would normally be the responsibility of the reader, have been annexed by Descartes, who paternalistically anticipates on our behalf the range of questions and concerns appropriate at each juncture in his text. We are allowed to doubt still, but only within the confines of his program, and within this program. Descartes will “steer” our minds and “restrict” our considerations. For to read an analytically composed text requires a deep personal immersion in the performance enacted therein, and this prohibits employing the text as an instrument for the realization of purposes which are extrinsic to that of the text itself; we must remain in lock-step with the meditator throughout the journey.<sup>1</sup> And here, “attention” reveals itself to be not only or not merely a matter of concentration and focus, but more importantly, a species of *commitment*. While a scientist is free to suggest that his or her results will only be accessible to those with the requisite technical expertise, to ask for commitment requires addressing one’s audience in an altogether different register.

The need for this attention-cum-commitment from the reader is a reflection of the fact that the *Meditations* are not constructed as a demonstration of the truth, as would be the case in a geometrical demonstration. For while it is true that the text “contains” many specific arguments, the merit of the analytic method does not lie in its argumentative rigour but in its transformative

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<sup>1</sup>It is true that Descartes attempts in this passage to minimize the apparent severity of these restrictions by presenting them as entirely natural and reasonable; only our sense-derived and inherited wisdom is ruled out *a priori* he tells us. But --to form yet another Cartesian circle --it is the argumentative content of the *Meditations* itself (particularly the end of the second meditation with its famous piece of wax) which is meant to justify the deprecation of empirical knowledge, and so Descartes is in no position to rule out such cognitive resources at the outset of his text. The methodological constraints he places on the reader are supported here by content derived *through the application of that method itself*, and while in practice it may be impossible to derive methodological principles in any other way, this inevitability hardly makes the results “neutral” or natural. There is a veneer of justification going on here, but the management of our reading-processes is in the end simply a right which Descartes has advanced himself, the prophetic authority of his voice masquerading as argument.

potential. The analytic text does not *present* the truth (at least, it does not do so *qua* analytic text),<sup>i</sup> but solicits the mental attitudes on the part of a cooperative and committed reader that will cause that reader to spontaneously generate the truth from within: it does not seek so much to force agreement as to trigger an internal recognition of the truth. To return once more to an earlier theme, it is not just *persuasio*, but *persuasio* and *assensio* together that Descartes wants, and this will only arise if the reader has a kind of existential commitment to the exercise embodied in the text. But “synthesis” holds the truth at arm’s length from the reader --it presents an *argument* rather than providing an *experience* --and thus the persuasion it generates may not immediately engage a wilful assent. Analysis is meant to overcome this defect through engaging the *whole* mind --understanding and will --in the act of reading, and as Gary Hatfield notes, this ties Descartes’ *Meditations* very much to the tradition of religious meditational literature:

Although works of religious meditation may make use of argument, their purpose is not to present a continuous argument that compels by force of logic; they serve as guidebooks to prepare the soul for illumination from above or within. Similarly, Descartes’ *Meditations* are not so much a continuous argument as a set of instructions for uncovering the truths that lie immanent in the intellect.... Descartes’ work is constructed in such a way that the force of such conclusions depends on the ability of the meditative exercises to evoke in the reader certain experiences that bring their own content and carry their own conviction.<sup>45</sup>

### 10) The Magic of Composition:

There is an ambiguity in Hatfield’s summary which stems from a corresponding ambiguity in Descartes’ own position: the text is written “in such a way” as to “evoke in the reader certain experiences.” Hatfield says, but what precisely *is* this way? What is it that gives the text this magical property of catalyzing specific, revelatory experiences? In traditional meditational literature, the meditational program is grounded in the faith that God will gracefully intervene at the appropriate

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<sup>i</sup>Descartes hedges his bets here, for while he is explicit that the *Meditations* have been composed “in the analytic style,” he also insists on more than a few occasions that his “proofs” are “quite certain and evident,” and “leave no room for the possibility that the human mind will ever discover better ones” [AT VI 4]. He seemingly wants the benefits of each method without being entirely willing to accept the liabilities of either.

moment to supplement the efforts of the meditator. Each of the *Meditations* in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, for instance, begins in prayer, the exercitant petitioning God to grant what is needed for that day's contemplation, whether this be a specific mood, the power to recall one's sins, or the intellectual fortitude necessary to draw the appropriate insight out of the meditation. This "preparation," in turn, helps to put the meditator into the dispositional state which --for lack of a better explanation --is "pleasing to God" and therefore the precondition for grace. But within the tradition, this is most decidedly *not* construed as any kind of "magic;" it is not --on pain of heresy -- a matter of forcing God's hand through engaging in a special series of rites, for such would introduce an unacceptable limitation on Divine omnipotence. Instead, it reflects an implicit or explicit contract; God, whose trustworthiness is inviolate, has promised to respond to those who petition with this kind of sincerity and humility.

Having secularized the tradition however, Descartes cannot appeal (directly) to God's reliable intervention in order to explain the effectiveness of the program. In fact, behind the technical verbiage in which "analysis" is opposed to "synthesis," this uniquely potent process of reading begins to look more than a little magical again: it is perhaps not altogether irrelevant when Descartes claims that the ancients reserved the method of analysis as a kind of "sacred mystery" [AT VI 156]. For even assuming that each one of us *does* have the truth, buried deep within, it is hard to see how a set of words in a text will necessarily release it, no matter how attentively the words are read, and no matter how committed the reader. And it is still harder to know how Descartes himself has arrived at the appropriate incantation without Divine assistance, for --contra Socrates --it is one thing to *know* the truth and quite another to know how to *communicate* it. The right to demand commitment to even the confines of a restricted program relies on two presumptions, not one: the speaker must be in possession of the truth, but equally, this speaker must know how to produce an appreciation of this truth in the reader.

As near as I can tell, there is no causal story that circumvents these concerns while still explaining how the textual *Meditations* manage to generate an experience of the truth. While Descartes' relentless experimentation with different styles of composition suggests that he was all too aware of a deep conceptual problem here, he typically lashes out at his readers rather than questioning the inevitable limitations on his powers of expression. Peter France summarizes the resulting state of affairs:

Descartes' first and constant notion of persuasion is one in which he will state the truth firmly and clearly and everyone will agree. Although he makes suitable protestations of modesty...his confidence that he is right is virtually unshakeable. Nor is he in the least worried when Regius points out to him that any madman can claim that his ideas are perfectly clear; he simply returns the accusations to Regius. Frequently he refuses to believe that anyone can in good faith refuse to see and accept the truth of his ideas.<sup>46</sup>

But to fantasize about a "perfect reader" --defined in the end simply as one who agrees --and to berate the others through crude psychological attack is to elide the issue: the process through which the revelation is represented textually, then subsequently translated into the truth once more by a reader remains hidden away, unaddressed.<sup>1</sup>

To replace this explanation, Descartes relies on what is essentially a first-person testimonial: it is he *himself* who first underwent this series of meditations, many years ago, in exactly the form in which we read them today. In the preface, Descartes claims to be setting "out the very thoughts which *have* enabled me, in my view, to arrive at a certain and evident knowledge of the truth" [AT VII 10], and this is entirely consonant with what he has to say about the method of analysis. One of the great virtues of the analytic method is that it is meant to reproduce in the attentive reader the precise history of the writer's thoughts: it "shows the true way by means of which the thing in

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<sup>1</sup>In light of this, I tend to understand Descartes' routine attacks on rhetoric as an expression of his frustration over the need for rhetoric; there simply is no way to speak the truth so "plainly" and "directly" that even the idiosyncrasy and externality of the other cannot bring about a slippage of meaning in the process of communication. The "problem of other minds" here is not so much with whether they exist as with whether they are listening, and what they might be thinking. [I will explore the problems of searching for a "perfect language" more fully in the following chapter, as they pertain to Rousseau, and the problem of the "perfect reader" as it appears in Nietzsche's texts in chapter four].

question *was* discovered” [AT VII 155]. It is Descartes himself then --not God --who stands credit for the *Meditations*. and it is the fact that *he* has found the truth through this precise series of thoughts that advertises the method to his readers. Having seen in the *Discourse* an image of a younger Descartes, confused and uncertain, followed by the supremely confident Descartes setting out after his “revelation” to revolutionize the natural and metaphysical sciences. we have a powerful inducement to risk attempting his exercises. This is also, of course, precisely the inducement offered to me as a youth by the more flamboyant of the Baptist preachers I knew --“I was a great sinner. lost in the world, and just look at me now.” In either case, it is not a causal explanation. We don’t know precisely why *A* led to *B*, or even, in the end, *whether* it did; perhaps as Nietzsche would later suggest, a host of other contingent factors (ranging from diet to ancestry to climate) played the larger role in whatever change took place, and the “precise history” of Descartes’ reflections was relatively accidental. But whatever its logical force, the testimonial is at least grounds for a degree of faith in the efficacy of the program; it worked once. it can work again.

### 11) A Question of Credibility:

But what, after all your efforts, have you told us about yourself? You are not a bodily structure, you are not air, not a wind, not a thing which walks or senses, you are not this and not that... but the question is not what you are not, but what you are...When you go on to say that you are a thinking thing, then we know what you are saying; but we knew it already, and it was not what we were asking you to tell us. Who doubts that you are thinking? What we are unclear about, what we are looking for, is that inner substance of yours whose property is to think. .... given that you are looking for knowledge of yourself which is superior to common knowledge (that is, the kind of knowledge we have had up till now), you must see that it is certainly not enough for you to announce that you are a thing that thinks and doubts and understands, etc. You should carefully scrutinize yourself and conduct a kind of chemical investigation of yourself, if you are to succeed in uncovering and explaining to us your internal substance.

Gassendi, to Descartes<sup>47</sup>

Descartes is tied very much to the meditational genre within which he writes his most famous text. The reader must be guided to the truth, without knowing ahead of time where they are



going, how they will get there, or what sort of experience they will have on arrival. The truth we will find was within all along. we are assured, but we will have no way of knowing this in advance; we have only Descartes' assurance. In the meantime, we must make a leap of faith, cultivating a profound existential commitment to the exercise we have begun in order to genuinely retrace the steps of the master. But as Descartes notes in the *Passions of the Soul*, emulation or imitation requires a kind of "courage" that "disposes the soul to undertake tasks in which it hopes to be able to succeed because it sees others succeed in them" [AT XI 461]. What motivates this courage? What prompts us to extend Descartes this inordinate credit?

In traditional meditation, the life of the master is exemplary; the saint stands as guarantee of the legitimacy and desirability of the method. The lived, visible life of Ignatius, for instance, inspired others to join him, and knowing that he would be gone someday, his disciples repeatedly urged him (against his natural inclination) to write his life "as a substitute for a bequest." Jerónimo Nadal –Ignatius' heir and disciple --reportedly prompted, or even *pestered* Ignatius into dictating his memoirs in the belief that "in nothing could Father do more good for the Society than in doing this, and that *this* [the autobiography] *was truly to found the Society*."<sup>1</sup> Whether we choose to read them together or not, the *Reminiscences* in a sense legitimize the *Spiritual Exercises*, justifying the rigorous demands that will be made of us there. The same could obviously be said of Jesus, the exemplary life depicted in the gospels at least partially underwriting the staggering demands of the Sermon on the Mount.

So where is Descartes? What life stands above his revolution, the overthrow of Aristotle's

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<sup>1</sup>Philip Endean summarizes the origins of the *Reminiscences* in the introduction to his edition of the *Personal Writings* of Saint Ignatius, from which I draw this remark [p. 3, emphasis added]. While the autobiography was dictated to Gonçalves da Câmara, it seems to have been Nadal who was most insistent on the value of the project for the continuation of the Jesuit Society after its founder and first-generation of followers inevitably died. The means by which Jesuit followers had always come to recognize their vocation had been to "talk in detail about our Father Ignatius, the beginning used by God as a means for imparting this grace, and willed to be the one to channel this vocation to others" [p.4]; the *Reminiscences*, Nadal believed, would continue to make this conversation possible in future generations.

millennium-long hold on understanding? The *Meditations* give us nothing, and the *Discourse*, only the slenderest of threads. As I have stressed throughout, Descartes' modifications and emendations to the traditional rhetoric of prophecy have the effect of *exaggerating* the already intense of focus on the speaker which this mode of speech already generates. But there is no *life* there when we look for it, no one to support our faith. As an author, Descartes remains anonymous: as a metaphysical subject, he is generic, no different from any of us; and as a literary character, the prophet of the *Discourse* is remarkably thin, devoid of any history. There is no life here to be assessed, no way of knowing whether he is a true or a false prophet, whoever he is. And this lack seems particularly damning in a work that relies for its credibility on its author's testimonial. For without the living subject here to address us, only the most vivid and compelling biographical portrait seems capable of generating faith in the generations who have heard but not seen.

But as troubling as the lack of specificity within the *Discourse* may already be, the difficulties are compounded still further by the ambiguous status of the work itself. For while it is presented as an autobiographical history --a testimonial which, as I have suggested, is crucial in justifying the presumptions of the *Meditations* --it also acknowledges within the first pages that it may well be a "fable," not even mimetically faithful within the already sparse degree of biographical detail which it does contain. Does this not undercut irrevocably the enticement to follow Descartes' program? Does it not only make Descartes' meditational regimen suspect, but perhaps even *dangerous*? For to cite Descartes' own words from later in the *Discourse*, fables can pose a certain risk to those who would treat them as exemplary histories worthy of imitation:

Fables make us imagine many events as possible when they are not. And even the most accurate histories, while not altering or exaggerating the importance of matters to make them more worthy of being read, at any rate almost always omit the baser and less notable events; as a result, the other events appear in a false light, and those who regulate their conduct by examples drawn from these works are liable to fall into the excesses of the knight-errant in our tales of chivalry, and conceive plans beyond their powers. [AT VI 7]

It is completely remarkable to find this word of warning in the very text which allows that it may well be a fable, for Descartes has certainly altered --if not exaggerated --certain events, and clearly omitted almost everything outside of a select set of experiences which serve his agenda. Would we not be foolish to follow an example drawn in such a false light? Is the possibility of rationally reconstructing the world after a heroic purging of history not the impossible dream of a mad knight-errant?

Though he obviously never addressed himself to precisely the question I am asking of him here. Descartes has --as near as I can tell --two modes of response. First, while the exemplary life of a saint may provide the grounds for faith, there is no need for *faith* when there is *proof* available; turning water into wine is a far more effective recommendation of a speaker than a dignified and inspiring life could ever hope to be. Descartes' scientific discoveries are presented very much in this register, a sample of what he can do with his new-found powers that could never have been done before. The three essays he appends to the *Discourse* are enough to show his credentials, but he does not vulgarize the method by producing too much too soon. Like any good performer, Descartes frequently alludes to the fact that he has more and better in reserve, including what he tantalizingly suggests would be a controversial but revolutionary book (*Le Monde*). As can be seen in what he *does* reveal though, his new techniques have enabled him to solve a number of intransigent problems in optics, in astronomy, and mathematics, and these are Descartes' miracles.

At least some of these discoveries have proved in the course of time to be false prophecies, but let Descartes have them; the incommensurability between these regional results and the burden of the *Meditations* is still enormous. Am I really expected to deny all that I have previously believed, enter the whirlpool of despair, and patiently and methodically reconstruct my universe from the ground up because such a process once aided a scholar in resolving the ambiguities of refraction? For this much I *can* grasp from the essays themselves; important or not, these are mere

technical innovations. But let us make no mistake. Descartes is insistent that we must meditate along with him in order to fully experience the transformative implications of the *Meditations*; I cannot simply extract the rules and procedures of his new science from the text while keeping an arm's length distance from any psychological involvement. Or rather, I can, and do --this is exactly what I have always done with Descartes heretofore, raiding his texts for interesting and valuable arguments and constructions. But this is not what he has asked me to do. Descartes demands a commitment as absolute in its own way as that of any religious revolutionary. Empty rule-following of the kind employed in scholastic syllogism, or scholastic rhetoric, is precisely the enemy which his method seeks to overthrow, just as the rule-obsessed Pharisees were Christ's most consistent target in the Gospels (at least, as the gospel writers have presented him).

But to ask the question again, can Descartes really expect such existential commitment from his readers solely in virtue of a handful of demonstrable pragmatic results? I doubt it. If Descartes is drawing up a contract with his readers --our unmitigated trust and intensive participation in return for his truth --the appeal for us to accept these terms may well be a function of no more than his voice itself. The emotional profile of the Cartesian narrator is that of a character with an absolute and astonishing confidence in his proximity to the truth, the wholly unconvincing modesty of the dedicatory address to the doctors of divinity overwhelmed in the *Objections and Replies* by a writer who openly mocks and disdains those who fail to see the truth. Only some gross disorder of the passions, such as excessive vanity, envy (of Descartes himself), or an uncorrectable lack of wonder, could explain how Gassendi --"O Flesh" --could fail to recognize the truth which Descartes has made so plain. But where Augustine could suggest that disagreement could only arise in the souls of those who lack the grace of God, Descartes naturalizes the same *ad hominem*: some souls are so constitutively disordered that they will forever fail to see the truth which is in front of their noses. And we --clever readers of Descartes --are in on the joke, laughing haughtily along with him at the

sight of the fool who says in his heart there is no God. At least, we are there if we would like to be; the legendary arrogance of Descartes' texts --to say nothing of the man --continues to have the power to divide readers. The sharp division between the supremely confident Descartes and his chastised interlocutors carves out a space for us, should we want it, in which to locate ourselves on the side of the angels. In the shift from Augustine or Ignatius to Descartes, the tone of the condemnation has changed --the moral condemnation of heretics becomes the self-aggrandizing mocking of fools --but the principle of division remains as sharp as ever.

If some "opt out" of the text at this point --as I have done --it is not simply because Descartes is arrogant and this is offensive; careless use of such a principle would cost one too much of the philosophical canon (consider who else I am reading here!). Instead, it is because of what this arrogance *masks*, a lack of credibility on the part of a writer who asks for so much. But there is a caveat which is overdue here. It is true that Descartes states that his method is "not for everyone," and that he knows "only too well that such individuals as can seriously meditate with him exist in small numbers" [AT VII 9]. Officially then, Descartes demands nothing of us: if we are so inclined, and have the necessary intellectual ability (and the necessary self-control), we are free to join him on the journey. To speak candidly however, I have a difficult time crediting this modest disclaimer.<sup>1</sup> It is virtually impossible not to identify oneself --while reading at least --with the audience to whom the text is addressed; Montaigne's insistence in the preface to his *Essais* that he is writing for his "friends alone"<sup>2</sup> similarly makes each reader a *de facto* friend, rather than excluding us, and this was

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<sup>1</sup> Ignatius similarly acknowledges that his *Spiritual Exercises* are not appropriate for everyone, and even within them, he recommends that the spiritual director tailor the rigours of the program to the capacities of the exercitant. But Ignatius is at least candid that there is a ranking going on here, that one has attained more "merit with God" for having undergone the *Exercises* in their most complete and thorough form. Descartes may well position the *Meditations* as an "optional activity," but after so clearly insisting that they provide the royal road to the truth, it is an offer which he implies we would be cowards or fools to refuse.

<sup>2</sup> *Essais*, "Dedication to the Reader." Montaigne rethought this dismissive preface as the years went by and increasingly addressed himself to posterity, and to his unknown contemporaries, in later

precisely the purpose of the remark. In Descartes' case, the caveat "only a precious few can follow where I lead" serves as a fairly obvious kind of flattery; each one of us, miraculously, becomes a part of that small number who are capable of conversing intelligently with Descartes, just as each of Rousseau's readers is that "rare honest man" who loves justice, and each of Nietzsche's readers is the philosopher of the future to whom he speaks. It takes enormous discipline to read a book as if it were "not for me," but the inevitable failure to do so results in our finding ourselves more deeply committed to the agenda of the text than we may have intended.

If such strategies of literary seduction are necessary, it is because of a weakness in Descartes' rhetorical position *vis a vis* his audience. The scientist who presents his research after the *Discourse* may well rely on the evident utility of his results to commend his work, but the prophet of the *Meditations*, who demands our faith, who will transform and enlighten our souls, needs something more. Traditionally, it is a sacrifice; the martyred body of the saint stands as the most astonishing evidence of a self-control so profound that it can give up what otherwise seems most properly its own. This heroism reveals, in turn, the presence of the grace and insight needed to carry out such an act, and this (belatedly) grants the martyr a degree of credibility otherwise all but out of reach. But beginning with St. Augustine, if not before, autobiography has served for some as a literary analogue to martyrdom, a means of "offering up" one's life to the public in order to contribute to their redemption. In a manner which I do not claim to understand just yet, the autobiographical sacrifice of the self to the public seems to be a mirror of the Christian atonement narrative, the dark equation of sacrifice and salvation being inextricably bound up in each. But hiding within fables, withholding even his name, Descartes keeps himself very much to himself; whatever it is he gives us, it is certainly not a life.

But perhaps there is simply nothing there to give. The self produced within the Cartesian

narrative can seem at times almost entirely universal and generic, a soul so abstract and general that it threatens at every moment to come unstuck from any particularity, only tenuously tied to a body through the smallest of glands. Genevieve Lloyd sums up a common concern on this score by suggesting that Cartesian selves are --at bottom --completely interchangeable: "precisely because it lacks determinate properties... [t]here seems nothing left to distinguish one Cartesian 'I' from any other, and it is impossible then to see what would be lost from the world by the removal of me."<sup>48</sup> As a full account of Descartes' position this is woefully one-sided (and Lloyd is certainly not presenting it as such); particularly toward the end of his career, Descartes devoted increasing attention to putting some flesh on the bones of his pure thinking substances.<sup>1</sup> But it is precisely this "flesh" that is missing in the *Discourse*, where a rote and predictable "love of truth" stands as the only recognizable passion of a bodiless, parentless, friendless narrator.

And just as there is no self (or self-sacrifice) to justify the severity of the *Meditations'* injunction to the reader, neither is there a historical tradition to help support the demands that are made. Augustine's self-presentation is threaded-through with references to the tradition in which he writes: his own biography stands as the present example of a pattern of redemption seen in countless other previous lives, several of which figure prominently in the development of his own story. Our "faith" in Augustine *qua* teacher reaches back through him to the history that begins in the Scriptures.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the *Spiritual Exercises* require us to meditate on the biblical narratives for which God stands as the ultimate credit. These saints may ask at least as much of us as Descartes,

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<sup>1</sup>In this movement, Descartes comes ever closer to heeding the warning issued by Montaigne fifty years earlier: "Those who would divide our two principal parts, and isolate one from the other, are in the wrong. On the contrary, we must reunite them and bring them together. We must command the soul not to draw aside and hold herself apart, not to scorn and abandon the body --which she can do only by some false pretence --but to ally herself with it,.. marry it and become its partner, so that their actions may not appear diverse and opposed, but harmonious and uniform." [2:17, "On Presumption," p. 199 in Cohen]

<sup>2</sup>And as he indicates in the early dialogue *The Teacher*, this is entirely appropriate, since there is only one teacher (Christ) who is present in all true instruction. In chapter one, I sought to emphasize exactly this point --that we see *through* Augustine in the *Confessions* as we are led back to the scriptural sources of his self-description.

but they speak as proxies for a long tradition which itself manifests and speaks for the providence of God. Our faith is “spread out” as it were --a tradition rich with related and corroborating accounts, coupled with the trustworthiness of the Divinity, tacitly supporting the claims of the present speaker. But Descartes speaks for no one but himself, having decisively rejected the traditions which formed him, and so he must bear the full responsibility for his demands, must stand full credit for the promises he makes.

## 12) Concluding Remarks:

But it is not anybody who can make the gods speak, or get himself believed when he proclaims himself their interpreter. The great soul of the legislator is the only miracle that can prove his mission. Any man may grave tablets of stone, or buy an oracle... but he will never found an empire

*Rousseau: The Social Contract*

If I have failed to read Descartes as he requests, it is because I find nothing here to justify a leap of faith, no reason to honour the credit he has given himself, and yet this seems to be the price of admission to the *Meditations*. Without paying it, the text dies. It is true that I am free to approach the text with any number of scholarly agendas in mind, and for some purposes I continue to find this activity quite valuable. But as I suggested at the outset, not without acknowledging that I have remained “outside of” the text, that communication has broken down.

In weaving together the scholarly and the saintly narratives, Descartes inaugurates an altogether new mode of self-presentation --call it the genre of the secular prophet --to which both Rousseau and Nietzsche might plausibly be seen as direct inheritors. Each of these writers shares the same problem I have sought to tease out of Descartes’ writings; each has been described --with good cause, by many --as shrill and presumptuous, as lacking the credibility needed to justify their demands. In fact, the metaphor of “credit” that I have been using throughout this discussion is one that I have taken directly from Nietzsche’s autobiography. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche announces quite explicitly in the preface that he is a writer who “lives on [his] own credit,”<sup>49</sup> an acknowledgement



that (amongst other meanings) we will have a difficult time knowing *how* to read him and *whether* to read him; there will be decisions to make concerning how we will choose to hear his voice. Does he have a right to this kind of credit? Does Rousseau? And yet, I *like* each of these writers: I enjoy in them the audacity and arrogance which puts me off with Descartes. What is more, I take them quite seriously, though arguably they have demonstrated even less right to the voice of prophecy than Descartes. Why? I think it is because these writers are in their own ways far more faithful to the prophetic traditions which undergird their self-presentations than Descartes: each finds a way to introduce history once more, and each is willing to run the enormous risk of putting their lives, their names on the line, matching or surpassing the demands they make of their readers. This theme will be at the heart of my treatment of Nietzsche, so I will close with a brief remark about its relation to Rousseau, with whom the present chapter began.

Huntington Williams suggests, convincingly, that in inaugurating a new metaphysics and anthropology, Rousseau writes his own scriptures; the *Confessions* make frequent appeal to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and to *Emile*, the narrative fables which tell a new tale of fall and redemption, of an original perfection.<sup>1</sup> What he doesn't add, but might have, is that the process continues within the *Confessions* itself, with Rousseau increasingly recalling the earlier books as he reaches the later ones. Not only does Rousseau reach back in his analysis to our collective past, drawing lessons from Sparta and Athens, from Genesis and Homer, but he also generates within his writings a kind of simulated historical depth through such extensive internal cross-referencing.

If Rousseau's published oeuvre is more extensive than Descartes' (and the individual works which compose it much longer), it is at least partly because Rousseau understood his rhetorical situation quite differently from Descartes, recognizing that the call for a radical reconstrual of life on

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<sup>1</sup>"Rousseau's autobiography is a textual exchange with his own pre-autobiographical writings. The Discourse sur l'inégalité, La Nouvelle Héloïse, Émile, and Rousseau's other theoretical, fictional, and dramatic works are present there, just as Scripture is present in Augustine's Confessions... The autonomous self must write its own scriptures" [*Rousseau and Romantic Autobiography*, p. 3].

all its levels required a history, a text, a life; there must be stories to tell about the master, no matter how elusive he may ultimately be, no matter how cryptic and apocryphal these myths of origin. The new state needs a founder, the mysterious stranger who rides in off the plains, since a name, a named individual, must stand at the origin of each revolution, even if only in the false memories of the populace: Moses, Solon, Christ, Lycurgus. And it is thus no surprise that a figure with such revolutionary ambitions as Rousseau would end his literary career with one of the most extensive and involved exercises in autobiography ever undertaken. To demand of his readers the sort of close identification that he does --an identification that can lead to transformation, and which thus entails an enormous *risk* --Rousseau recognizes that he must honour the timeless conventions and offer up a life, the sacrifice which will make good the debt he has assumed through writing. Historians may well dispute the verisimilitude of the life Rousseau gives in his autobiographies, but within the present context, this misses the point. The Rousseau of the *Confessions* is a rich and nuanced character --"alive," as we say in a telling metaphor, and certainly not the sort of bare and abstract portrait of which Gassendi might complain. It is *this* character who we know as "Rousseau," the biographical individual having long since gone, and so however much he may depart from his original, it remains the case that a "Rousseau" has been given over to the public, the only Rousseau who still bears the name. Historical accuracy is not important, but a vital, living sense of history is.

And there is a final irony here, for given Descartes' enormous influence, his apparent *success* in inaugurating a new tradition, there now *is* a history which demonstrates implicitly the value of the Cartesian revelation. "Some are born posthumously," as Nietzsche says. It is precisely this history into which I have been born and bred, as I noted at the outset. But perhaps because of this, it is a history which I --like so many today --find problematic, an ambivalent and ambiguous recommendation of its founding aspirations, as also of the anonymous, history-less figure who stands at its origin.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ROUSSEAU: SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

*"I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different."*  
Rousseau: *The Confessions* [1:17]

#### 1) From Augustine to Rousseau; A New Language:

While Augustine wrestled with the lusts of the flesh, his friend Alypius was obsessed with the gladiators, but neither man, Augustine tells us, was unduly tempted by the desires that tormented the other. Then, as now, we all have our characteristic vices, unique dispositions towards particular kinds of sin. This simple fact of moral psychology is significant enough for Augustine that he quite often --as with Alypius --uses these sinful dispositions as a kind of ethical fingerprint; Alypius is differentiated from others (in part) through his unique susceptibility to "vain curiosity," just as Augustine can be identified through his susceptibility to carnal concupiscence. And yet this same Alypius renounces these desires during his transformation in the garden, just as Augustine resolves to "spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites."<sup>50</sup> Post-conversion, these sinful differences are relegated to a remote and disparaged corner of self-identity, and as Christians, each individual recognizes a common essence that defines their nature more fully than the accidents of their differing bodies and histories ever could. It remains true --for Augustine, sadly true --that these individuating differences do not evaporate simply through conversion; Augustine's inventory of his post-conversion sins in book ten is presumably quite different in content from that which Alypius might provide. But this fact merely indicates that in *this* life, redemption is never complete. The particular sinful dispositions of each body (and mind) continue to cling to the individual in this middling state as the "weight" which pulls them down, but in Augustine's ascensional metaphor,

they are more and more clearly distinguished from the “true” self as the soul rises toward God. Being “one in Christ” has --for Augustine --a metaphysical as well as a moral meaning; we are alike in so far as we cling to the image of God in which we were made.

As I suggested in chapter one, the *Confessions* have the effect of effacing Augustine’s particularity behind the disclosure of a universal human nature. In that chapter, I emphasized the rhetorical structures that give rise to this fact. This continues to be a worthwhile agenda, but in pursuing it, I may have under-emphasized the degree to which the “self-effacement” in Augustine is integrated into a comprehensive theological perspective. If it is true that Augustine understands “difference” to be a function of sin, and the uniformity of human souls as the ground of our capacity for redemption, it is both feasible and desirable to write a text which emphasizes this common structure. By encouraging (or coercing) his readers to find *themselves* rather than Augustine within the text, Augustine might be understood to be guiding his readers into a fuller possession of this redeemed and purified “essential” self.

Intentionally or not, Rousseau seems to invert the structure of each of the rhetorical aspects of Augustine’s text that I had examined in this earlier chapter. Augustine’s text, for instance, was noteworthy for its indirect address to the reader, where Rousseau’s *Confessions* presents a narrator who is in nearly constant dialogue with his imagined readers. The effacement of the “true” text in Augustine --the silent prayer that grounds the narrative --is opposed by Rousseau’s repeated claims to “reveal myself absolutely to the public... in all the extravagances of my heart and into every least corner of my life” [2:65]. Where Augustine’s deployment of scripture and biography within his *Confessions* is part of a project in which the self is imbricated into an elaborate and established narrative history, Rousseau insists that there is no historical precedent for either his project or for its autobiographical subject. And finally, Augustine’s insistence on a “charitable” reading is matched in Rousseau by a narrator who demands not “charity,” but informed judgment from his readers, as instanced in this declaration of the respective duties of Rousseau and his readers:

I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader's eye, and for that purpose I am trying to present it from all points of view... and to contrive that none of its movements shall escape his notice, so that he may judge for himself of the principle which has produced them. His task is to assemble these elements and to assess the being who is made up of them. The summing up must be his... It is not for me to judge the relative importance of events: I must relate them all, and leave selection to him. [4:169-70]

The outcome of these contrasting rhetorical structures is exactly what one might expect. If it is true that Augustine's relationship to his imagined reader both presupposes and supports his depiction of a generic, essential self common to all, it is equally the case that Rousseau's inversion of the Augustinian method on each of these counts reveals a self that is insistent on its radical idiosyncrasy. "I am like no one in the whole world," Rousseau boasts on the first page. "I may be no better, but at least I am different" [1:17]. There are no precedents for Jean-Jacques, either in the distant past or in his present, and lest we imagine too readily that this situation has changed since 1769, he immediately assures us that Nature has "broken the mould" after fashioning him [1:17]. Catherine Beaudry aptly points out that the title alone reveals this shift in emphasis; what we are presented with is no longer "*Confessions*" --as it was with St. Augustine --but "*The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*:"

Rousseau thus immediately thwarts the reader's expectations. By his evocation of the proper name, 'J. J. Rousseau' he gives the lie to any intention of self-humiliation. The hallmark of the earlier writings of this type is a self-effacement which would not permit of the proper name as emblem.<sup>51</sup>

Rousseau's text is thus attuned on all possible registers to the first person, claiming in a stridently first-person voice to describe the first (and only) person to have undergone an unprecedented range of new emotional experiences, to have lived an altogether new kind of life.

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<sup>51</sup>This is a striking instance of what Lejeune has called the "autobiographical pact" [cf. "The Autobiographical Pact," and "The Autobiographical Pact --bis," in *On Autobiography*]; the text is positioned as autobiography not simply through reference to its internal content, nor through our *decision* to read it as autobiography (as we might, for example, decide to read *Remembrance of Things Past* as autobiography), but through a contract drawn up in the text which assigns respective duties to both writer and reader. Rousseau's "sincerity" is balanced by our "fair judgment," and should either party default on these terms, the contract is void and the text ceases to perform as an autobiography.

This agenda clearly relieves Rousseau of the most onerous requirements of Augustine's rhetorical situation; where Augustine had to speak about himself without becoming *too* present, and needed to speak to the reader without altogether seeming to do so. Rousseau will revel in his particularity, courting all the attention he can generate for the portrait he displays. And yet, we need not be Hegelians to imagine that the absolute rejection of a problematic stance is not likely to provide a stable and satisfactory position. Rousseau's relationship with his imagined readers is if anything more tortured and uncertain than Augustine's, shifting several times within the *Confessions* itself before being entirely rethought in the *Dialogues* and the *Reveries*. The very individuality that allows Rousseau to bypass Augustine's rhetorical difficulties generates a new set of difficulties for the writer-reader relationship. "The emphatic individual must portray himself in the language common to all," says Elizabeth de Mijolla. "and therein, for Rousseau, is the paradox and the problem of autobiography."<sup>52</sup> It is a paradox that I will attempt to unravel in the pages which follow.

## **2) Reflections on Method:**

As in my reading of Augustine, so also here, the work of Jean Starobinski has provided me with an invaluable source of informed speculation, an impetus for further thought, and above all, a model for my own methods of reading. While he is not concerned with exploring the manner in which his own texts may participate in the patterns that he finds in others, in all other respects, his writings serve as both a template for the agenda I announced in my introduction, and as an intimidatingly high standard of achievement. That agenda, to reiterate, involved seeking an integrated reading that combined the approaches of psychological and theoretical analysis. Speaking of Rousseau's sexual aberrations, Starobinski states his orientation quite clearly, and in a manner with which I fully concur:

For a critic anxious to elucidate if not the totality of a writer and his work then at least the principles that make them intelligible, Rousseau's sexual aberrations, as recorded in

the work itself, contribute to its overall meaning just as much as its theoretical framework. The point is not to trace Rousseau's ideology to its emotional roots... [but] the writer's experience... cannot be viewed as a marginal datum. Exhibitionism was an aberrant phase of Rousseau's sexual behaviour, but it lies transposed at the root of a work like the *Confessions*. To be sure, there is no justification for a 'regressive' interpretation... [that would] characterize the *Confessions* as a more or less sublimated form of Jean-Jacques' juvenile exhibitionism. I prefer a 'prospective' interpretation: I want, that is, to examine attitudes and events that reveal intentions, choices, or desires whose significance transcends the circumstances in which they first became manifest... Behaviour cannot be fully explained in terms of ulterior motives or pretexts, nor in terms of the substitution of symbolic objects for primitive objects of desire. What is crucial is how the internal and the external are linked; we must ask how the purposes of action are conceptualized and structured. An answer to this question brings us close to the truth of thought and experience.<sup>53</sup>

Others have not seen it this way. In her widely cited study *The Modern Self in Rousseau's Confessions: A Response to St. Augustine*, Ann Hartle positions her work against "the psychological approach [that] has concerned itself with the unconscious subtleties it finds in Rousseau's *Confessions*," since this approach has tended to undervalue the elements of "artful design" that she finds in the text.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the "design" that Hartle argues for would undercut the utility of importing *any* psychological analysis into one's reading of the *Confessions*, since the text --as she sees it --is "essentially a fiction... not an autobiography, not the detailing of Rousseau's life," and its purpose is only the "raising and the answering of the questions about... what man is by nature." As Hartle reads the text, Rousseau is quite methodically mirroring Augustine's text in order to refute the picture of human nature found there, fictionalizing the events of his life in order to demonstrate the futility of the Augustinian theory of Providence: "Rousseau is consciously intending and deliberately seeking to expose the 'madness' of Augustine's interpretation of his life as a whole, as the working out of God's design for him."<sup>54</sup>

Now I would like to emphasize from the start that I believe Hartle's analysis is extremely effective in elucidating the distinctiveness of these two thinkers, and thus, a valuable contribution to

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<sup>1</sup>*The Modern Self*, p. 155. As these reductive, psychologizing commentators are neither named nor refuted in her text it is hard to know exactly how their readings have been prejudiced and unproductive. Does she have in mind Starobinski, Derrida, de Man...?

our continued engagement with them. My concern is with her interpretive strategy, and the methodological principles lying behind it, but not (or not principally) with the particular claims she makes. For that matter, I will also conclude that Rousseau's text is in some ways best understood as a "fiction," though in a different sense, and for different reasons.

Is Rousseau "consciously intending and deliberately seeking" to fashion a "Reply to St. Augustine?" For Hartle, our first clue that the text is a "reply" is the title itself, which is "surely" meant to call to mind Augustine's *Confessions*. But while Rousseau is entirely silent about Augustine's autobiography in the *Confessions*, he *does* explicitly note that he read a set of memoirs entitled "*The Confession of the Count de XXX*,"<sup>1</sup> being so impressed with them that "directly [after] I read that book, I desired the friendship of its author" [7:273]; we are similarly, I suppose, expected to disregard the explicit reference to Montaigne as a predecessor from whom Rousseau is at pains to distinguish himself. The question is not whether or not Rousseau was aware of Augustine's text, whether he had read it, or even whether his choice of title "intentionally" alludes to Augustine by situating his own text within the same genre. All of these may be true (and likely are) without Rousseau thereby *responding* to Augustine; de Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, for instance, is certainly not a systematic philosophical engagement with the ideas of the learned Saint simply because it calls to mind this earlier text (and Rousseau's as well) through its title. Since Rousseau has explicitly discussed other precedents for his work within his text itself, we need evidence of a different sort to justify this stronger conclusion.

The evidence that Hartle does present is --at best --highly ambiguous, hardly the sort of thing to settle the case. For the most part, this involves noting parallel stories within the two *Confessions*.

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<sup>1</sup>The "anonymous" *Confessions* were those of Duclos, who did in fact become a friend; it was to Duclos that Rousseau entrusted his *Confessions* after returning to Paris. As with all of Rousseau's friends, they of course had a falling out eventually, and Duclos was retroactively recognized as a member of the conspiracy.



Rousseau's childhood theft of an apple, Hartle suggests, was modelled on Augustine's infamous account of the stolen pears, but it has a more obvious biblical precedent, and given Rousseau's ongoing involvement throughout his career with the narrative of the fall from Eden, this seems a more plausible analogue.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the "illumination" on the road to Paris *may* have been copied from Augustine's conversion in the garden, but Paul's transformative illumination on the road to Damascus is a closer and more familiar model. Nor should we discount *a priori* the possibility that Rousseau is simply reporting at least some of these events more or less as they occurred. Given Rousseau's acute awareness of literary style, he is almost certainly consciously re-presenting much of his life within the terms of recognizable biblical or classical narratives (in order to lend his description added resonance), but this does not mean that every event in the *Confessions* is manufactured from whole cloth. And finally, Hartle points out somewhat bafflingly as "more subtle but no less revealing... structural parallels between both *Confessions*," that both are divided into past and present sections --except for Rousseau's --and that both have twelve books --except for Augustine's: "Augustine's *Confessions* consists of thirteen books; Rousseau's... of twelve books. Augustine's thirteenth book is essentially a commentary on the creation story in Genesis... There is no parallel 'creation' book in Rousseau's work" [p. 26]. This is not presented as counter-evidence, but I am at a loss to see how it could be taken to *support* Hartle's thesis.

Hartle certainly needs much stronger evidence than she provides to support the allegation that the *Confessions* is developed as a "*Reply to St. Augustine*," and whatever this evidence may turn

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<sup>1</sup>The *Second Discourse* is of course entirely structured around the concept of a fall from primordial innocence into civilization through the acquisition of knowledge and technology. The first book of the *Confessions*, in which the apple theft takes place, is an application of this general perspective to Rousseau's own life (or alternately, it is the biographical source of this perspective); the time of innocence and ignorance as a child at Bossey is irrevocably ended by a series of "falls" --the apple theft, the awakening of sexual desire, an unwarranted punishment, the gates of the city closing him out, and (another tree), the destruction of the sapling which he and a friend were irrigating with water stolen from his uncle's great walnut tree. It would be unreasonable to take any one of these moments as the definitive narrative of the fall (and there will be numerous others in the later books as well --Rousseau is *continually* evicted from Eden).

out to be, it will have to include some account of Rousseau's reasons for the elaborate subterfuge; why on earth does Rousseau make such a show of his sincerity while concealing the key "absolutely required" for a successful reading? I am not suggesting that such explanations are unavailable *in principle*: it is relatively standard in Nietzsche scholarship, for example, to discuss his strategic misdirection of large classes of his potential readership. But Nietzsche himself repeatedly taunts his readership with the idea that his meanings are "masked," "not for all ears," and thus dissuades us (if we have been paying attention) from attempting to read a text like *Ecce Homo* as an unproblematic instance of autobiography. Rousseau, in contrast, says no such things in his *Confessions*, and moreover, he says the opposite. Where Nietzsche warns us to be on our guard as readers, Rousseau seems to want anything but caution and reserve in his readership: "over anything that is really relevant to the subject I am certain of being exact and faithful, as I shall always endeavour to be in everything. That is something that can be counted on" [3:128].

As Hartle's book has become something of a standard in Rousseau scholarship, it would certainly be of value to develop further the critique that I have begun here. For my immediate purposes however, her text simply represents --in an exaggerated way --a methodological point on which I wish to insist, namely, that a reading which interprets everything in a text as if it *must* support the official, theoretical position of its author is as reductive as the crassest of psychological dismissals. Her objective is clear enough, and in one sense it is my own as well. Rousseau has suffered more than most philosophers from hasty dismissals: the claustrophobic air of delusion and paranoia that pervades his later writings provides a ready excuse for not taking his thought seriously, or for treating him merely as a case study of neurosis. Opposing this tendency, Hartle provides an *apologia*; Rousseau is *not* a raving paranoid fit only for diagnosis or dismissal, but rather, an artful and intelligent writer with a coherent philosophical agenda to communicate.

But the strategy employed by Hartle in order to accomplish this commendable objective is grossly distorting. Throughout her text, Hartle's habitual interpretive move is to re-present the

seemingly fantastical aspects of Rousseau's "self-portrait" as exemplifications of delusions that Rousseau *wants* us to see through. Thus, for example, Hartle acknowledges that the repeated efforts at self-exoneration in the *Confessions* are notoriously weak, unlikely to convince anyone: "if the *Confessions* is Rousseau's defence of himself against his enemies, then it seems he has done a poor job. His 'excuses' are rather weak and easily anticipated." But this admission is immediately followed by the interpretative gloss: "his 'excusing' is part of the portrait and Rousseau *intends* that there be such responses [from his readers]." And again, the various instances of the "Great Plot" against Rousseau --described in excruciating detail in the last books of the *Confessions*, reiterated and expanded in the *Dialogues*, and reprised once more in the *Reveries* --are not instances of the "real" Rousseau's paranoia, but rather, are "clear examples of paranoiac invention which Rousseau places before us so that we may see their madness... Rousseau is *consciously intending and deliberately seeking* to expose the 'madness' of Augustine's interpretation of the events in his life as a whole, as the working out of God's design for him."<sup>55</sup>

This breathtaking insight into Rousseau's private intentions is only possible against a backdrop of the charitable assumption that Rousseau must ultimately be coherent, which for Hartle seems to mean that his rhetoric must always, in *some* way, bear out his theoretical reflections. To accommodate the moments of apparent disparity, the "real" Rousseau --the author --is whisked away, obscured (but protected) behind the postulation of what is essentially an "unreliable narrator." And thus, Hartle can have it both ways: the elements of the *Confessions* that can readily be integrated into the coherent philosophical view that she extracts are the "true" portrait, the moments where the narrator speaks directly on behalf of the author. But the exceptions, the disruptions to this story, are always aspects of a *reductio ad absurdum* --exactly the opposite of what the author really believes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>It is a familiar enough move; Descartes' "weak" proofs for the existence of God are excused by some on the grounds that he *meant us* to see through them. But whether or not this analysis of Descartes is correct, its advocates can at least provide a plausible explanation for the indirection, if it exists. The

This story is, I think, grossly implausible. If Rousseau's agenda in the *Confessions* is to expose the "madness" of a belief in fate, providence, or the "Great Plot," one wonders why he continues his obsession with conspiracy into each of his next books, and even into his private correspondence. It is his subsequent work, the *Dialogues*, that offers the most gruellingly elaborate explication of the mechanisms through which the universal conspiracy against Jean-Jacques operates. Is this also unreliable narration? And is his failed attempt to deposit the manuscript on the high altar at the Cathedral of Notre Dame an ironic rhetorical flourish, meant to explicate just how silly such a view really is?

But even if Hartle turned out to be right about Rousseau's didactic purposes, having both discovered and resolved a mystery that had eluded the rest of us, my objection would stand. For while Hartle *does* manage to explain the *Confessions* without any appeal to "unconscious" factors by interpreting it in this idiosyncratic manner, she achieves this result only at the price of attributing to Rousseau an equally elaborate set of conscious intentions that are not directly disclosed in the text. If the problem with discussing "unconscious" factors is that they are unverifiable --the author is long since dead already --have we really gained anything by switching to a vocabulary of conscious but unstated assumptions? For Hartle's text relies crucially throughout on an inference about Rousseau's intentions, smuggling in a vast array of assumptions about the relation between Rousseau's rhetoric and his theoretical objectives. In reading everything in the text as theory, Hartle --ironically I think --ends up attributing some rather peculiar mental states to Rousseau, but since she has discounted the legitimacy of "psychological" analysis, these attributions are not supported, made explicit, or given a textual basis. This provides for a text that exhibits a degree of coherence, symmetry, and organization of which I can only be jealous; there are no more "loose ends," caveats,

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recent condemnation of Galileo could very well have led to a certain amount of self-protective subterfuge. But what is Rousseau's reason for such indirection? In a book designed for posthumous publication, why be less than candid? Hartle does not say.

or contradictions in Hartle's text than she finds in the *Confessions*. But this simplicity is achieved through sidestepping the genuine hermeneutical difficulties of reading; she has approached the text with Rousseau's "theory" already in hand. She knows what kind of book it is, what it is trying to do, and this determination organizes the *Confessions* into neat and mutually exclusive categories --the genuine and the ironic --both of which serve a single agenda. And this is at least as reductive and distorting as a reading that latches on to the peculiar, affective qualities of the rhetoric while ignoring any explanatory significance of the theoretical position which the author provides.

Beyond its value in explicating and justifying a point about method, this attack on Hartle's "apology" for Rousseau is in part an "apology" for my own reading, a reading that cannot claim the architectural clarity of her work. In tracking Rousseau's rhetoric in his autobiographies, I will be moving unevenly back and forth between psychology and doctrine, and this makes it quite difficult to arrive at decisive conclusions. *Each* is a crucial aspect of the overall act of communication enacted in the text, but when they run in opposite directions (as they so often do in Rousseau), there can be no definitive statement about what the author is *trying* to accomplish; which vocabulary --to the extent that we can even separate them --speaks for the author's intentions?

Rather than seeking to establish a "formula" which encapsulates Rousseau's relationship to his imagined readers, detailing who is "in" and who is "out," and why, I will be performing something more akin to cartography here, a mapping of the theoretical and rhetorical forces at work in the *Confessions* which attempt to govern and delimit a reader's movement through the text. Hartle has Rousseau responding to Augustine in the title of her work, and while I have obviously been critical of her method, I too will be charting connections between the two texts. It is informative and revealing to read Rousseau against the backdrop of Augustine's project, and all the more so if we treat Descartes as an intermediary figure, but I am not overly concerned with the existence or non-existence of a demonstrable line of influence. In fact, I would be pleased to

discover that Rousseau was *not* familiar in any serious way with Augustine's text; the further removed the two writers are, the more significant it is that their modes of navigating their way through self-description tend to run in parallel, or at least, as mirror images.

### 3) The Private Made Public:

Jean-Jacques is unique, unprecedented. Establishing this fact constitutes much of the burden of the *Confessions*, but it entails some peculiarities. Béla Szabados puts it nicely:

[T]o consider a person in isolation we must be regarding him as *one of us*. This paradox is especially compelling when *I* consider myself as autobiographer in isolation. Here I must think of myself as situated in a community of readers. Even though Rousseau has the scarcity of uniqueness, he can appreciate this only within the context of a community of readers where contrasts and comparisons are available as resources.<sup>56</sup>

To be unique, one cannot be fully isolated, but nor can one enjoy any unproblematic membership in a community. The individual is in this sense a liminal member of the community, marking a boundary position that is simultaneously "in" and "out." There is certainly a tension here, but it is a tension beautifully rendered throughout the *Confessions*. Rousseau continually presents himself as "misplaced" and not recognized at his "true value," the simple man-of-nature, farcically thrown by circumstances into the heart of Paris *salon* culture, and suffering keenly from the "embarrassment at playing a part so ill-suited to my nature" [9:439]. In what has become a favourite phrase in the commentaries, Rousseau describes himself as "a man who has come in out of the blue" [3:114], unable "to talk for a moment without blundering" [ibid.]. "Though I am not a fool," he summarizes, "I am very often taken for one, even by people in a good position to judge. Unfortunately... my face and my eyes seem to promise otherwise, and people find my stupidity all the more shocking because it disappoints their expectations. This fact... presents the key to a great number of my strange actions" [3:115-6].

Rousseau's concern with "disappointing expectations" may or may not provide the "key" to his many strange actions, but he is certainly doing more in these passages than providing biographical data. Having already drawn, even over-drawn, the picture of himself as devoid of all manners and affectation, what we see in the recounting of these "blunders" is not simply his failure to master the social conventions (which he is careful to disparage anyway), but the disparity between how he must have been understood by those around him and the manner in which we, his readers, will understand the same behaviour. Rousseau is unique not simply because he lacks the social graces: others are no doubt similarly inept because they *are* the fools they are taken to be. What makes Rousseau unique is the unprecedented degree of separation between the public perception of who he is and the private reality, the inner life of his feelings. It is true that the precise quality of his feelings is (in his own estimation at least), highly novel, and I do not mean to disregard this explanation of Rousseau's self-ascribed uniqueness. But whatever there is in his emotional constitution that picks Rousseau out of the crowd as "that individual" (to use Kierkegaard's phrase), it is all the more startlingly unprecedented that such novelty should be so radically misinterpreted by the public, that the truth and the appearance should be so completely at odds. If Rousseau is unique, it is because --like Christ --he "dwelt among us" but we "did not know him."

Having staked his identity on his novelty, and his novelty on his being misplaced and misunderstood, Rousseau is led naturally into writing as the optimal means for demonstrating and claiming this self-ascription. In writing, Rousseau can present himself on both sides of the public/private division at once: "I would love society as much as anyone else if I was not sure of showing myself, not only to my disadvantage there, but completely different from the way I am. The decision I have made to write and hide myself is precisely the one that suits me [3:116].'<sup>1</sup> As in

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<sup>1</sup>I have used Kelly's translation here rather than Cohen's [from *The Collected Works, Volume 5*, p. 97-98]. The general sense is similar in each, but Kelly's "to write and hide myself" is stronger than Cohen's "writing and remaining in the background." I would like the stronger version in place since I

fiction, the “inside view” provided by the narrator corrects and qualifies the publicly verifiable record of facts, and the two stories thus created run in tandem. But according to Rousseau, they are hardly dual-aspects of a unified phenomenon; the inner story, where the two conflict, is the true one. In the *Dialogues*, begun a mere two years after the completion of the *Confessions*, the staging and magnification of this contrast comes to generate the entire structure of the text. As the two interlocutors in the text attempt to come to terms with the enigma of “Jean-Jacques,” the one speaks at first only from an acquaintance with the public reputation of the author (“a monster so hideous as could never exist”), while the other speaks on behalf of the “private” self revealed in Jean-Jacques’ writings. The character who knows only the reputation in part one is led to meet with the “real” Jean-Jacques (offstage) prior to part two, having concluded that the public account of Jean-Jacques is ultimately either worthless or pernicious in the attempt to form a fair judgment of the man. It is a text, then, which argues even more strongly than the *Confessions* for *replacing* the public view with the private, making no attempt whatsoever at a synthesis of the two.<sup>1</sup>

This is certainly reminiscent of Augustine’s *Confessions*, where the Divine plan explicates the events of Augustine’s history in a manner that would be unavailable to any neutral observer, or even to its young protagonist. In both *Confessions*, the writer has an opportunity to present himself as simultaneously veiled and revealed, perceived and concealed, and can do so through dividing (or doubling) the self along private and public lines. In an attempt to replace the dominant “public”

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will have recourse later to the works of other critics who rely on this translation. [The original French reads: *Le parti que j’ai pris d’écrire et de me cacher est précisément celui qui me convenait*].

<sup>1</sup>How very different from Descartes, who is every bit as worried that he will be misread, but not at all concerned that he will appear to be a fool in public. In fact, Descartes claims in the *Discourse* to have worried that he acquired a reputation for genius prior to having produced the works that would justify it. If it is true (as I argued in chapter two) that he too favours the idea of writing and remaining hidden (his motto of course was “he lives well who lives hidden”), it is not because he himself will be devalued by the fools of the world if he appears in public, but rather, because his ability to work and his absolute, solitary self-mastery will be compromised if he is too forthcoming. His habitual concern is that the incompetent fools will be lined up in front of his door, wanting to discuss their inferior research with him and distracting him from his own.



version of the self --which in Rousseau's case is (he is sure), the image of an "infidel, an atheist, a lunatic, a madman" [12:545] --the private is *made public* in writing, and, in the same act, is given a privileged interpretive status. The private self enjoys access to all of the same information that is available to the public, it is suggested, but has additional interpretive resources unavailable to anyone but the narrator, or a god.

At least, this is the case in so far as we are persuaded to accept the legitimacy of the writer's private perspective. A ground of sorts must be given for the claims that the private self makes, if they are to trump considerations drawn from the demonstrable record of public "facts." Consider in this context Rousseau's famous "confession" of the ribbon theft, recounted in book two. The "facts" are relatively straight-forward: working alongside a fellow servant Marion, towards whom he has become attracted, Rousseau steals a small ribbon from their employer in order to present it to Marion as a gift. When the employer discovers the ribbon and demands an explanation, Jean-Jacques brazenly accuses Marion of the theft. As the employer has no time to sort out the truth of the matter, both employees are summarily dismissed, Rousseau to seek his fortunes elsewhere, and Marion to whatever horrors await a young girl of suspect virtue in 18<sup>th</sup> century France.

It is hardly a flattering portrait of Rousseau at this point, but perhaps we would be inclined to pass it by without too harsh a judgment; whether we choose to reveal them or not, who does not have a sin or two from their adolescent years? But Rousseau continues:

I should not fulfil the aim of this book if I did not... reveal my inner feelings and hesitated to put up such excuses for myself as I honestly could. Never was deliberate wickedness further from my intention than at that cruel moment... I should have rejoiced if the earth had swallowed me up and stifled me in the abyss. But my invincible sense of shame prevailed over everything. [2:88]

So, there are two stories (as de Mijolla puts it): "what happened (Rousseau unjust and hiding in his lies) and what should have happened (Rousseau finding the heart in which to confess himself)."<sup>57</sup>

Are we prepared to allow the private account to revalue the significance of the public actions, and if so, on what basis?

Like many readers, I find myself immediately put off by Rousseau's obvious lack of contrition in his account; the "crime" introduced melodramatically as filling him with "an unbearable weight of remorse" that "grows more painful with the years" [2:86], is transformed over the several pages of its telling into "really... no more than weakness" [2:89]. Moreover, there is a distasteful emphasis throughout the description on *Rousseau's* suffering rather than on Marion's; he imagines the disastrous effects of his action on his former friend largely in order to tell us how much pain this image has caused *him*, and it is hard not to hear a somewhat lurid fantasy operating behind his speculation about the depths into which Marion must have sunk (clearly prostitution), now that he has "injured" her "innocence."<sup>1</sup> And so it is easy to be annoyed with Rousseau here, even while accepting his claim to have acted out of shame and embarrassment. In fact, he may be more annoying in his justification than in his crime; I at least would more readily excuse his youthful cowardice than his adult defensiveness. But it is worth noting that the logic of the situation is not affected by its moral axis. When Augustine claims that it was God's hand and not his own that opened the scriptures to St. Paul we are in a similar situation, presented with both a series of (public) events *and* with their definitive (private) explication. It makes all the difference in our judgment of each case whether we believe the private story, for it presents the public actions not as free choices, but as necessitated by unseen forces --"invincible shame" or divine intervention.

As I have already noted, Augustine has recourse here to the "charity" of his readers, rejecting overtly the reader's ability, and even their right, to adjudicate on such matters. Without divine illumination, there is simply no way to tell as a reader whether Augustine's claims about the action of God in his life are even remotely accurate, such knowledge being humanly inaccessible. But

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<sup>1</sup>Beaudry perceptively points out that "in a way, Rousseau blames Marion for his desire for her" in these pages; "he did in point of fact steal it [the ribbon], but only because of his wanting to offer it to her" [*The Role of the Reader*, p. 106]. The fantasy of having forced Marion into prostitution, I would suggest, thus fulfills the double role of metaphorically venting his hostility over having been *made to* desire Marion, and of belatedly simulating the conquest he desired; however indirectly, it is *he* who took away her innocence.

Rousseau's "privileged" account, though structurally parallel, has no such divine sanction to back it up, and without this, the weight of the evidence is strongly against him. As Paul de Man notes, "the distinction between the confession stated in the mode of revealed truth and the confession stated in the mode of excuse is that the evidence for the former is referential (the ribbon), whereas the evidence for the latter can only be verbal."<sup>58</sup> If Rousseau's "inner" version of history is to hold sway over the reader's judgment then, he must find a way to present the (merely) verbal in a manner which is self-certifying, irrespective of the observable facts.

As Starobinski sees the matter, it is "passion" in Rousseau's text that fills the justificatory role that God plays in certifying Augustine's inner descriptions. Rousseau is deeply (if not consistently) committed to the view that passion cannot be simulated: an emotional account of sufficient intensity is effectively self-certifying:

In Rousseau's work the private emotions and conscience inherit some of the functions assigned to God in traditional theological discourse. As a consequence, the veracity of the narrative must be demonstrated with reference to intimate feeling, to the strict contemporaneity of emotion communicated in the writing. Pathos replaces the traditional address to a transcendent being as the sign of reliable expression... [T]he spontaneity of the writing, copied closely (in principle) from the actual spontaneous sentiment (which is given as if it were an old, relived emotion), assures the authenticity of the narration.<sup>59</sup>

In light of this, Rousseau can assure us that *even if* he were to lie, he would not likely be able to mislead us, the affective intensity of his prose either ringing true or false, irrespective of the "content" of whatever he might say: "I cannot lead him [the reader] into error, unless wilfully; and even if I wish to, I shall not easily succeed by this method" [4:169]. "Passion," to use Rousseau's vocabulary, or "*pathos*," as Starobinski puts it, cannot be contained or produced by artifice, and any attempt to do so will be transparently obvious to the reader. When Rousseau's narration "feels" authentic, when the *Confessions* is vivid, intense, and moving, we are led (Rousseau hopes) to regard its account of affairs as decisive.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Berel Lang repeats Starobinski's point here: "whatever engages the reader about such statements, it cannot be due to any external assurance of their correspondence to fact or events. The

#### 4) Writing as Expression, Writing as Craft:

Does Rousseau believe this? Can he possibly expect us to believe this? Whether his reading audience is constituted in the future or out of his contemporaries, can anyone assume that Rousseau --the author of the best-selling romantic fiction of the 18<sup>th</sup> century --is incapable of simulating an emotion? As he describes the reception of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, it appears that at least some of his contemporaries *did* believe this, and fervently so: “everybody,” he notes, “was convinced that it was impossible to express feelings so vividly unless one had felt them.”<sup>1</sup> This is exactly the premise he needs, and he immediately appears to endorse it: “In that [belief] they were right, and it is true that I wrote the novel in a state of burning ecstasy.” And so, he seems to be in complete agreement with Starobinski’s assessment: written descriptions surpassing a certain threshold of emotional power must, in fact, be direct representations of the author’s experiences. But this endorsement of the view of language that would validate his private account is followed by a remark which appears to entirely undercut it:

They were wrong in supposing that I required real objects to produce that condition. They were far from imagining how enraptured I could be by creatures of the imagination. But for some reminiscences of my youth and of Mme d’Houdetot, the loves I have felt and described might have been no more than the nymphs of the air [11:506].

And so, in the midst of an autobiography that parades its emotional vibrancy before the reader --at least partly in order that the “inner life” described in this modality might register as *necessarily* true --Rousseau quite abruptly acknowledges that he is perfectly capable of dreaming up such emotional experiences, and that when he does, we won’t be able to tell the difference.

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reader’s confidence in the ‘description’ of such facts or events can only depend on the authority of the writer or speaker” [*Anatomy of Philosophical Style*, p. 176].

<sup>1</sup>Rousseau’s estimation of the public’s attitude on this score is substantiated by the surviving correspondence, with many readers readily identifying him with the novel’s heroic Saint-Preux, and requesting portraits of his beloved (but fictional) Julie. Indispensable and fascinating reading on the 18<sup>th</sup> century reception of the novel can be found in the chapter “Readers Respond to Rousseau” in Robert Darnton’s *The Great Cat Massacre*.

It is an odd reversal. but it is far from being the unique moment in which Rousseau appears to vacillate between two different accounts of writing. Insisting that this will guarantee both his novelty and his sincerity, Rousseau once wrote of his *Confessions* that his “new” style therein will be --in a sense --no “style” at all. but simply direct, non-rhetorical speech:

For what I have to say it would be necessary to invent a language as new as my project: for what tone, what style does one adopt in order to unravel this immense chaos of feelings so diverse, so contradictory... with which I am ceaselessly agitated? Thus I decide *the style as I do the things*. I will not tie myself down to making it uniform; I will always have the one that comes to me, I will change it according to my mood without scruple, *I will tell each thing as I feel it*, as I see it, without refinement, without bother, without troubling myself about motley.<sup>60</sup>

It is this model of writing that serves, as Starobinski suggests, to legitimate the private account of events offered in the *Confessions*. But while this declaration of an “artless style” is to be found in the lengthy original preface to the *Confessions* written in 1764, the new three paragraph opening -- likely composed in 1769 -- contains no such claim.<sup>1</sup> Instead, and to greatly differing effect, there is an acknowledgment that the text contains “some immaterial embellishment[s]” that are intended to “fill a void due to a defect of memory” [1:17]. This concern with filling the “voids” left in his narrative suggests a Rousseau who is, by now, quite “troubled” by the “mixture” that results from his spontaneous reporting, and this openly contradicts the view of writing found in the earlier preface. In fact, the *Confessions* in its final form contains quite of number of similar passages. moments in which Rousseau describes his experience of writing in a manner that appears almost completely antithetical to that found in the original preface. This typical passage from book three might stand in for many:

Ideas take shape in my head with the most incredible difficulty. They go round in dull circles, and ferment, agitating me and overheating me till my heart palpitates. During

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<sup>1</sup>For an analysis of Rousseau’s reasons for abandoning his original preface found in the so-called “Neuchâtel” manuscript in favour of the crisp and confrontational introduction found in the final version, see Beaudry’s *The Role of the Reader*, chapter two (especially p. 56-58). Beaudry links the change to Rousseau’s gradual abandonment of his contemporary readership, a result of the increasingly public attacks on both Rousseau and his texts during the years when he was composing his autobiography.

this stir of emotion I can see nothing clearly, and cannot write a word; *I have to wait...* This is the explanation of the extreme difficulty I have in writing. My blotted, scratched, confused, illegible manuscripts attest to the pain they have cost me. There is not one that I have not had to rewrite four or five times before sending it to the printer. I have never been able to do anything with my pen in my hand... it is at night in my bed when I lie awake, that I compose in my head... Some of my paragraphs I have shaped and reshaped mentally for five or six nights before they were fit to be put down on paper. [3:113-4, emphasis added]

In this account, Rousseau presents writing and immediate emotional experience as entirely *incompatible*. Where the first model emphasized the contemporaneity of experience and writing --“*I shall say each thing as I feel it*” --the second model positions the act of writing as a representation *after* the fact, an “emotion recollected in tranquillity,” to use Wordsworth’s famous definition: “*I have to wait.*”

The two images of Rousseau-the-writer are, at least *prima facie*, in conflict. In the first, which I will call his “expressive” theory, the text is situated as the direct, unmediated product of Rousseau’s current mental state; frustrated by no more than the speed of his pen, Rousseau is locked in private reverie while the hand of its own accord traces out the lines of his various imaginings, inscribing a polygraph reading of a body which need not even know that its processes are being automatically and incontrovertibly recorded. It is a “stream-of-consciousness” image, and one can almost see his eyes glazed over, the writing simply “taking place.” But in the second image, Rousseau is the archetypally tortured artist, complaining (as all writers do) about the innumerable hours that lie invisibly behind the pages which appear so effortless and natural. Perhaps a trifle defensively as an autodidact surrounded by so many cultured and refined “men of letters.” Rousseau wants to insist on the *craft* involved in presenting his ideas in such an unhurried, conversational tone, a skill which he has cultivated with such effort and care. “Craft” and “art” are the key words here, as “whatever talents one may have been born with, the art of writing is not learned all at once” [8:329]. But as a conscious and controlled art form, writing in this image is no longer *direct* as in the expressive theory, but rather *directed*. It is designed and constructed with an effect in mind, and

therefore with an audience in mind as well. As such, it immediately raises questions in the reader's mind about sincerity and intentions; just what *is* the effect of the text on me, one asks, and why is it *trying* to have such an effect? It is a style of writing then which is entirely unsuited to the task of convincing that audience that it's author speaks the truth.'

I have no particular difficulty in choosing which of the two theories to back, if such a choice were somehow necessary. Whatever its romantic allure, and however much I might at times strive to simulate it, the expressive theory is compromised by an insurmountable internal contradiction. Immediacy, by definition, cannot be represented in a new medium, and no matter how natural or spontaneous it may sometimes appear to be, writing just *is* such a re-presentation: a mental state written down is no longer a mental state. Long before broaching the more vexed question of whether or not it is appropriate to speak of an immediacy that *precedes* writing, one can at least claim with some certainty that writing itself will not be such a state.<sup>4</sup> This common-place observation does not get us any closer to knowing precisely what it *is* that takes place in the act of writing, but it is enough in itself to refute the manifest meaning of the theory on which Rousseau so frequently relies; pretensions to sincerity and spontaneity aside, a book is not a life, a painting is not

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'This duality in Rousseau's speech is highly reminiscent of the similar bifurcation in Augustine's mode of address, which saw a silent, direct mode of communication with God contrasted to the imprecisions of physical, temporal speech. But where Augustine, I argued, is not altogether displeased that his authenticity cannot be verified outside of "the charity that believes all things," Rousseau is at least *trying* to overcome this limitation through reproducing a "pure" speech in physical words. However, God plays a crucial role in eliciting such speech from Augustine, while Rousseau is faced with generating it from his own native resources, and transmitting it to a reader who is all-too-human. An impossible project begun in earnest, one might think, but recalling Augustine's desire to be "overheard" by the Manicheans as he conducted private discourse with God, it is clear that the desire itself is not idiosyncratic.

<sup>4</sup>It is of course Jacques Derrida who has done more than anyone to explore this connection between writing and immediacy (or "presence," in his vocabulary). His reading of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology* argues that writing functions as a "supplement" for Rousseau (and, for that matter, for everyone else), a necessarily incomplete and unrealizable attempt to replace the fulness of a self-presence that was always-already absent. Writing stands to speech as culture to nature, and --in Rousseau --as masturbation to intercourse: each is an artificial and suspect means of offsetting the lack which results from the unavailability of the natural order of things.

a pair of peasant shoes, and passions signified are no sure revelation of passions experienced.

Would Rousseau ultimately have agreed with me on this? My manner of presentation may have created the illusion of development here, an “early” and a “late” Rousseau divided along the dates of his two prefaces. And yet, it would be misleading to suggest that on reflection, Rousseau realized that the expressive theory of language was grossly implausible and therefore set it aside. The situation is more complicated. Rousseau returns repeatedly throughout the twelve years of his autobiographical writing to the claim that he is speaking “from the heart,” without reflection or control, even though the very texts that make this claim will openly engage in a much more structured, controlled enterprise than this theory would allow. It is in fact in his last text of all, the *Reveries* (1776-78), that Rousseau gives the strongest, programmatic statement of his intention to write “expressively.” Given that he is by nature “without guile, without skill, without cunning and without prudence.” [1:28] he suggests not only that he *will not* present us with an artfully constructed manuscript, but more strongly, that he *cannot*. It is not so much that Rousseau has chosen to write expressively because of the specific effects that this technique allows; it is simply a necessary outcome of his fundamental constitution that he will write in this manner:

I *ought* to proceed with order and method, but such an undertaking is beyond me, and indeed it would divert me from my true aim, which is to give an account [to whom?] of the successive variations of my soul. These pages will be no more than a formless record of my reveries... [1:33]

I shall say what I have thought just as it came to me, with as little connection as the thoughts of this morning have with those of last night [1:32]

The easiest resolution to the disparity between the two theories of writing is therefore prohibited.

We cannot follow the time-honoured exegetical practise of distinguishing between Rousseau’s “early and late” theories of writing, pre-and-post 1769, since the contradiction cannot readily be resolved into anything like an evolution in his thought. Seven years after rewriting the preface to his *Confessions*, Rousseau is once again endorsing the views on writing he presented in his initial prologue of 1764.



Lacking this mode of explanation, it is perhaps tempting to consider only the “better” theory to be Rousseau’s “considered” position, and this too is a typical exegetical strategy. The expressive view of writing could perhaps be dismissed as a blemish in Rousseau’s thought, mandated either by the structural need to validate his discourse in front of his readers, or, alternately, by an incorrigible romantic yearning after a mirage of transparency and immediacy. In one sense, I accept the truth of each of these explanations. I have already shown that Rousseau requires something like his expressive theory of writing in order to substantiate the account of his private experiences. At the same time, as Starobinski has demonstrated in his masterful *Transparency and Obstruction*, the desire to be “transparent as crystal” [9:415] is an ineliminable aspect of Rousseau’s psychology, at least as it is instantiated in his texts.

And yet, even taken together, I do not find these explanations satisfactory. In my opening remarks on method, I was critical of what I took to be Hartle’s over-extension of the principle of charity, and I think that something of the kind is *often* at work in the quick and ready distinctions sometimes drawn between a philosopher’s “real” position, and the unfortunate-but-eliminable accretions to this position that result from the fact that the author is “only human.” It is a practice that domesticates the novel elements in a writer’s thought, purchasing coherence at the price of dividing the actual writer into a sagely voice of reason and an all-too-human voice of prejudice, neurosis, and simple error. To say that Rousseau had a sophisticated understanding of writing that was (unfortunately) corrupted at times by the peculiarities of his psychology and the limitations of his intellect strikes me as just such a strategy; we are left with no task here other than the assigning of a grade, a reflection of the balance between the coherent and the irrational elements in his thought --the good and the bad. But to falsify practice in order to clarify theory robs us in advance of any insight into the real, concrete experience of a writer, and it is the opportunity for such insight, I would argue, that constitutes one of the enduring values of autobiography.

I would like then to take some preparatory steps toward making the conflict between the two theories productive and informative, to search for a deeper coherence underlying Rousseau's apparently conflicting views on writing, and to do this it is worth pausing to reiterate the "problem" developed thus far. Rousseau has two theories of writing operative in the *Confessions*, an "expressive" theory and a theory of "craft." It is the problematic expressive theory which corroborates Rousseau's "private" account of his history, as the pathos *of* or *in* writing on this view is meant to be self-verifying. This private account is in turn extremely important for Rousseau, since it is meant to replace the public account in which he is (so he figures) "a monster." So, the overall goal of the autobiography --at least, in so far as it has a public rather than a private goal' --is to redeem the public impression of who Rousseau *is*, and this goal is seemingly threatened both by the internal incoherence of the expressive theory and by the fact that it is apparently contradicted by Rousseau's talk of craft and skill.

##### **5) Pathos *For* or Pathos *As* the Truth:**

I would not want to discount the importance of this picture of Rousseau's situation. The critics and commentators upon whom I have drawn most heavily thus far --Beaudry, de Mijolla, Starobinski, and Szabados --each agree, and I with them, that replacing the "public" with the "private" is a key element of Rousseau's autobiographical task. And yet, reexamining the text of the *Confessions* in light of this, it seems odd that Rousseau would spend so little time correcting the public record of *facts* if this were at the heart of his agenda; typically, his strategy is to clarify how he

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<sup>1</sup>This is an important caveat. I have chosen to focus on the communicative aspect of autobiography, but this introduces a regrettable distortion into my analysis; the communicative goals of autobiography can no more be fully separated from its private ends than can these private purposes safely ignore the complexities introduced by the image of the reader. While I cannot provide a sustained investigation of their intersection here, I will return to the connection between the two types of agendas in the following chapter. Relative to my practice in the other chapters, I will give considerable attention to Nietzsche's "private" goals in *Ecce Homo* before returning once more to the image of the reader.

*felt* while acting, but to leave the record of the action itself untouched. There are exceptions of course. Rousseau wants it to be very clear --Voltaire's anonymous libel to the contrary --that he did not abandon his five children to the street, but rather, delivered them to a foundlings home, a much more common (if still questionable) practice. There are other minor corrections as well --questions of authorship, claims to priority in publication, a vigorous denial of the rumours of venereal disease --but on the whole, there is relatively little material of this kind.

More importantly, if the purpose of the autobiography were strictly to redeem a reputation somewhat tarnished by the false interpretations of his personal history, the text must be deemed a disastrously misguided performance. Within the *Confessions*, Rousseau describes a host of situations that could be expected to do more harm than good to his reputation, but which would almost certainly have remained unknown to even his contemporaries (much less to *us*), had he not detailed them so extensively in his text. A complete inventory of such materials would be lengthy indeed, and would have to draw some conclusions regarding precisely *which* events would likely have seemed incriminatory to Rousseau, but the confession to sexual masochism in book one, the betrayal of Marion in book two, the cowardly abandonment of his epileptic friend le Maître in book three, and the *ménage à trois* with Mme. de Warrens and Claude Anet in book five --merely to scratch the surface --would all quite obviously have provided further ammunition for Voltaire, Grimm, and Rousseau's other implacable enemies in "the d'Holbach clique." These incidents from books one to six of the *Confessions*, from the days when Rousseau was "unknown to the public" and therefore lived without "a name" [8:338], continue to damage his reputation even today. If his task is apologetic, why does he provide the world with such incriminating information?

At the same time, why does he not emphasize the events of his recent history, setting the (private) record straight on such matters as his much-publicized falling-out with Hume, or the

scandal over his public readings?<sup>i</sup> Though he speaks more than once of his desire to continue his text, “or at least to add... a supplement, which I feel it greatly needs” [7:304], he never gets anywhere near to catching up with his own present in his autobiographies. The “story” in the *Confessions* ends in 1765, but the text itself was not completed until five years after this point, in 1770; when Rousseau returns to autobiography in the *Dialogues* (begun in 1772) and the *Reveries* (begun in 1776), he allows the gap to grow even wider by abandoning the developmental chronology altogether, rather than filling in the increasing number of missing years. Why does he show so little interest in clarifying recent history and current events if he is seeking to replace the (false) history which has developed around them? It is *these* events that were ruining his reputation.

“To know me in my latter years.” Rousseau says, “it is necessary to have known me well in my youth:”

the first features to engrave themselves on my mind have remained there, and such as have subsequently imprinted themselves have combined with these rather than obliterated them. There is a certain sequence of impressions and ideas which modify those that follow them, and it is necessary to know the original set before passing judgments. I endeavour in all cases to explain the prime causes, in order to convey the interrelation of results. [4:169]

The text of the *Confessions* as a whole, coupled with Rousseau’s subsequent autobiographies, bears out the claim he makes here; there is a persistent emphasis in Rousseau’s autobiographies on the distant past, on childhood especially, and a secondary emphasis on the present time of writing, but very little concern with the recent past. The private portrait that Rousseau makes public is most effectively observed in the earliest stages of its formation, the time of its “prime causes:” later events

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<sup>i</sup>Prior to the authorities banning such action, Rousseau gave a number of private readings drawn from the manuscript of his *Confessions*, one lasting from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon. For the most part, these appear to have been drawn from the earlier books, but at least one included the abandonment of his children described in book eight, a book which ends with the following (performatively contradicted) statement: “My *Confessions* are not intended to appear in my lifetime, or in the lifetime of the persons concerned. If I were master of my own destiny, and that of my book, it would not see the light until long after my death and theirs.” I take the information about the public readings from Manguel’s *A History of Reading*, p. 255.

will combine with this psychological nucleus to produce a layering of images and events that will be much harder to decipher. These later events may --on occasion --still serve to illustrate Rousseau's nature by showing how he behaves in situations that are in some way or other unlike those that he had previously encountered, but this will simply be the further explication of a pattern which is already latent in the earlier portrait. If we have been reading diligently, we will not be surprised. "What then did I do?" Rousseau asks the reader in the middle of a story, and we are meant to be able to answer: "My reader has already guessed, if he has paid the least attention to my progress so far" [9:398]. This is book nine. But before even reaching the physical half-way point in the text --as its second section begins in book seven --Rousseau's readers are expected to have attained such insight into his fundamental character that "nothing will save them from boredom except the desire to *complete* their knowledge of a man" [7:263, emphasis added], and as early as book six. "the reader should know my heart by now, and my most constant and genuine feelings" [6:249]. In the hands of a reader who has "paid the least attention," the text will seemingly have accomplished its principal objective by the conclusion of its first half, with the latter sections merely adding detail for the sake of "completeness." With the second half of the *Confessions* being of such minimal value next to the first, it is no wonder that Rousseau chose not to continue his chronological development in subsequent years: whatever there is that needs to be said, it has been said already, and saying it again will hardly turn a bad reader into a good one.<sup>1</sup>

What I would like to suggest is that this fact provides a clue that begins to resolve the problem that I have developed thus far. The "private" self that replaces the public in the *Confessions* is not a private *history*. Where Starobinski sees Rousseau attempting to verify a private history

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, he kept writing --about a thousand pages more after his remark in book six. There is a palpable frustration here that he has "said it all" and yet not been understood, somewhat similar to Descartes' annoyance that he has been so extraordinarily clear and yet his readers remain unconvinced, and also to Nietzsche's insistence near the end of *Ecce Homo* that "I have not said one word here that I did not say five years ago through the mouth of Zarathustra" [4:8].

through the effective inscription of “*pathos*” or “feeling” in the text, I would like to invert this priority.<sup>1</sup> It is history, as I read Rousseau, that is the means through which *pathos* can be conveyed. but *pathos* itself simply *is* the private self that Rousseau wishes to communicate: it is the end rather than the means. “My passions have made me live, and my passions have killed me” [5:209], says Rousseau as he promises us a faithful rendering of his life, “*that is my story.*” The refrain occurs frequently enough that I take it quite seriously; Rousseau, in telling his life, is telling a “story” of passion. but hardly as a “romance” might be said to be a story of passion. Rather, Rousseau takes his personal emotional orientation to be equivalent to “his nature.” To *know* Rousseau is to know how he *feels*, to know --as Thomas Nagel<sup>61</sup> might put it --what it is like to be (a) Jean-Jacques. Writing to Mme de Verdelin in 1760, Rousseau insists on precisely this priority, that narrative be subordinated to character: “I understand that my previous letter contained dubious and poorly phrased passages... Will you never learn that what a man says must be explained by his character, and not his character by what he says?... Please, learn to interpret me better in the future.”<sup>62</sup>

It is a slippery point, and as I search for an analogy, I am led to the classical theory of the bodily humours: the two biles, blood, and phlegm. To say within such a discourse that someone is “melancholic” is not to say that they suffer from a chronic depression which distorts their “true” nature: instead, it is to name their fundamental, organic temperament. The melancholic has a subjective experience of a certain tonality, a characteristic texture, and this temperament opens onto

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<sup>1</sup>I refer to Starobinski’s position in “The Style of Autobiography.” *Transparency and Obstruction* is a much more complex and extensive interpretation, and it moves much closer to the position that I am arguing here: “everything is said through emotion itself, of which words are never more than an uncertain echo” p. 137. To clarify my agenda here, I do not understand my own project as an effort to *replace* Starobinski’s analysis, even though we proceed in contrary directions. I see no reason to believe that Rousseau’s *Confessions* has only one objective --it seems, rather, to be trying to do many different things at once --and therefore, I see no reason to suppose that contrary analyses may not each be appropriate within their own proper spheres of applicability. I have extracted *one* layer of the *Confessions* through opposing the two theories of writing it contains, but there is no reason to expect that Starobinski, exploring the dynamics of immediacy and alienation in Rousseau, should arrive at an immediately compatible conclusion.

a range of particular moods and responses, imbuing each with a common quality. To be melancholic is a manner of being-in-the-world; it is to paint both the inner and the outer world with the colours available in the melancholic palette. It is not is a set of conditions *added to* a human nature that could possibly be considered complete in their absence, since it is one of the principal forms of human subjectivity itself.

The alchemical language had faded from use by Rousseau's day<sup>1</sup> --and he would doubtless have refused to describe himself in categories that were applicable to so many others --but it captures very well what it would mean to have an "emotional" essence, something deeper than we normally mean by temperament. Rousseau may speak of charting the "succession of his feelings" in the *Confessions* (as also in the *Reveries*), but these feelings are meant to be revelatory of an underlying quality in his emotional constitution; they are not independently valuable in his attempt to reveal himself to us, as they would be if he were simply replacing a "history of action" with a "history of feeling." And thus, each incident is presented to the reader as a moment that will bear out the truth of Rousseau's nature already established, or reveal another facet of this concealed "self." While Rousseau often speaks of documenting the succession of his feelings, these statements must be read under the guidance of his still more frequent allusions to providing the "key" to his nature. There is always, in Rousseau's mind, a unity underlying and indeed generating the plurality of experiential phenomena.

Consider in this context the manner in which Rousseau introduces his account of his failed liaison with Giulietta. While he is working as a secretary in Venice (1743-4, therefore age 32-33), Rousseau is set up with a prostitute by a business associate (as a courtesy he believes, but I can't help but wonder if it might not have been a cruel joke; how will the overwrought and awkward

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<sup>1</sup>Montaigne, in contrast, thinks it is important in *On Friendship* --circa 1580 --to describe his temper as balanced "between the jovial and the melancholy, moderately sanguine and warm."

Rousseau handle a highly refined Italian courtesan?). The introduction to the story is remarkable:

If there is one incident which plainly reveals my character, it is the one I am now going to describe. Whoever you may be that wish to know a man, have the courage to read the next two or three pages and you will have complete knowledge of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. [7:300-1]

This introduction certainly solicits attention from the reader, most overtly. And what is the story in these “two or three pages” which rewards this attention, which reveals so much so quickly? After some preliminary (and public) flirtation, Jean-Jacques is at last alone with Giuletta --“Nature’s masterpiece” --but after only partially undressing her, he panics and is wholly unable to touch his object of desire. Until, that is, he discovers (or decides) that Giuletta has a malformed nipple, and therefore concludes that “instead of the most charming creature I could possibly imagine I held in my arms some kind of monster, rejected by Nature, men, and love” [7:302]. Pestered by Rousseau about her “hideous” deformation, Giuletta (quite reasonably) rejects Rousseau and advises him to “give up the ladies and study mathematics” [7:303], at which point Rousseau quite suddenly recognizes his “madness” and apologetically --but ineffectually --begs her to take him back. She refuses of course, and he waxes nostalgic about the perfection that eluded him, the great love that mysteriously slipped through his fingers.

The account is indeed fascinating and worthy of study in its own right; I am somewhat taken aback at Rousseau’s perspicacity in discerning that *this* incident is uniquely revelatory of his nature. It most certainly is. But what interests me at this point is not the insight into Rousseau’s psychology that might be drawn from this narrative, but rather, it is the *kind* of significance that Rousseau claims the narrative should have for the reader. The Giuletta story is presented to the “courageous reader” as sufficient in itself for the task of letting us “know” Jean-Jacques. Having read and pondered this section of the text, the reader will have a “complete knowledge” of its author, and this is something that would be impossible if such knowledge were tied to a personal history. While I assume that there is more than a little hyperbole in this rhetorical address to the reader, that it serves to



resuscitate flagging interests and generate suspense, it reveals all the same the *kind* of effect that Rousseau is aiming for in the *Confessions*. He might have said any number of things to generate interest: “I come now to the most unexpected event in my life; this is the most embarrassing thing I ever did: I then met the most beautiful woman I have ever known (or the most monstrous, for that matter).” But instead of these, or countless other possible openings, Rousseau promises *knowledge*: after so many tangential and incomplete approaches to revelation, this time Rousseau will be direct. He will reveal in these brief “two or three pages” precisely who he is, if through some gross lack of perception or concentration we have somehow failed to master this all-important subject thus far.

Rousseau can make this claim precisely because what he is attempting to reveal in the chronological series of vignettes that constitute the *Confessions* is a characteristic pattern of affects, a quality of feeling which undergirds the experiences recounted.<sup>1</sup> The series of events which constitute his history are no more than the phenomenal indications of this noumenal pathos: “I may omit or transpose facts, or make mistakes in dates; but I cannot go wrong about what I have felt... [I]t is enough if I enter again into my inner self, as I have done till now” [7:262]. Rousseau’s strategy, like Descartes’ in the more autobiographical parts of the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*, is to use biography as a means of ever more precisely zeroing in on the most fundamental and basic character of who and what he is. Both have an essentialist orientation toward selfhood. But while Descartes views the self purely as a “thinking thing,” the *cogito* common to all persons, “Rousseau” is very much a thing which *feels*, and through the textual revelation of this feeling across so many incidents and through the prism of his own history, he demonstrates how entirely idiosyncratic he is in his subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup>Even the “exceptions” in the *Confessions* prove this rule. It is not at all uncommon to find Rousseau prefacing certain stories with the claim that his “head was tuned to the pitch of a strange instrument and was out of its proper key” [3:128]; we are thereby instructed to read these stories as revealing (problematically I would think) what Rousseau is *not*, and in its own way, this continues the project of revealing an emotional essence.

## 6) A Time for Pleasure:

But the image of the reader is crucial in Rousseau's awareness of his own subjectivity. However much he may desire to declare himself autonomous and fully present to himself --though sadly misunderstood by nearly everyone --it is clear from his text that he is able to think of himself in this manner only through anticipating a kind of confirming gaze from the reader; he is immediately present to himself through the mediation of others. The most pleasurable experiences in Rousseau's life are those constructed as timeless idylls, the "timelessness" being very much a part of the enjoyment. In the *Reveries*, Rousseau complains that while he "was barely allowed to spend two months" on the Isle of St. Pierre, he "could have spent two years, two centuries and all eternity there without a moments boredom... I look upon these two months as the happiest time of my life. so happy that I would have been content to live all my life in this way. without a moment's desire for any other state" [5:82-3]. Similarly, Rousseau describes "the twelve hours spent" with his charming companions in the cherry orchard as being "as good as centuries of intimacy... we were ready to go on loving one another like that forever" [4:135-6]. And of course, the central idyllic experience of Rousseau's life --the time alone at Les Charmettes with his beloved Mme de Warrens --intensifies this structure even further; in his final piece of writing (the unfinished tenth *Reverie*), Rousseau claims that "in the space of four or five years I enjoyed a century of life and a pure and complete happiness... I wanted nothing except that such a sweet state should never cease" [10:154]. Rousseau discovers who he is only through happiness, and happiness is invariably described as a tenuous grasp of the eternal within the flow of time. This is sometimes figured as a kind of mystical rapture, as in the St. Pierre reverie, but equally, it can be seen as the submersion into the undifferentiated expanse of pastoral life, where no day is qualitatively different from the one before. In either case, Rousseau seems to agree wholeheartedly with Zarathustra; "all joy wants eternity."

But there is a notorious "problem" with Rousseau's account of his most significant idyll, his

time alone with Mme de Warrens; it almost certainly never happened. In the *Confessions*, the pair spent roughly two years living in rustic isolation, and this becomes “four or five years” by the end of the *Reveries*. but such prosaic historical facts as the land deed records reveal that there was --at most --a very brief window of three or four months during which Rousseau could have lived alone with his “Mamma.” More strongly, it is likely that there was no time at all during which either Claude Anet (the former lover), or Wintzenried (Rousseau’s replacement) were not living with de Warrens alongside Rousseau.<sup>i</sup> Much has been made of this fact, and perhaps much should be. for it seems to reveal either an astounding instance of what Freud would call a “cover memory” (a self-deception which protects the ego from the details of one’s true history), or the outrageous inclusion of a fabrication as the “defining” element in a life story. *Both* of these explanations seem implausible. but the fact is there. awaiting illumination.

I would not presume to resolve this long-standing debate at a stroke. but it does provide an occasion for noting certain features of the relation between time and writing in Rousseau, and this may in turn suggest a part of the explanation. In discussing the role of the reader in Augustine’s *Confessions*, Starobinski suggests that the human audience “makes the Truth discursive.” Augustine’s prayer to God is timeless in itself, but the reader “needs a narrative, a laying out of the events in their enchainned succession.”<sup>63</sup> This strikes me as a fruitful suggestion with respect to Augustine’s text, but I think it also has an application, though a less obvious one, when considering Rousseau’s. I certainly do not read Rousseau’s invocation of God at the start of the *Confessions* as instantiating a bifurcation in his audience at all similar to that found in Augustine, but in his own

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<sup>i</sup>Cranston’s biography patiently considers every available piece of “evidence” on this matter, and I would like to avail myself of his findings --they have not been seriously disputed --without pausing to reiterate the somewhat cumbersome details of the case. As Cranston’s task is historical rather than interpretive, he forestalls on offering a definitive explanation. He concludes only that as a matter of historical fact, Rousseau has his dates quite wrong here, but he (quite rightly I think) avoids simply calling him a liar; the “liar” explanation, on its own, lacks sufficient explanatory power to address a biographical distortion on this scale.

way, Rousseau also has the problem of “spreading out” experiences which may in themselves have occupied a very short period of the calendar (or no time at all, outside of his imagination). If a small series of (virtually) timeless idylls are the defining features of Rousseau’s life, without which he “should perhaps have remained uncertain about [his] true nature” [Rev. 10:154], then he too can utilize his readership in order to justify the augmentation and magnification of these instances into a lengthy narrative. And this is very much what he tells us he is doing at the start of book six, the book in which the problematic *Les Charmettes* idyll is most fully recounted:

Here begins the short period of my life’s happiness; here I come to those peaceful but transient moments that have given me the right to say I have lived. Precious and ever-regretted moments, begin to run your charming course again for me! Flow one after another through my memory, more slowly, if you can, than you did in your fugitive reality! What shall I do to prolong this touching and simple tale, as I should like to: endlessly to repeat the same words, and no more to weary my readers by their repetition than I wearied myself by beginning them forever afresh? [6:215]

The passage is curious in quite a number of ways; in the middle of an apostrophe to memory, Rousseau invokes the image of the reader, desiring this reader’s satisfaction as well as his own. Once introduced as the rhetorical justification for the elaboration of idyllic memory, the reader becomes an active participant in the unfolding of the narrative. It is for this reader that Rousseau will recount his experiences (principally his emotive experiences). Or is it? It is also for himself, *through* the reader --the discontinuous images of his life, inscribed in text, returning to him as a developmental narrative. Catherine Beaudry asks the pertinent question here, “whose pleasure is the text concerned with.”<sup>64</sup> Rousseau’s, his reader’s, or Rousseau as he sees himself being seen? My suspicion is that at various times, each of the three analyses provides an appropriate answer, though it is the last which offers the most intriguing complexities.

There are a variety of ways of conceptualizing the situation of viewing oneself through the mediating gaze of the other. In a line of interpretation initiated by Hegel, but exaggerated and codified by Sartre, the result is inevitably dismal; objectified by the other, one submits to his or her interpretation and is trapped (at least temporarily) in a sharply delimited role. Rousseau certainly

gives ample evidence of having experienced himself in such a manner at times; in his account of working for Mme de Vercellis. Rousseau tells us that “she judged me less by what I really was than by what she had made me: and since she saw nothing in me but a servant she prevented my appearing to her in any other light” [2:85]. But while the “Sartrean” diagnosis captures one aspect of Rousseau’s self-description quite nicely, it fails to capture the strain of exhibitionist delight that is so dominant in the first books of the *Confessions*. In this model, Rousseau actively enjoys his capacity to force his presence on a witness whose responses will reflect Rousseau back to himself.

Rousseau certainly likes being looked-at: relating his (literal) practise of exhibitionism as a youth. Rousseau candidly informs us that “the absurd pleasure I got from displaying myself before their eyes is quite indescribable” [3:90]. This is already a rather striking admission to make in the midst of a self-portrait that promises to reveal all of the “extravagances of [his] heart.” under the reader’s “incessant” gaze, and Rousseau gives us ample evidence that this kind of pleasure does in fact carry over into his writing as well. Repeatedly, he describes *within* his writing the excitement he feels *about* the act of writing itself, *about* being read: “I feel my pulse beat faster once more as I write” [1:30] he admits, and he is sometime completely overwhelmed by his own act of narrative exertion --“the pen falls from my hand” [1:42]. But while the metaphors in these passages are --at the very least --suggestive, the exhibitionist mode of Rousseau’s writing is captured perhaps most effectively in a curious and coquettish piece of dialogue with the reader that occurs shortly after his admission of unabated sexual masochism (“the first and most painful step in the dark and miry maze of my *Confessions*” [1:28]):

I am well aware that the reader does not require information, but I, on the other hand, feel impelled to give it to him. Why should I not relate all the little incidents of that happy time, that still give me a flutter of pleasure to recall --six or seven of them at least. ... Or let us strike a bargain. I will let you off five and be content with one, just as long as I am allowed to take as long as I like in telling it, in order to prolong my pleasure [1:31, Rousseau’s ellipsis].

Rousseau seems to be enjoying himself quite a bit in this passage, quite aside from the “flutters of

pleasure” his memories provide. In fact, the actual memories come to seem rather arbitrary in this passage: there are “six or seven” which suit themselves to his purposes, but any one of them will do, provided he is allowed to prolong it. But while the choice of anecdotes may be arbitrary (at least, as Rousseau describes his situation), he is “impelled” to write at least one of them for the reader. It is the communication that is necessary here, not the “reliving” of memory, and the pleasure derived from the telling seems to be directly linked to the imagined presence of this reader upon whom Rousseau imposes his memories. The memories themselves are in this case pleasant, in other cases most decidedly unpleasant, but always --as this passage so nicely illustrates --dilated in front of an anticipated reader who is inscribed within the text. As Beaudry notes in this regard, “Rousseau’s success in attaining an audience is due to his genius at structuring the narrative so as to include a role for the reader to follow.”<sup>65</sup> The apologetic bargaining in passages like this one draws the reader into closer contact with the narrative (again, as Rousseau imagines the situation), making it clear that this is a conscious act of communication; with Rousseau speaking so directly to us, we should not remain at arm’s length from the text, it seems, but respond most directly to this person who speaks to us from across the page.

But it is not sufficient for Rousseau that he merely attract our attention. He must also make himself --his pleasure --the object of interest. The response to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* had been unprecedented, with readers swearing their eternal devotion or proposing marriage by mail, based on the assumption that Rousseau himself must in fact be the romantic Saint-Preux of the novel. While Rousseau had claimed only the status of “editor” of the love-letters in his epistolary novel, denying even his own authorship, he admits in his *Confessions* that he had consciously avoided developing this into a plausible subterfuge, so that in the resulting confusion his readers might identify author with editor and hero. The response must have whetted his appetite to be recognized not merely as a great author, but as a great man --“like no one else in the whole world.” The series of

autobiographical writings beginning with the *Confessions* thrust Rousseau himself in front of the reader as an object of interest, and this is precisely the relationship he wanted. The address to the reader cited above continues in the following manner:

If I were only<sup>1</sup> concerned for your [pleasure], I might choose the tale of Mlle Lambercier's unfortunate tumble at the end of the field, which caused her to display her full back view to the King of Sardinia as he passed. But the incident of the walnut tree on the terrace pleases me better. For I took part in it, whereas I was only a spectator of Mlle Lambercier's tumble. [1:31-2]

Our pleasure is subordinated to Rousseau's pleasure here, and in fact, what pleasures we get from our reading will seemingly be obtained through a vicarious identification with those that Rousseau himself experiences in writing for us. It is a rather tangled rhetorical situation, but ultimately a symbiotic one: Rousseau needs a reader in order to narrativize his pleasurable memories, and so that he might enjoy the anticipated recognition of that readership, while as readers we are meant to enjoy both the spectacle of the events depicted and the image of the narrator who reveals them. As an exhibitionist, Rousseau reveals to his witnesses a body (of events), which may in itself be beautiful, unattractive, or simply comic, but even more, he reveals the bold subject responsible for the exposure, who is perhaps "depraved," perhaps admirable, but at the very least audacious and singular.

But something else happens in this exchange of pleasures that is worth noting. In passages such as the one I have just discussed (and there are numerous others of the same kind), the implied identity between the narrator and the protagonist begins to break down. Rousseau --the narrator -- impresses himself on us through his writing, but he is distanced from the content of that narration through the simple act of telling it. Narrator and reader are contemporaneous, looking together at the

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<sup>1</sup>There is a significant error in Cohen's translation here, which I have corrected above: where he has "were I *not* concerned for your pleasure," the translation should read "were I *only* concerned with your pleasure." [Si je ne cherchais que le vôtre, je pourrais choisir celle de derrière de Mademoiselle Lambercier...]

spectacle of the events and emotions that have befallen the protagonist. But the real subject of the *Confessions* is ever more clearly the narrating “I,” our tour guide through these various adventures and misadventures, who pauses so frequently to offer commentary on both the tragedy and the comedy of it all. “The incident with the walnut tree pleases me better,” he says, “for I took part in it.” And yes, he did --once, as a youth; there is certainly a kinship between the narrator and protagonist that is unavailable to the rest of us. But in the very act of narration, *this* Rousseau is distanced at least to some extent from the chronology of events, looking down on them from above just as surely as his story began outside of time and space on the day of Judgment. It is this character, the narrator, who has such a tenuous relation to the story he tells, who feels such sorrow and joy, loss and regret, as he reviews the parallel experiences of his narrated self: it is the narrating “Rousseau” --not the protagonist --who is the origin and final destination of the pleasures that circulate through his text, and who stands as the recipient of whatever sympathies, judgments, and identifications he manages to elicit. And so once more, the history of feeling that pertains to the protagonist is not in fact the deepest subject of the *Confessions*; the “story” is in some respects simply a means through which the narrator can speak. But it is the narrator who ever more fully dominates the narrative as a pure capacity for feeling that transcends its own textual determinations.

### **7) The Whole Story:**

The kind of analysis I have begun here answers at least one of the standard charges levelled at Rousseau’s *Confessions*, and indeed, at virtually all chronological autobiographies. Rousseau repeatedly claims to present a “complete” account of himself, but is it not obvious that there must be a process of selection at work? A small set of events, uniquely revelatory in some manner or other, have been drawn out of the potentially infinite storehouse of memory and made to stand in for the whole of a life. A longer autobiography might have allowed for more detail and precision in what



was described, but as we see in *Remembrance of Things Past*, it does not get one any closer to a *complete* account; Proust's narrator may well give us an unprecedentedly detailed description of a tree, a cookie, a cup of tea, but did he not see a thousand trees during his life and drink untold cups of tea? What chain of associations and impressions did these unleash?

Judged against this standard, the task of constructing an autobiography seems (as Freud might put it) interminable; as long as we are alive, there is no end to what *could*, and perhaps *should* be said. In *Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne has his novel's genial narrator grapple with this fact in its most hyperbolic form. In what --anachronistically --I like to read as a parody of Proust, Tristram spends the first four books of his autobiography detailing the first day of his life, only to realize that this has put him further away from "telling his life" than when he started:

"I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve month[s] ago; and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my fourth volume --and no farther than to my first day's life --'tis demonstrative that I have three hundred and sixty-four days more life to write just now, than when I first set out... As at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write --it must follow, an' please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write --and consequently, the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read... [W]rite as I will...I shall never overtake myself."<sup>66</sup>

Sterne's agenda is at least largely comedic; fighting a losing battle to "say it all," Tristram is a fool. But is Rousseau the same kind of fool, and all the worse for being less amusing? He shows some concern that he might be. "In telling the story of my travels," Rousseau says, "as in travelling itself, I never know how to stop" [4:167], and there is no one I suppose who has ever claimed that Rousseau was concise. And yet, however delayed and postponed it may be, Rousseau does manage to stop; a last word is written, even if he does sometimes consider a sequel. "if ever I should have strength to write it" [12:605]. Rousseau was evidently frustrated by the final period, composing three distinct autobiographical texts in his last years, but it is only the *Reveries* that was left --in some sense --"unfinished," and this only because of his death.

There are a host of ways in which I might want to say that even the *Confessions* and the *Dialogues* are “incomplete,” something less than the “revealing myself absolutely” [2:65] that Rousseau has promised us: the historical detail left out of any autobiography will always be infinitely greater in scope than the detail that *is* included. But I suspect that Rousseau’s claim to completeness is not simply misguided, not simply hyperbole, and not fully captured in the image so commonly invoked in studies of autobiography of a “representative sample.” The kind of totality or completeness Rousseau is aiming for, as I have suggested, is *internal* rather than external, *essential* rather than accidental and contingent, and as such, it is not affected by the density of historical detail it contains.

The frequency with which Rousseau speaks within the *Confessions* of his “failure of memory,” of the “gaps in his narrative,” and of the “inevitable errors” in his chronology, are further corroboration of this, collectively suggesting that one would be ill-advised to read the text as a historical memoir:

It will be strange if, amongst so many comings and goings, amongst so many successive moves, I do not make some confusions of time and place... There are some events in my life that are as vivid as if they had just occurred. But there are *gaps and blanks that I cannot fill except by means of a narrative* as muddled as the memory I preserve of the events. I may therefore have made mistakes at times... But over anything that is really relevant to the subject I am certain of being exact and faithful... That is something that can be counted on. [4:128, emphasis added]

Rousseau’s insistence on his veracity is familiar, as is his acknowledgment of the “gaps” in his memory; every autobiographer that I have come across will at some point rail against the insufficiencies of memory. But there is a new element introduced in this passage that will preoccupy Rousseau throughout his remaining years of writing. Not only must an autobiography --of necessity --*select*, omitting much that could be said, and omitting much that must have been forgotten: there must also be material *added* to the autobiography in order to preserve the story. In producing the *Confessions*, Rousseau is not only condensing and distilling the vast range of his experiences into a

manageable text, he is also dreaming-up new material as a kind of supplement for this fractured narrative. Whether consciously or not, imagination moves into the terrain of memory, producing a connective tissue that will *look like* memory once it is recorded, but which springs from a different origin. Pieces of real history and pieces of imagined history are strung together in the *Confessions* along a narrative thread --the "story" to which Rousseau so frequently adverts. And yet, for all that, it is a work of which Rousseau can boast in the *Reveries* "with a proud consciousness of my achievement," that it "carried good faith, truthfulness and frankness as far, further even, or so I believe, than any other mortal" [4:76]. Somehow, fiction can be interwoven with fact without the truth being compromised.

The *Confessions* is informed by this perspective, but it has not yet crystallized into a theory. It is in the *Reveries*, particularly in the fourth walk, that the relationship between fact and fiction, truth and lies, is made thematic. Claims to be writing "for himself alone" aside, it is one of Rousseau's most elegantly structured pieces of writing; a discussion of the obligation to tell the truth moves seamlessly through an example into a concern over the moral status of fiction, and finally -- inevitably --into an assessment of fact and fiction in the *Confessions* itself. I will follow this structure as I conclude my discussion, rereading the *Confessions* through both the analysis I have developed thus far, and through the theory Rousseau presents in the fourth *Reverie*.

## **8) Fables and Fictions:**

The fourth *Reverie* begins with an enigma: "going over my life... I was very surprised by the number of things of my own invention which I remembered presenting as true at the very time when my heart was proud of my love of truth... What surprised me most," Rousseau says, "was that when I recalled these fabrications I felt no real repentance" [4: 64]. How can it be, he wonders, that he can recall *some* of his fabrications with such a clear conscience, while others from so long ago continue

to plague him? Though he is strangely silent about the lies that do not bother him, Marion is very much on his mind again as the lie that *does*: it is a lie which “has continually tormented me these fifty years” [4:65].

The difference between the two kinds of “lying” seems, at first, to lie outside of us. Given that Marion’s life would be ruined by his lie, he “owes” her the truth, and it is a kind of “robbery.” he argues, to withhold it from her in such a situation; Marion has an *a priori* entitlement to the truths that affect her welfare, and through his lie he has violated this. In contrast, it is “a profanation of the holy name of truth to apply it to trivial things of which the existence is a matter of general indifference and the knowledge totally useless. Truth without any possible usefulness can therefore never be something we owe to one another; it follows therefore that anyone who conceals or disguises it is not telling a lie” [4:66].<sup>1</sup> The “lies” that are so inconsequential do not violate the (capital “T”) Truth, since this Truth is a “moral” rather than a “metaphysical” category [4:66]: where we can have done no wrong to others --or to ourselves --we cannot have run afoul of our duties to the Truth.

Rousseau will very soon reject this account --who is fit to determine “usefulness;” how can we ever be sure that something is useless? --but it is, I would suggest, the crucial moment in his essay. While he rejects the use of utility as a standard, he quietly allows to stand the division he has carved here between morally permissible and morally condemnable instances of “lying.” It is this cleavage that creates the space in which Rousseau will locate fiction, and it is his account of fiction that will justify the “truthfulness” of his *Confessions*.

“Lies” contradict the moral Truth, but if not through violating the rights of others, then how so? What *is* the moral Truth? For Rousseau, it is purely a matter of intention. If he is not precisely

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<sup>1</sup>A more accurate translation might be “that not everyone who conceals or disguises it is telling a lie.” [La vérité dépouillée de toute espèce d'utilité même possible ne peut donc pas être une chose due, et par conséquent celui qui la tait ou la déguise ne ment point.”]

a Kantian in his ethics, he is very much less a utilitarian: “to judge men’s words by the effects they produce is often to misjudge them,” since “their degree of goodness or malice can only be gauged and determined by the intention that produced them” [4:68-9]. Consequences are misleading for Rousseau, since they are out of our control: the purest of motives can lead to the most disastrous of results. And yet, though Rousseau is often cited as an influence on Kant’s moral theory (particularly through *The Social Contract*), he is almost mockingly dismissive of a Kantian-style “categorical” approach to ethics, casting it as the easy way out of a moral quagmire: “What a host of knotty problems, which it would be easy to dispose of by saying: ‘Let us always act truthfully, whatever happens. Justice is inherent in truth; falsehood is always evil... whatever truth may lead to, we are always guiltless in declaring it, since we have not added anything of our own to it.’ But this is merely to cut the Gordian knot” [4:68]. Like Kant, Rousseau finds the moral law written within, but not as the universalizable dictates of practical reason, which is merely the public face of a private refusal to take responsibility for one’s actions. Rather, it is conscience, the “voice of Nature” within, that provides him with his infallible guide:

In all ethical questions as difficult as this I have always found it best to be guided by the voice of conscience rather than the light of reason. My moral instinct has never deceived me. It has always remained sufficiently pure within me for me to put my trust in it, and if in my conduct it is sometimes swayed by my passions, it has no difficulty in regaining its authority in my recollections. Then it is that I judge myself as severely perhaps as I shall be judged after death by the Supreme Judge. [4:68]

This accounts nicely for the lie that has caused Rousseau such torment over the years: while his conduct was “swayed” by his passions --his “invincible shame” --his conscience quickly and fully reasserted itself, revealing inescapably the moral status of his lie. Indeed, it would have done so at the time if the affair had not begun and ended so suddenly: “if I had been given time to come to my

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<sup>1</sup>Rousseau’s self-judgment is always *at least* as stern as God’s, but in his numerous invocations of this sublime comparison, he can never quite decide whether or not he might have been harsher than the Supreme Judge; eight pages after the above passage, his conscience assures him that he will “one day be judged *less* severely than I have judged myself.”

senses, I should most certainly have admitted everything” [*Confessions* 2:89]. Conscience is infallible, but it takes time: next to the storms of passion, it is quietly insistent, the tortoise rather than the hare.

However, the moral theory that Rousseau develops in the fourth *Reverie* does more than explain his otherwise inconsistent responses to the lies he has told; it also “explains” my own response to Rousseau. In discussing the Marion narrative earlier, I referred to what I took to be a distasteful emphasis on Rousseau’s suffering next to a somewhat distanced and disengaged feeling for Marion’s well-being. The Kantianism in Rousseau’s moral theory stands behind this phenomenon, and also behind my own perhaps exaggerated response. For while Rousseau may have rejected the Kantian reliance on reason, substituting the voice of nature in the form of conscience, he maintains a typically Kantian manner of interpreting moral crime, and it is an approach that I have always found offensive. Not only is “intention” invoked to mitigate culpability (“never was deliberate wickedness further from my intention” [2:88]), but the sin itself is construed, I would argue, primarily as a distressing loss of control over oneself, rather than as a violation that requires apology and reparation. He stands accused more of his shame than of his lie. The emphasis Rousseau places on his own suffering in response to his action is due to the fact that he understands “sin” as a revelation of the soul’s degree of autonomy, with the waves of guilt in which he indulges serving as an index of his frustration over the dominance of shame and timidity in his life. The lying itself will have consequences, to be sure, but as he has argued in this fourth *Reverie*, he will never be able to predict or contain them: his action, once released into the world, will be indistinguishably mixed with the actions and responses of others. But the fact of his lying --irrespective of Marion’s fate --reveals an appalling submission to the control of an alien passion.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>I have used Kant’s well-known moral theory as a useful contrast here, but to avoid further anachronism, I should indicate that Rousseau’s ethical position in the fourth *Reverie* is almost certainly derived from and opposed to the Calvinist theology of his native Geneva. As a predestinarian, Calvin

But if this accounts for the “lie” that continues to distress Rousseau, how is he to interpret those “untruths” for which he has felt no remorse? To account for these, he relies on the division he has allowed between our obligation to the Truth --which is absolute and inviolable --and our much more problematic, defeasible obligation to factual accuracy. “To lie to one’s own advantage is an imposture, to lie to the advantage of others is a fraud, and to lie to the detriment of others is a slander --this is the worst kind of lie.” And yet, “to lie without advantage or disadvantage to oneself or others is not to lie; it is not falsehood but fiction” [4:69], and “anyone who holds a mere fiction against himself as a lie has a more tender conscience than I have” [4:71]. It is the intention (the *justifiable* intention) to cause no advantage or disadvantage through one’s words, coupled with the factual inaccuracy of what is said, that renders a performance fictional, and this gives “fiction” a rather technical meaning that at times diverges from common usage. A work that we might otherwise consider to be a “fiction” is therefore a lie in Rousseau’s schema, if it is presented as true in order to garner favour for the author. Rousseau’s example is the then-popular text by Montesquieu, *The Temple of Gnidus*, which the author presents as a translation of a recently discovered Greek manuscript. The pretense may have been transparent --even amusing --to the literati of the day, but Rousseau has reservations about the gullible commoners who will inevitably miss this point, and the text is therefore suspect. In contrast, idle remarks made to fill in conversation, provided they are irrelevant, are mere fictions for Rousseau. For what does it matter “whether I believe the sand at the bottom of the sea to be red or white” [4:67]? Fiction, then --as opposed to lying --is to be assessed not on the basis of an externalist standard, but through reference to what we might broadly call the author’s intentions.

With this distinction in place, Rousseau comes at last to speak of his own text. In his

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understood “sin” as a significant indicator of whether one is fated to be saved or damned; the consequences of my sin on the earthly life of another are marginal next to what my sinfulness reveals about the state of my own eternal soul.

assessment, he repeats many of the claims already made within the *Confessions* itself, but they are mapped onto the moral theory of fiction he has just developed. It is worth quoting at some length:

I never said less than the truth; sometimes I went beyond it, not in the facts but in the circumstances surrounding them. and this kind of lie was the effect of a wild imagination rather than an act of will. I am wrong to speak of lies, since none of these embellishments was really a lie... I was writing from memory; my memory often failed me or only provided me with an incomplete picture, and I filled the gaps with details which I dreamed up to complete my memories, but which never contradicted them. I took pleasure in dwelling on my moments of happiness and sometimes I embellished them with adornments suggested to me by my fond regrets. I described things I had forgotten as I thought they must have been, as they perhaps really had been, but never in contradiction to my actual memories. Sometimes I decorated truth with new beauties, but I never used lies to extenuate my vices or lay false claims to virtue. [4:76-7]

It is a striking passage in the text, one which raises a host of questions in its attempt to resolve a few.

What precisely is the difference between “the facts” and the “circumstances surrounding them”?

Does Rousseau really intend us to view his “wild imagination” as an autonomous pseudo-agency within his mind that could write various “embellishments” into the text without any engagement with the will? What are the adornments suggested by Rousseau’s “regrets” if they are not in contradiction to his memories? My sense is that if there are answers to be had for each of these questions, they will not necessarily cohere with each other; the text at this point has the sound of someone thinking out loud, experimenting with different interpretations (even the correction is left in: “I am wrong to speak of lies...”), and perhaps this is perfectly appropriate for a “reverie.” There is a single point, however, that is emphasized at least twice in the passage, and which dominates the remainder of the essay. Rousseau will imagine, he will fantasize, but his “embellishments” will not contradict the truths reported by his memory. In developing his self-portrait, the facts of his history provide a lattice within which he is free to fictionalize, but the lattice itself must not be covered up or removed. In Starobinski’s apt metaphor, “inventions are elaborated as a composer might elaborate a melody, reworked to fit the emotions called forth by writing; but the variations are constrained by the cantus firmus provided by memory.”<sup>67</sup>



This at first may appear to be precious little comfort for his readers; what good does it do *us* to know that he has not distorted the facts if we cannot tell the facts from the fictions? And yet, the standard of fiction contained the proviso that a fiction can be neither to the author's advantage nor to the reader's disadvantage. Would this not screen out almost every fiction that could possibly be of concern? If one pushes the merely logical possibility of utility to its limit, *no* fiction would ever be permissible, for somewhere, somehow, someone may either gain or lose from the existence of the fabrication. In an alternate universe, so much depends upon the presence of red sand at the bottom of the sea; it *does* matter, or could, contra Rousseau. But might we not allow Rousseau a reasonable latitude on what is to count as useful, permitting him in the interest of story-telling to give the menu (as he does) of lunches eaten fifty years ago, even while accepting that these are almost certainly fabrications? "I have often made up stories, but very rarely told lies" [4:79]. Rousseau concludes. The facts, he suggests --the morally *relevant* ones -- are safe from the intrusions of fiction.

But is the line as certain as Rousseau suggests? Are his fictions merely added onto a record of facts, and never in contradiction with them? His moral instinct --which alone will tell him when he can and when he can't "embellish" --is sometimes, as he acknowledges, "swayed by" his passions. Now, in so far as these passions are "external," the chance moods that flare up in response to circumstance, there is no great problem; whatever narrative Rousseau produces while under the temporary control of these intervening feelings is open to revision and restoration when his blood subsides again. Indeed, since (as he has told us), he "cannot write a word" during these storms of emotion, he is --within his own terms --protected from writing a lie. But what if these passions are a part of his nature? What if rather than external and temporary impositions, the passions that distort his vision are the very passions that constitute his essential nature? As I have suggested in my earlier analysis, Rousseau's "story" is very much an attempt to communicate a very deep level of emotional subjectivity; the story *is* a story of passion. Does "conscience" not lose its foothold then, opposed as

it must be to passions that will not subside, to passions which are *constitutive* of a nature rather than temporary impositions upon it?

We need not speculate about the result; the central confession in the text, then and now the most damning imputation against Rousseau's moral standing, demonstrates the results. In "explaining" his decision to abandon his five children to the foundling's hospital, Rousseau opposes a ludicrously self-laudatory account of his "nature" to the simple "fact" of his actions. And it is the fiction which wins:

If I were one of those low-born men, deaf to the gentle voice of Nature, a man in whose breast no real feeling of justice and humanity ever arose, this hardness of heart would have been quite easy to explain. But my warm-heartedness, my acute sensibility, the ease with which I formed friendships, the hold they exercised over me, and the cruel wrench when they had to be broken; my innate goodwill towards my fellow men; my burning love for the great, the true, the beautiful, and the just; my horror of evil in every form, my inability to hate, to hurt, or even to wish to; that softening, that sharp and sweet emotion I feel at the sight of all that is virtuous, generous, and lovable: is it possible that all these can ever dwell in the same soul along with depravity which, quite unscrupulously, tramples the dearest of obligations underfoot? No, I feel, and boldly declare --it is impossible. Never for a moment in his life could Jean-Jacques have been a man without feelings or compassion, an unnatural father. [8:332-3]

The stress on Rousseau's rhetoric is enormous here. It is by turns shrill, desperate, defiant, and scared as the task of replacing the public with the private reaches its breaking point in the maze of a run-on sentence that delays as long as possible the inevitable conclusion. There is something tragic, perhaps something pathetic, in watching a man not only trying to convince us of the unacceptable, the impossible, but also, I think, struggling unsuccessfully to comprehend the magnitude of his own crime. Or perhaps, less benignly, struggling with partial success to deceive himself, to forget. After myth and fact are at last forced into open confrontation (he had introduced the confession ten pages earlier, only to back away), the declaration "it is impossible" constitutes a supreme act of will, but also, a complete abdication of moral responsibility. And it is Rousseau's fictions that will service this abdication. The "facts" denied, rejected, one sees the new fable beginning to surface, beginning to form tentatively in the wake of the battle: his "real" reasons are perhaps too dangerous to reveal;

or perhaps he saw himself “as a member of Plato’s Republic;” the children would only have shared in his misfortunes; or, cryptically, they would have been exposed to some grave danger from Thérèse Le Vasseur’s lineage (mental illness?).

The four justifications to which I allude are all on pages 333-4 of book eight: by book nine [p. 387], he has come to favour blaming the Le Vasseur family, though by the time he writes the *Reveries*, he has reverted back to claiming Platonic citizenship. He never managed to find the explanation he so deeply needs. And can one really imagine an explanation that would suffice?

This is an utter breakdown in communication --with others, and within the self: the reader’s anticipated refusal, which can only be countered by the bold declaration that such things as *have* happened are somehow yet *impossible*, is an all too transparent mirror of Rousseau’s own lack of conviction. Structurally, however, it is identical to the Marion narrative. As in this prototype, Rousseau ultimately insists that his “fault is great, but it was an error; I neglected my duties, but the desire to do harm never entered my head” [8:335]. It is hardly a stretch to consider Rousseau’s seemingly obsessive concern with Marion as the textual figure for his abdication of paternity, the substitution of a manageable crime for the confession which can never fully be expressed. As he says of this youthful sin, “the most that I could do was to confess that I had a terrible deed on my conscience... [T]he desire to some extent to rid myself of it has greatly contributed to my resolution of writing these confessions” [2:88]. Rousseau’s passion, his feeling, *does* communicate itself expressively as he suggests it will, but in fiction, not in fact. The construction of what he can say, what he will say, reveals the absence of what cannot be (directly) expressed. Substitution and displacement are --paradoxically --immediately present.

But what happens to the reader’s relationship to the *Confessions*, if anything at all like the interpretation I have just sketched is appropriate? It is passion, through the agency of “wild imagination,” that is both the subject of the story and its final author. Inverting the traditional

priorities yet again, Rousseau's narrative is not a product of a reflection that is occasionally derailed by emotion; it is feeling which authors the text as a fiction, artfully introjecting a historical, biographical structure into the text as the ladder which falls away after the fact. As with Augustine, the narrative that provides the detail, the particularity, the image of a fleshed-out biographical individual, is subverted by the language of the text itself. "Fictions" are not only added to, but replace and stand in for Rousseau's life; they are not used to "fill the void left by some defect of memory," but rather, the historical experiences of Rousseau's life are used to fill in the content of his fictional narratives. Fiction has priority over fact as a means of expression, allowing for the inscription of condensed representations of passion. The affect is available; the narrative is suspect. And the "void" that so troubled Rousseau is not, in the end, a void of memory at all, but rather a withholding of complete confession on a matter that is all too present in his memory.

But Rousseau does not disappear behind this veil. The pathos itself continues to call through the narrative, insisting on the presence of a palpably *feeling* subject, even if it is true that the precise location of that subject and the precise feelings he experiences are displaced and uncertain. As he himself notes, "writing" is a way of remaining "hidden," and it is this relationship that is "precisely the one that suits" him. But being "hidden" is a very different matter from being (simply) absent. In an often cited illustration, Sartre speaks of his failure to find his friend Pierre in the café where he was expected, and finds that his friend is very much present to him in the mode of his not-being-there: he "haunts the café,"<sup>68</sup> insistently and obtrusively failing to appear. Rousseau too is absent, but ubiquitous in his absence. Not all together there, but not simply gone either; a cry in the dark. The reader is meant to call back. In love, Rousseau fantasizes constantly about the absolute contemporaneity of two souls, transparent to one another as crystal, but in practice, he always inserts a mediating third party between them. When he is with Mme de Warrens, there is Claude Anet, preserving order and preserving distance; when he is in love with Mme d'Houdetot, there is her lover

Saint-Lambert. Even in his novel, Julie and Saint-Preux are kept apart by Julie's husband, Wolmar. But not simply kept apart; they are also kept in love, or at least in desire, by the impossibility of absolute fulfilment, uneasily maintaining both their connection with each other and their privacy at the same time and through the same act. They write to each other --the endless declarations of love that so closely mirror those which Rousseau will send to Mme d'Houdetot. Mme de Warrens once told Rousseau of a man who left his mistress in order that he might write to her; "I answered that I could easily have been that man, and I might have added that I sometimes was" [5:176]. Indeed, he sometimes was, and is, in the telling of it. Writing itself serves to mediate the relationship between Rousseau and his reader, securing a distance through which desire can only partially pass, but which therefore maintains the tension of postponed fulfilment. "[I]f ever in all my life I had once tasted the delights of love to the full." says Rousseau, "I do not think that my frail existence could have endured them: I should have died on the spot" [5:210]. The writing that conceals is also a writing which protects, an indirect evocation of presence that allows him to remain hidden. "He wants to seduce without letting go of himself, without giving up the immediate rapture of desire," says Starobinski.

[H]e seeks to elicit the attention, sympathy, and passion of others, but without doing anything beyond surrendering to his cherished dreams. Seduced himself, he will seduce others, will seduce them because he is seduced himself... Rousseau is unwilling to accept the risks or to make the effort required to achieve authentic communication with another person, hence he loses his grip on the truth of his personal relationships. But at the same time he loses his grip on the truth of his feelings, since he feels nothing that is not intended overtly or covertly to be displayed before witnesses.<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps by the end this was true. Or more precisely, between the difficult years of 1768-1776: he did seem to rally somewhat in his last year or two, and the *Reveries* contain moments of both striking beauty and relative lucidity. But the soundness of Rousseau's mental health at any given moment is --for me at least --quite secondary; the strange fascination of his various autobiographical writings, and the dangers which they court --as summarized above by Starobinski --are constant throughout, even if their form and intensity becomes exaggerated at times by Rousseau's illness. And these

patterns are of course remarkably similar to those we can see in the other authors I am considering here. so we should perhaps not rush too quickly to declare madness; not all anxiety is neurosis.

Part of the excitement of the *Confessions* --for me --lies in witnessing someone pushing his limits: "what will I say?" "what will I show?" It is the obvious difficulty of the project for Rousseau --the long delays and aborted attempts leading up to every difficult confession--that garners my sympathies. and sometimes even my respect. This is not reportage; it is self-overcoming. or at least, it is so at its best. At its worst, it is inarticulate, and --I suspect --wilfully so. He grieves the wrong losses, confesses the wrong sins, and is angry with the wrong people. "The stronger the feeling the less it can be described" [6:224], he says, and his *Confessions* seem to bear him out.

And yet, I wonder: he has promised a full account, he has told us to look to his childhood for explanatory causes, he has even suggested that his readers --and not himself --will alone be able to untangle the myriad details of the Great Plot. I am drawn in by all of this. and in each case. I find him, or if not quite him, traces at least, a ghost or after-image which surrounds the text. It is not easy, not immediately obvious, and so I tell myself that I have found a Rousseau that the author did not *mean* for me to find, a Rousseau constituted of illegible rage, inexpressible grief, and yes. even a capacity for joy which exceeds his language. My knowledge of the man seems all the more reliable, all the more revealing, for being taken thus from behind his back. It is *I*, the reader, who have found the author out unawares, heard him saying what he feared he could not and hoped he did not say.

Were this Nietzsche, were it Kierkegaard, I would stop short here... and smile at the author's cleverness, marvel at the rhetorical intricacies that have led me so unaware into precisely the kind of experience that he had in mind from the outset. And surely there would be no shame in being out-manuevered by an acknowledged master of indirection.

But this is Rousseau -- "naive," "effusive," and "unrestrained."

He is not so crafty.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### NIETZSCHE: THE GHOST WRITER OF *Ecce Homo*

What prudent man would write a single honest word about himself today? --he would have to be a member of the Order of Holy Foolhardiness to do so.

*Genealogy of Morals*, 3:19

#### 1) The End of Autobiography:

“The nineteenth century,” Peter Gay notes, “was the psychological century par excellence:”

It was a time when confessional autobiographies, informal self-portraits, self-referential novels, intimate diaries and secret journals, grew from a trickle to a stream, and when their display of subjectivity, their purposeful inwardness, markedly intensified. What Rousseau in his painfully frank *Confessions* and the young Goethe in his self-lacerating and self-liberating *Sorrows of Young Werther* had sown in the eighteenth century, the decades of Byron and Stendhal, of Nietzsche and William James, reaped in the nineteenth. Thomas Carlyle perceptively spoke of “these autobiographical times of ours.”...“The key to the period,” Ralph Waldo Emerson said later in life, “seemed to be that the mind had become aware of itself... the young men were born with knives in their brains, a tendency to introversion, self-dissection, anatomizing of motives.” It was an age of Hamlets.<sup>70</sup>

And yet, the development of a psychology which seemingly expanded the resources available for would-be autobiographers, and the increasing experimentation brought about by the very popularity of the genre were at the same time revealing the fundamental and inescapable limitations of autobiography. Even prior to Nietzsche’s own work in the genre, the conceptual limitations of autobiography were all too apparent to any who would study the previous examples. As the studies in my previous chapters have revealed, memory is unreliable, sincerity is impossible to establish, language is distorting, and the holy trinity of autobiographical persons --author, narrator, and protagonist --can seemingly never be made into One.

What Nietzsche adds to this already impossible set of facts is a deepening of Hume’s critique of the very notion of a unified person --a decisive contribution to the so-called “death of the subject.”

Even within his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche was already speaking of the “individual” as the outcome of a kind of dream, a dream easily shattered by the resurfacing of an all-embracing will. By the time he came to write the *Genealogy of Morals*, this Schopenhauerean will had been recast in the less overtly metaphysical language of force, and the concept of a self had become the dark creation of *ressentiment*; a political interest now supplements the earlier polemic against the subject, as the postulation of a soul comes to be seen as an attempt to limit the spontaneous circulation of force through the cultivation of responsible agents. And running in tandem with these modes of analysis, almost from the start, Nietzsche identified language itself as instrumental in perpetuating the belief in a subject behind every predicate: “I shall repeat a hundred times [and he very nearly did]; we really ought to free ourselves from the seduction of words!”<sup>71</sup> But in each case, in whichever mode of critique, the subject or “soul” is stripped of its assumed naturalness, the Cartesian *cogito* re-presented as a historical product rather than as an immediate given that could securely ground further reflection. And, if there is no uniquely localizable, essential and enduring “self,” the very concept of an *auto*-biography must seemingly be discarded; there is no longer any “thing” to talk about, and no one to do the talking. With such concerns in the background, it is perhaps no wonder that some have thought it best to read *Ecce Homo* --Nietzsche’s “autobiography” --as a purely critical text, an exposé of the naivety of the genre,<sup>1</sup> and a means through which Nietzsche could expand and develop his ongoing critique of that “calamitous atomism

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<sup>1</sup>A clear example of reading *Ecce Homo* as a critical exercise can be found in Richard White’s “‘Autobiography Against Itself.’” Roy Pascal’s influential *Design and Truth in Autobiography* also concludes that *Ecce Homo* is not a “real” autobiography, but for exactly the opposite reasons: “One must distinguish autobiography... from philosophical reflection on the self, static analysis, and the self-portrait --as in... Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*... What is common to all these methods is the attempt, by means of introspection, at a static representation of the personality. The autobiography is on the contrary historical in its method... it involves the philosophical assumption that the self comes into being only through interplay with the outer world” [p. 8]. This is certainly a misrepresentation of Nietzsche’s project, but Pascal has not drawn his impression out of thin air; there is, I will argue, a “static” element in *Ecce Homo*’s portraiture, owing to both Nietzsche’s use of the eternal return, and to the problematic role of *Zarathustra* in the text.



which Christianity has taught best and longest, the *soul* atomism... the belief which regards the soul as something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, as a monad, as an *atomon*: this belief ought to be expelled from science!”<sup>72</sup>

And so, with Nietzsche, we reach the end of the line in autobiography. The genre which begins so promisingly with Augustine and which receives its defining modern formulation through Rousseau becomes, after Nietzsche, an impossible project. But just as the growing awareness of the impossibility of a complete and objective history has not sounded the death knell for the historical instinct, nor fatally compromised the value of the histories still being written, the “end” of autobiography is far from the end. As Philippe LeJeune gnostically reminds us, the fact that autobiography is impossible “in no way prevents it from existing.”<sup>73</sup> Rather than speaking of autobiography as something that Nietzsche thinks we must discard, it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of Nietzsche as reconfiguring the genre, for while Nietzsche’s critique of the ego-subject renders the very concept of a “life story” problematic, he also places a premium on the capacity of “the great souls” to weave the disparate events of their lives into a kind of unified narrative: “that is to say, to think of all things in relation to all others and weave the isolated event into the whole... Thus man spins his web over the past and subdues it, thus he gives expression to his artistic drive.”<sup>74</sup> Autobiography on this model is a task of creation rather than of description: *Ecce Homo* is of course subtitled “how one *becomes* what one is,” not “how I *became* who I am.” But autobiography need not be pursued as a conscious task --the occupation of a select few --for Nietzsche also insists on reading even the most abstract and impersonal writers of the philosophical tradition as engaged *at all times* in the process of inadvertent autobiography. “Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been,” he says, “namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir.”<sup>75</sup> Autobiography, it seems, is both impossible and inevitable.

## 2) An Attempt at a Self-Criticism:

Honest books make the reader honest, at least to the extent that they lure out his antipathy and hatred, which cunning prudence otherwise knows best how to conceal. Against a book however, we may let ourselves go, however much we may restrain ourselves when it comes to men.

*Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, 145

What follows are two distinct but related “pieces.” The first, written for the most part over a year ago, is a study of the “subject” of *Ecce Homo*, a play on the two meanings of subject. Taking as my guide the idea that Nietzsche’s autobiography is a performance in which Nietzsche attempts to “become what he is,” I searched for a kind of subject in the text, a “Nietzsche” who emerges in the process of his writing. The subject (topic) of *Ecce Homo* is thus the coming-to-be of the subject (individual) created in and through the writing itself. But after elaborating an interpretation of how this could work, I turned to look at the ways in which it *didn’t* work. Chief amongst these is Nietzsche’s ongoing ambivalence about communication, which leads him to deny the very readers whom in other moods he courts. This is, let us say, the “external” problem. The internal problem concerns Nietzsche’s hagiographical re-presentation of Zarathustra; there is a sustained alienation between Nietzsche and his favourite text which compromises his otherwise masterful presentation of himself as one who absorbs and overcomes his own history. It is, I suggested, the great deed to which he is no longer sure that he is equal. The problems mirror each other in a number of ways, but each results in the “Nietzsche” of *Ecce Homo* taking on an ephemeral and undecidable quality --both present and absent, alive and dead, and thus, becoming a kind of ghost.

I still hold to much of what is (sometimes tentatively) expressed in this essay, but I am uncomfortable with it on three counts. First, the voice does not strike me as entirely settled and comfortable with itself. Rather entranced at the time by Jacques Derrida’s unique style of philosophizing, by the breath-taking novelty of what he is able to say in this voice, I found myself using heady and extravagant metaphors: life and death transactions, transubstantiation, ghosts contained (or not contained) in proper names. But to my ears today, there is a palpable unease about

what is being said, a desire to get back to firmer and more familiar ground as quickly as possible. I wasn't always sure when I was and when I wasn't using metaphor. Describing the state in which he composed *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche claims to have revelled in this confusion: "the involuntariness of image and metaphor is strangest of all; one no longer has any notion of what is an image or a metaphor: everything offers itself as the nearest, most obvious, simplest expression" [3:6:3].<sup>1</sup> What dazzling confidence in his own voice lies behind this freedom with words! But he also worries, sometimes, that he is "only a poet," and I was likewise disturbed at the thought that I might be believing in my own dreams, the first (and maybe only) victim of a trick with words.

Second, there is a frustration throughout at the lack of a satisfactory resolution: I did not find Nietzsche --it is a null-hypothesis (or so I thought at the time) --and my own frustration with this turned in the second half of the paper into something of an attack on Nietzsche himself. There is much to learn from many a failed experiment, but rather than questioning what led to the "failure" --the annoying lack of "Nietzsche" --I moved rather too quickly into the always-convenient terms of arm-chair diagnosis, all but calling him neurotic. While this may well be true, I don't think that I had "proven" the point to anyone who didn't already suspect as much. And my view on what this would mean --if it were true --has changed significantly since working on Rousseau, where the question of lucidity is much more pressing. It now strikes me that a diagnosis of "neurosis" may simply be a means of foreclosing further discussion, a way of containing the troublesome aspects of human experience behind the label of "illness."

And finally, as a sort of synthesis of these two points, I think I was insensitive to my own involvement in the issues I was discussing. I never questioned why I was asking the questions I was

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<sup>1</sup>Sarah Kofman has argued persuasively in *Nietzsche and Metaphor* [chapter two], that in Nietzsche, "metaphor is no longer referred to the concept, as in the metaphysical tradition inherited from Aristotle, but rather the concept is referred to metaphor" [p. 14-15]. "As early as *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche judges the conceptual language of philosophy the most inappropriate to express the 'truth of the world,' since it is at three removes from it, simply a metaphor for a metaphor" [p. 6].

asking, never acknowledged that the Nietzsche I partially found and partially failed to find was very much *my* Nietzsche, a kind of distorted and distorting mirror. While condemning Nietzsche for his fear of his readers, I failed to note how deeply my own shifting narrative voice reflected the same concern; if I say something odd, something embarrassing and unscholarly, will I be taken seriously, or will my text come across as a series of private reveries and delusions of interest to no one other than my analyst? In the process, I think I may have broken a methodological rule --or what Nietzsche might have called a principle of "intellectual hygiene" --that is only now beginning to crystallize for me: if one's content is generated in significant measure through a subjective response to the affective qualities of a text, it is necessary to be more forthcoming about the quality of that process, and to take full responsibility for it rather than passing it off as "impersonal" analysis. I really had an insufficient textual basis (at least in the essay itself), for the claims that I made --they cannot have come from a disinterested appraisal of the material (an "immaculate perception") --and so I should have said more about my own stake in the proceedings, the motivations that prompted precisely this Nietzsche to emerge in my reading. Especially, I think, when my subject was Nietzsche, who is so insistent on this very point.

I could have re-written it. Instead, I have written a second essay, "On the Problems of Reading Nietzsche," that tries to determine what features of Nietzsche's texts give rise to the concerns I have just outlined. I think of it as a preface, though it comes at the end. As I argue in the original paper, *Ecce Homo* itself functions very much like a preface, sometimes subtly and

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"The step of everything honest speaks; but the cat steals over the ground... You too love the earth and the earthly... but there is shame in your love and bad conscience" [Z, 2:15]. A conceptual equivalent for the parable might have it that Zarathustra is condemning those scholars who disavow their affective interest in the knowledge they seek, but it is questionable whether a "conceptual equivalent" is appropriate for this idea. The two sections which follow are also significant for this theme; "On Scholars" castigates the scholar who *no longer has* any significant degree of desire, while "On Poets" treats the opposing extreme: "we [poets] do lie too much. We also know too little and we are bad learners; so we simply have to lie. And who among us poets has not adulterated his wine?" Significantly, Zarathustra claims that he *is* a poet, worrying that he may be "*only* a poet," while he simply "*once was*" a scholar; *his* danger is clearly not with forgetting his interest in what he discusses.

sometimes radically reconfiguring the content of the earlier works it addresses. In *Ecce Homo*. Nietzsche appropriates and reinterprets his earlier work according to how he now sees it; he imputes motives to his historically-past self that reflect not a veridical history (he denied that such a thing could exist), but a created, living history, a history of the self where both this self and its history must constantly be recreated and renewed. I am intrigued by this. No, I am obsessed with it --conscious and clear-headed self-mythologizing as the life of memory, the praxis which keeps one's past from being a dead and inert "it was," though as Nietzsche recognized as early as the *Untimely Meditations*, it is a dangerous praxis,' this attempt to give oneself "a posteriori, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate."<sup>76</sup> Without in any way resolving the problem, he simply states that it is "so hard to know the limit to denial of the past."<sup>77</sup>

I have not played entirely fair; I have added in significant ways to the earlier text, so I am not engaged as Nietzsche was in a pure appropriation of an unaltered given.<sup>ii</sup> I may thus be closer in spirit to Montaigne than to Nietzsche (Montaigne continually added phrases, quotations, and sometime lengthy subsequent reflections to his earlier essays without indicating where the additions occurred). But I have left in what I now find embarrassing, the material that makes me uncomfortable (against a not-inconsiderable degree of inner resistance). And not. I should stress, as

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<sup>i</sup>Nietzsche points --somewhat cryptically --to the nature of this "danger" somewhat later in the same essay, saying that to "give oneself, as it were, a posteriori, a past in which one would like to originate" is "a dangerous process... For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions, and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them" [p. 76]. I will discuss this passage briefly in section five, and provide a more general discussion of the function of the rhetoric of danger (and heroism) in Nietzsche's writings in section eighteen.

<sup>ii</sup>The changes to the original paper --aside from the inevitable correction of grammar and spelling --are largely confined to the addition of three new sections: a discussion of Kaufmann's interpretation of *Ecce Homo*. near the beginning; a more elaborate analysis of Nietzsche's use of the eternal return (turning paragraphs into pages); and most significantly, a sustained reexamination of the role of Zarathustra in the text, which complicates immeasurably the claim of the original paper that "Nietzsche" is the master-name within a chain of inter-substitutable proper names. Beyond this, any further additions or emendations are recognizable by the fact that they refer to the conclusions of previous chapters.

something that I secretly disavow. In fact, my concern is that I secretly believed, and continue to believe, what I once presented in a way which deflected attention from that fact. My point in writing a new preface is to claim more clearly in my own name both the metaphorical / theoretical content of this earlier work and the ambivalence and unease which accompany its formation and expression. I now find this material more revealing --of myself, certainly, but also I think of Nietzsche --than a "corrected" version of the same thoughts could be. For in some respects, this anxiety about signing one's name to a set of views --views that can never be expressed transparently, that will be heard in any number of unintended ways, and that will inevitably be revealing of who one is as a writer --has been one of the central themes of my text.

There is also a kind of conceptual symmetry that arises through this decision that I find uniquely appropriate. As if inevitably, in the last section of the last chapter of a book on philosophical autobiography and the problems of readership, the line between my own autobiography and those that I am reading has finally collapsed, and I have become my own reader, the text for my own commentary.

## THE SUBJECT OF NIETZSCHE'S *ECCE HOMO*

Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been, namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir.

*Beyond Good and Evil*, 6

### PART A: INTERPRETATION

#### 3) Preface(s):

If all philosophy is involuntary autobiography, and Nietzsche knows this, why, we might ask, does he feel a need to “voluntarily” write *Ecce Homo*? What is the difference between the voluntary and the involuntary here, or put another way, how --if at all --does *Ecce Homo* differ from the previous works in Nietzsche’s literary career?

There is an answer that I will not pursue here, though in its own way, it is surely the right one: Nietzsche’s official autobiography does not differ from his other works, both because *Ecce Homo* was *not* in fact an autobiography and because these previous works were *already* highly autobiographical. To take the first half of this equation, it seems clear that in spite of a very few biographical references, *Ecce Homo* does not present a conventional life-history of its author in the mode of traditional autobiography; as Hollingdale notes in his introduction, if “you approach it as ‘Nietzsche’s autobiography’ you will get very little out of it and probably won’t even finish it, short though it is. As autobiography it is a plain failure. You cannot reconstruct Nietzsche’s life even in its broad outlines from his ‘autobiography:’ it is in no way a narrative;’ it is not in the least ‘objective.’”<sup>78</sup> It may seem entirely accidental that Nietzsche chose to write his final text in a quasi-autobiographical form, for it simply elaborates themes and teachings that are largely continuous with those developed in his earlier works. The largest section of the text, after all, can be read as a sort of

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<sup>78</sup>Definitions are important here; Hugh Silverman is convinced that whatever else it is, “*Ecce Homo* is *very much* a narrative. It is not narrative in the sense of a nineteenth century novel, but neither is Thoreau’s *Walden* or Roland Barthes’ *Roland Barthes* --though they both would qualify as autobiographical narration” [Silverman, “The Autobiographical Textuality of Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*,” p. 142, emphasis added].

precis of Nietzsche's earlier publications.

On the other hand, these previous texts were themselves written in the most highly pronounced first-person imaginable; the "I" who speaks in these books is insistently present, and one would rarely mistake a Nietzsche text for the work of another author. As Derrida points out, "the name of Nietzsche is perhaps today, for us in the West, the name of someone who (with the possible exceptions of Freud and... Kierkegaard) was alone in treating both philosophy and life... with his name and in his name."<sup>79ii</sup> Nietzsche flouts traditional expectations by tying his view of life to his own idiosyncratic experiences: the authority of his thought is tightly bound to his unique mode of expression, and that expression is an inevitable product of his life, its natural outcome. "I speak only of what I have lived through, not merely of what I have thought through; the opposition of thinking and life is lacking in my case."<sup>79ii</sup> His autobiography is thus only the most obvious instance of this general approach to writing, and in this sense then, there is no important difference between *Ecce Homo* and any of Nietzsche's other writings. The commentators are thus perfectly within their rights to draw indiscriminately from *Ecce Homo* and the other texts as they develop critical positions, without needing to make special allowances for the complexity found in the rhetorical situation of a traditional autobiographer.

That said, it strikes me that there *is* an important difference that is worth exploring.

Nietzsche's other texts are at least potentially isolated entities; there are occasional moments of

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[*Otobiographies*, p. 6.] I'm not entirely sure I know why Derrida singles out Nietzsche in this manner --why not at least Montaigne as well, or Rousseau in his last eighteen years? --but his general meaning is clarified through his contrasting accounts of Hegel and Freud. The former is "someone who constantly tells you that his empirical signature --the signature of the individual named Hegel --is secondary. His signature, that is, pales in the face of the truth, which speaks through his mouth, which is produced in his text... so that in the end Hegel, the individual, is nothing but an empirical shell which can fall away without subtracting from the truth or from the history of meaning" [p.56]. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, "can't get along without Freud's name... [It] has been inherited from Freud and accounts for itself with the structure of this inheritance." [p.71]

"Whether we can and should treat the thought of other philosophers without reference to their lives is a separate and important question, witnessed perhaps most dramatically in the ongoing debate about the significance of Heidegger's connection with National Socialism.



cross-referencing in them,<sup>80</sup> but they could still operate intelligibly in the absence of each other. *Ecce Homo*, in contrast, has a necessary relation to the other books in the corpus that would make it incoherent without them. It gets its content, so to speak, at second-hand through appropriating the teachings of these other texts, and in this it functions very much like the series of prefaces which Nietzsche composed in 1886 and 1887. The re-readings embodied in these prefaces often advance and recapitulate the themes developed in the texts Nietzsche is reviewing, but he is surprisingly circumspect in passing judgment on his earlier work; only the *Attempt at a Self-Criticism* appended to the *Birth of Tragedy* is overtly critical. Instead, Nietzsche's concern is typically with reading his earlier texts "genealogically," as signs of health or sickness, and relating such observations to his personal history. Speaking of the stages in the cultivation of the free spirit, Nietzsche tells his reader in the preface to *Human, All too Human* that "no psychologist or reader of signs will have a moment's difficulty in recognizing to what stage in the evolution just described the present book belongs (or has been *placed*)."<sup>81</sup> The emphasis, as here, tends to be on exploring the significance of the production of each text as a moment in the development of *Nietzsche*, not just reviewing it as an instance of disembodied, impersonal thought.

#### 4) An Embarrassment of Authors:

*Ecce Homo* extends this practice to its limit; Nietzsche's biography, his teaching, and his literary career are entirely interwoven here. And this is not only the case in "Why I Write Such Good Books," the extended book review that constitutes the bulk of *Ecce Homo*. In the other sections as well, Nietzsche not only discusses his previous texts, but also frequently interrupts his narrative in order to quote himself --often as if from another author, as if these were simply texts that he had

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<sup>81</sup>Preface, 8. The significance of the curiously unexplained parenthetical phrase, "or has been *placed*," will --indirectly --be the theme of the following section (the italics, I should stress, are always Nietzsche's unless otherwise indicated).

*found*. The effect can be somewhat disorienting. What, for instance, is one to make of a passage where Nietzsche says that his current topic seems to “allude to something Zarathustra says” [3:6:3], or where he quotes Zarathustra describing his task and interjects “it is mine too” [3:6:8]? Those who are looking for signs of incipient madness would certainly find compelling evidence for their case in this, for it is as if Nietzsche has *forgotten* that he himself had written these books, forgotten that “Zarathustra” is a merely a fictional character. Even Walter Kaufmann, who goes to such lengths to scoff at those who doubt Nietzsche’s absolute lucidity, is uncomfortable with the role of “Zarathustra” in *Ecce Homo*: while on the whole it is a stylistic masterpiece, the high-water mark of German letters, *Ecce Homo* is marred for Kaufmann by “all too many references to Zarathustra -- most of them *embarrassing*.”<sup>81</sup>

I think I know what Kaufmann means --Nietzsche’s treatment of *Zarathustra* flirts with hagiography, and thereby treads in the domain of the biographer or critic. It is improper for autobiographers to say such things as Nietzsche says; they are to wait patiently for their commentators to deify them rather than placing the crown on their own heads with Napoleonic presumption. All true no doubt, and Nietzsche is nothing if not “improper.” But “embarrassing,” it seems to me, is an odd word to use here, and all the more so because Kaufmann does not say that it is *Nietzsche* who should be embarrassed --he lets the predicate float without tying it to a subject. Ignoring what he knows about Nietzsche’s view of *Zarathustra* (and as translator, he knows this better than most), he proffers the following explanation for the excessive self-quotation: the frequent references to *Zarathustra* were “intended for readers who did not know that book.”<sup>82</sup> But this is grossly implausible. Nietzsche assure us that *Zarathustra* is incomprehensible to all of his contemporaries [3:4], that to have “understood six sentences of it... would raise one to a higher level of existence than ‘modern’ men could attain” [3:1]. How could he possibly feel that a mere sampling of quotations bereft of context could be of any use at all in explaining a work that lies so far beyond the reach of most of his readers? On the contrary, it seems clear that he is writing for his

“serious” readers alone, those who have read the earlier books with appropriate care. (a class in which Nietzsche is the foremost, and perhaps only member, as we shall see). In the preface to the *Genealogy* for instance, he admits (or brags) that his writings are “indeed, not easy to penetrate. Regarding my *Zarathustra*, for example, I do not allow that anyone knows that book who has not at some time been profoundly wounded and at some time profoundly delighted by every word in it.”<sup>83</sup>

But I take Kaufmann’s “embarrassment” as a clue, even while ignoring his defusing explanation. And it may be quite appropriate that the “subject” of his embarrassment is left unspecified, for at least part of what is involved in embarrassment seems to be a confusion of subject and object positions not unlike that orchestrated by Nietzsche in his texts. Committing a social gaffe, I am of course hyper-conscious of myself as *object*, as “seen-by” others; I am sure that we all know the phenomenon, whether or not we have read Jean-Paul Sartre. But the strange corollary to this “objectification” is that the spectator of my *faux pas* is, at the same time, quite likely to be embarrassed *for me*, sympathetically identifying with how I must appear --*to others*. There need not be a moral quality to this sympathy --the heartless will obviously feel free to laugh --but this very laughter is predicated on a vivid recognition of me as a subject; inanimate objects do not provoke embarrassment, no matter how inappropriately they behave. Part of the “embarrassment” in embarrassment (for philosophers at least) is the resulting instability, where no one quite knows who they are anymore. The breach of boundaries that gives rise to embarrassment inaugurates at least briefly an unsettling of fixed subject / object positions.

There is obviously more to the story of embarrassment than this --I have distilled into several sentences a phenomenology that occupies Sartre for several hundred pages in *Being and Nothingness*<sup>84</sup> --but this brief and admittedly dogmatic account is enough for my purposes here. Nietzsche *is* doing something embarrassing in *Ecce Homo*, something that similarly complicates the relationship between subject and object, or in this case, between author and text. I have said that *Ecce Homo* --unlike Nietzsche’s other writings --is a text about texts, and that these texts happen to

be his own. But this is not equivalent to simply writing a commentary on the earlier works in a manner that would be open to anyone other than Nietzsche. There is an at least *prima facie* authority --the authority of the author --that is only available to Nietzsche, and which appears to legitimate this kind of interpretive rewriting. “[I]t is Nietzsche’s own interpretation of his development, his works, and his significance,” says Kaufmann, “and we should gladly trade the whole vast literature on Nietzsche for this one small book. Who would not rather have Shakespeare on Shakespeare... than the exegeses and conjectures of thousands of critics and professors?”

His question, I take it, is rhetorical: who better to explicate the work than the author? But would *Nietzsche* have seen it this way? Well, perhaps: he did have a rather high opinion of his interpretive prowess. But he would not --*does not*, I believe --claim such a right on the basis of authorial privilege. For the author to step forward and declare “this and this alone is what my book meant and means,” there must be a tacit understanding that authors’ intentions are the fixed and grounding basis of interpretation, and at least part of what Nietzsche is doing in referencing Zarathustra in the third person is calling such assumptions into question. “Calling into question.” or perhaps I should speak more boldly, “overtly rejecting” any assumption of this kind of authorial privilege, for as Peter Fenves aptly notes, “Nietzsche refuses to let intentions put a halt on interpretation, even when they are legitimately described as his intentions: he is not in a privileged position to say what his words mean, even if he can very well say what he meant by them. Nietzsche is thus often surprised by what he writes; he takes delight in discovering that he had more to say than he thought at the time of composition, *Ecce Homo*... being the most obvious example.”<sup>85</sup> Fenves

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<sup>85</sup>Editor’s Introduction, p. 201. Much as I love *Ecce Homo* and praise its virtues to any who will listen, I am sure that I would *not* make the trade Kaufmann proposes. It is a good book --even a *great* book --but not a sacred text, and there is more than a whiff of idolatry in Kaufmann’s claim. Is *Ecce Homo* by itself *really* worth the collective works of “exegesis and conjecture” by (to name only the authors I draw from here), Altieri, Conway, Deleuze, Derrida, Fenves, Graybeal, Heidegger, Hollingdale, Kofman, LeJeune, Nehamas, Silverman, Shapiro, Sprinker, Staten, and --why not --Kaufmann himself? Only a rather robust theory of “genius,” coupled with a strong distinction between “primary” and “secondary” sources could justify such a presumption.

goes on to note that this process is not restricted to Nietzsche's reaction to his earlier texts, but seems also to occur within them: Nietzsche is always re-reading himself, giving his texts the curious rhythm of a dialogue. The words, once written, are immediately at a distance from the author, objects of perusal and interpretation rather than (if they ever were), direct expressions of a present conscious state. Nor is this unique to Nietzsche in any way, even if he is somewhat more aware of it than, say, Rousseau (who constantly strives after a pure language of immediacy that would express his mental states fully and transparently).<sup>1</sup> We are all aware of the phenomenological difference between writing and editing; even our own texts escape us, become object for us (and for others) as soon as they are produced. Within a surprisingly short amount of time, we may no longer even be certain what our intentions once were, but more importantly, these intentions may not seem all that relevant any more; they may cease to reflect what we now see as interesting in our own texts.

But while Nietzsche frees meaning from its confinement in intention, and in the process abjures the privilege of "owning" his texts, this is only half of the story. While one feature of Nietzsche's relation to his previous texts is his overt disavowal of identity with his earlier works, he is also engaged in the act of *re-appropriating* them. The alienation in the first movement is, I would like to say, sublated in his subsequent resumption of identification. To take an initial example, Nietzsche tells us in *Ecce Homo* that his essay "*Schopenhauer as Educator*" is really best construed as "*Nietzsche as Educator*" [3:2:3]. Not only does this claim affix the portrait of Schopenhauer to the image of Nietzsche developed in *Ecce Homo*, it also returns the earlier essay to its place in the canon in a significantly modified form; it is now an essay *about* Nietzsche and an event in the life of the "Nietzsche" who is the subject of *Ecce Homo*. The author of 1874 --who would surely have said that the essay was "about" Schopenhauer --is ignored, or rather, overruled. *Ecce Homo*, I would like

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<sup>1</sup>When Rousseau speaks in the *Reveries* of rereading his own writings, it is not in order to reinterpret them, but rather to extract once more the *original* meaning and thus commune across time with his past self: "I shall recall in reading them the pleasure I have in writing them and by thus reviving times past I shall as it were double the space of my existence." [1:34]

to suggest, stands as a comprehensive, personalizing preface to the entire corpus, and in passing through it, each of Nietzsche's previous works is returned in a modified form to its place in the body of work affiliated with the name "Nietzsche."

The kinds of modification practised in *Ecce Homo* are manifold. There is now, for instance, a "profound and hostile silence about Christianity" throughout *The Birth of Tragedy* [3:1:1]. This is certainly not a silence we would have heard in the text prior to *Ecce Homo*, for why on earth *should* we have expected a discussion of Christianity in a book on Greek Tragedy? Similarly, the three essays of the *Genealogy* each now begin in a way "that is calculated to mislead: cool, scientific, even ironic, deliberately foreground" [3:8:1], and this claim cannot but affect the way we read this earlier text. But while such comments are fascinating as an index of an evolution in Nietzsche's philosophical concerns, even if we don't take them unquestioningly as a "reader's guide" to the corpus (as Kaufmann seems to think we should), there is at least one feature in this interpretive prefacing that is of a rather different order. As is the case with his treatment of the Schopenhauer essay, the various names through which Nietzsche has written in the past are assimilated in *Ecce Homo* to the name of Nietzsche himself. Commenting on *Human, All too Human*, for instance, Nietzsche says, "the name Voltaire on one of my essays --that really meant progress --toward me" [3:3:1]. Of his early essay "Wagner in Bayreuth," Nietzsche states that "in all psychologically decisive places I alone am discussed --and one need not hesitate to put down my name or the word 'Zarathustra' where the text has the word 'Wagner'" [3:1:4]. The process is so ubiquitous that --not without some degree of irony --I would like to call it *intentional*. Nietzsche annexes to his own name the (reinterpreted) teachings formerly presented through the names of Wagner and Schopenhauer, Voltaire, Dionysus, Paul Rée [3:3:6], and --through a curious intermediary step --the text of *Daybreak* itself, which "lies in the sun... like some sea animal basking among rocks. Ultimately, I myself was this sea animal!" [3:4:1]. In *Ecce Homo*, the names through which Nietzsche has written are shown to be, broadly speaking, open to inter-substitution, and "Nietzsche"

comes to stand as the master-name within an ever-expanding network --"I am all the names in history."

Both movements in this process are necessary to understand what is going on in *Ecce Homo*. The externalization of his texts --which reflects Nietzsche's denial of a fixed and enduring author-subject --allows him to reinterpret these earlier works; meaning is decisively severed from author's intent and the texts are thereby liberated to say any number of different things. But this act of reinterpretation is also part of a process through which the texts are *claimed*; it is a gesture of power. In this context, we might remember what is perhaps the most frequently cited passage from the *Genealogy*:

the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart: whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it... [A]nd all subduing and *becoming master* involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous meaning and purpose are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.... Purposes and utilities are only signs that a will to power has become master of something less powerful and imposed upon it the character of a function.<sup>86</sup>

Nietzsche's right to interpret his past works is not then claimed in virtue of his authorship of them, but rather through his ability to make his texts serve as functions in the project he undertakes in *Ecce Homo*. For the identity of the author across time is not a simple *fact* for Nietzsche, but rather, a problem or a *task*. Rather than relying on what he takes to be the idealizing illusion of a fixed and enduring subject who possesses his history as a series of attributes, Nietzsche actively affiliates himself with the aspects of his past that he selects and interprets, sealing this transforming appropriation with his signature, his name. If anything, the traditional mimetic standards of interpretation are inverted here, for a rote repetition would reveal a text that still serves the agenda of a previous "Nietzsche," while a "fresh interpretation" and "adaptation" that "obscures or even

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<sup>86</sup>I will qualify this claim significantly in sections eight to twelve; a closer reading of *Ecce Homo* reveals that Nietzsche's relationship to the name 'Zarathustra' is considerably more problematic.

obliterates” his earlier intentions reveals a mastering of both his texts and the personal history they represent. Straining the limits of how we use the term, Nietzsche calls this process “objective,” even if he does allow that it is “the strangest ‘objectivity’ possible” [3:1:4]; “a historiography could be imagined which had in it not a drop of common empirical truth and yet could lay claim to the highest degree of objectivity.”<sup>87</sup> With this in mind, it is rather beside the point to complain (as some have) that Nietzsche does not give us anything like a veridical history in *Ecce Homo*. While autobiography is inevitably a mixture of self-description and self-creation, Nietzsche’s emphasis on relentless “becoming” aligns him much more strongly with the latter pole in this traditional opposition. In *Ecce Homo*’s treatment of Nietzsche’s literary past, we see an enactment of the movements of self-overcoming, the use of “history for life.”

### 5) Interpretation in the Moment of Recurrence:

This characteristic use of history that reinterprets and appropriates the past according to the needs of the present is given in the most highly condensed fashion on the “interleaf” to *Ecce Homo*, the epigraph that stands so conspicuously between the preface and the first chapter:

On this perfect day, when everything is ripening and not only the grape turns brown, the eye of the sun just fell upon my life: I looked back, I looked forward, and never saw so many and such good things at once. It was not for nothing that I buried my forty-fourth year today: I had the *right* to bury it: whatever was life in it has been saved, is immortal. The first book of the *Revaluation of All Values*, the *Songs of Zarathustra*, the *Twilight of the Idols*, my attempt to philosophize with a hammer --all presents of this year, indeed of its last quarter! --*How could I fail to be grateful to my whole life?* --and so I tell my life to myself.'

“This perfect day,” the sun overhead, two paths stretched out forward and back, and all things ripe or

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<sup>87</sup>I have reproduced Kaufmann’s translation exactly, but there is at least one significant error in it. As Gary Shapiro notes in *Nietzschean Narratives* [p.151], the phrase “the first book of” before the reference to “the Revaluation” is an editorial addition, based on the fact that Nietzsche occasionally described *The Anti-Christ* as the first book of his projected *magnum opus*. He also, however, sometimes viewed the *Anti-Christ* as the (complete) *Revaluation*, and at other times as an autonomous work in its own right. I will return to this authorial ambivalence about his projected master-work in section ten.



overripe --the language is clearly drawn from Zarathustra. the imagery associated with the thought of the eternal recurrence: it is from this unique location that the narration which follows will be spoken as Nietzsche tells his life to himself. And fittingly, Nietzsche summons up in this moment a will to the most comprehensive affirmation, the great and unbounded "yes" to life expressed in the emphasized line, "*How could I fail to be grateful for my whole life?*"

But there is an ambiguity lurking in this affirmation; is Nietzsche grateful for his life *as a whole*, or is he --in addition --grateful for *each moment* within it? The latter seems impossible. How could Nietzsche love the "torments that go with an uninterrupted three-day migraine, accompanied by labourious vomiting of phlegm" [1:1]? Does it make any sense at all to affirm a migraine *qua* migraine, eternally or otherwise? For a mystic, perhaps such things can be loved as raw experiences, as events or "points of intensity" within the ebb and flow of life, but such religious modes of experience are typically predicated on an eradication of the individual and a consequent identification with the universe as a whole. This does not sound like Nietzsche, the great advocate of selfishness and the primacy of the body. Even in *The Birth of Tragedy* --which is perhaps the most amenable of Nietzsche's works to a mystic interpretation --he is clear that the genius of the Greeks lay in their capacity for synthesizing the primal will of the Bacchic revel with the dream-world of Apollo that *preserves* individuation: he was never inclined to advocate a swooning abnegation of selfhood.

Much more prosaically, Nietzsche associates his suffering --here and elsewhere --with artistic creation; the sickness described above was a precondition for the production of the "perfect

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<sup>1</sup>Derrida suggests [*Otobiographies*, p. 14] that a similar structuring moment occurs in every autobiography, whether implicitly or explicitly, and I am inclined to agree. Augustine begins the *Confessions* in prayerful uncertainty, asking how one begins to call on God if one does not "remember" God already. Rousseau imagines himself --book in hand --on the day of Judgment, insisting on his exemption from any further judgment in the place where this is most assuredly impossible. Even Descartes' less overtly autobiographical *Discourse* seems tied to the isolation of the "stove-heated room" in order to establish the character of the narration that follows. Each of these moments establishes not only the leitmotif of the text, but also situates the writing as taking place "with one foot beyond life" [1:3], in a curiously extra-temporal domain from which (temporal) life can properly be reviewed.

brightness and cheerfulness, even exuberance of the spirit.” displayed in the text *Daybreak* [1:1], and so he has very good reasons to be grateful for it. But this is *not* the connection he makes ---he does not make an “apology” for suffering through a greater-goods theodicy --and in fact he goes out of his way to prohibit just such approaches. For in the same work, he explicitly claims *amor fati* as his “inmost nature,” and describes this as the love of fate that wants “nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely to bear what is necessary... but [to] love it” [2:10]. This perspective seems to preclude our appealing to either a “greater goods” theodicy or a Stoic “bearing” of what is necessary in our explication of what is involved in genuinely willing the recurrence of all things. The *parts* as well as the whole must seemingly be loved. Yet without the resources of Stoic enlightenment, Christian theodicy, or mystic detachment, it is hard to know how anyone could possibly embrace the recurrence of all things without gross self-deception.

This is a familiar exegetical problem in Nietzsche scholarship; the eternal return is already a difficult concept to make sense of, and once it is inflected by the “love of fate” expressed in *amor fati* (with which it is almost always associated), it can seem all but unintelligible. And perhaps it is. There is nothing to prevent Nietzsche from speaking nonsense, either intentionally or unintentionally; the various texts that seem to address the recurrence teaching do not in any straightforward way appear to be describing the same phenomenon. To clarify my own agenda, I am approaching the recurrence *solely* as it operates in *Ecce Homo*, and, moreover, through the lens of Nietzsche’s remarks on interpretation in both the *Genealogy* and the *Untimely Meditation* on history. It is therefore a version of the recurrence teaching that responds to these other Nietzschean ideas, but not my own claim as to the “true” meaning of this all-important but woefully under-specified term.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>I am not at all convinced that there *can* be an interpretation of the eternal recurrence that could claim any general applicability throughout the corpus as a whole. The key images and phrases in Nietzsche’s idiosyncratic lexicon seemed to please him, in part, because of their plasticity, their capacity for eliciting different effects depending on the context of their use. In line with this, my own view (which I will not seek to defend here) is that the phrase *does not have* a central meaning that could reconcile such apparently conflicting explications as the “psychological test” model founded on *GS* 341

Within this horizon, *amor fati* appears to function as an *aspect* of the willing of recurrence, not its precondition. It is *not* the case that Nietzsche's capacity for "loving" even his suffering as a brute given --a "fact" --allowed him the privilege of affirming his life as a whole, but rather, a feature of his ecstatic yes-saying is his reinterpretation of this factual given. This means (at the least) adopting a perspective from which any given phenomenon can appear as fully integrated into the projects of the individual. Nietzsche's sickness, for instance, is not excused because --on the basis of some *a priori* principle --it was needed for the production of a work of artistic genius, but instead, it is brought into relation with the experience of artistic production itself and seen as colouring the nature of that process: it is not a necessary evil, but an ineliminable aspect of a certifiable good.<sup>1</sup> His favourite example is always Wagner: "given the way I am, strong enough to turn even what is most questionable and dangerous to my advantage and thus to become stronger. I call Wagner the great benefactor of my life" [2:6].

But while the created and affirmed value of Nietzsche's relationship with Wagner is present in *Ecce Homo*, the sense of mutual betrayal, of disappointed expectations, and lost intimacy are seriously muted. As such experiences are reinterpreted, given new contexts and meanings, their "original" meanings are lost and forgotten, indistinguishable within the horizon of a new perspective. I have explored in the preceding pages some of the incorporating transformation that occurs within this affirmation, but this is only one side of the action of the great soul: much that is in *Ecce Homo* is heavily reinterpreted, but how much is *missing* here, how much of what is recalcitrant in the past is absent in these pages? The "most tremendous nature," he says in the *Untimely Meditations*,

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[“The Heaviest Weight”], and the notorious “cosmological” interpretation adumbrated in *WTP* 1066.

<sup>1</sup>Alexander Nehamas construes this as a part of Nietzsche's efforts to “give style” to his character. Pages 230-33 of *Life as Literature* outline in a highly effective summary how Nietzsche managed to transform so many of his potential liabilities into aspects of his strengths; his illness, his “wasted” years in philology, his inability to sustain the effort needed to produce a lengthy, integrated treatise, all become aspects of an unprecedented philosophical voice.

would be characterized by the fact that it would know no boundary at all at which the historical sense began to overwhelm it: it would draw to itself and incorporate into itself all the past, its own and that most foreign to it, and as it were, transform it into blood. That which such a nature cannot subdue it knows how to forget; it no longer exists, the horizon is rounded and closed<sup>1</sup>

There is something more than a little “magical” in Nietzsche’s invocation of this model of forgetting, both in the essay on history and in the later works. Philosophers working in the rather different tradition of contemporary analytic epistemology have often taken it as obvious that we simply do not have the sort of active control over our beliefs and memories that Nietzsche’s claim seems to require. “With respect to almost all normal perceptual, introspective, and memory propositions,” William Alston states, “it is absurd to think that one has any such control over whether one accepts, rejects, or withholds the propositions... How would I do so? What button would I push?”<sup>88</sup> I certainly cannot answer his question. But one might suggest that Alston’s problem is not Nietzsche’s; Alston is concerned with clear-headed, conscious and deliberate control over beliefs, while Nietzsche may well be speaking of unconscious processes. To say that the great soul “knows how to forget” may just be a somewhat misleading way of saying that such an individual is so constituted as to forget what it needs to, when it needs to. But for post-Freudians like myself, this hardly improves things. The question surely arises as to whether “the most tremendous nature” is in fact *forgetting* what it once knew (“*it no longer exists.*” Nietzsche says), or simply *repressing* it. How could “it no longer exists” mean anything more than “it no longer exists *for consciousness*”? And would “forgotten” experiences not have all the more insidious an effect to the extent that they could no longer be countered by deliberation and decision? Nietzsche may well

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<sup>1</sup>*UM*, p. 63. In his seminal study of autobiography (*Design and Truth*), Roy Pascal insists that *Ecce Homo* is *not* an autobiography (because it is “not historical” in its method!), but his definition of “good” autobiography sounds, ironically, almost like a paraphrase of this passage: “The best autobiographies seem to suggest a certain power of the personality over circumstances, not in the arrogant sense that circumstances can be bent to the will of the individual, but in the sense that the individual can extract [a] nature out of disparate incidents and ultimately bind them together in his own way, disregarding all that was unusable. Painful as well as advantageous experiences can thus be transformed into the substance of the personality” [p. 11].

tell us that only the decadent can never “be through with things.” but he tells us precious little about how he himself manages to expunge the traces of his own life-suppressing experiences. those which cannot be subjected to a redeeming interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

But there is a more pressing problem with forgetting that draws these abstract concerns into focus. This (unconscious?) forgetting is presented as the optimal solution of the tremendous nature to the oppressive force of history --the “great and ever greater pressure of what is past” that “pushes him down or bends him sideways,” encumbering “his step as a dark, invisible burden which he would like to disown.”<sup>89</sup> And Nietzsche does not warn us of any unwelcome consequences that will accrue to the individual who is able to live in this manner. But when he moves on to discuss “critical history,” which --in a different way --also involves the excision of the stultifying aspects of the past. the practitioners are suddenly “dangerous and endangered men:”

Sometimes, however, this same life that requires forgetting demands a temporary suspension of this forgetfulness; it wants to be clear as to how unjust the existence of anything --a privilege, a caste, a dynasty, for example -- is, and how greatly these things deserves to perish. Then the past is regarded critically, when one takes the knife to its roots, then one cruelly tramples over every kind of piety. It is... a dangerous process... For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions, and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them.<sup>90</sup>

The master simply “forgets.” and that is that --the past no longer exists --while for the critical historian, the process is gradual, tentative, and never complete --“it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain.” Why the difference? Why is it more dangerous to know what one is doing, and to remember that one has done it? It is as if in discussing forgetting, Nietzsche “forgets” what he knows as a critical historian, namely, that even the master (the noble, the free spirit, etc.) is a product

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<sup>1</sup>In fairness, I suppose that if Nietzsche *had* actually managed to rid himself of the past, he would not be in a very good position to describe whatever processes occurred to bring this about.

of his past.' "The best that we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away."<sup>91</sup>

Whatever this stern new discipline may be, it is hardly "forgetting."

The *Untimely Meditations* presents these two visions of history side by side, and even if Nietzsche never overtly notes the obvious disparity, the picture of "masterful forgetting" is at least tempered by the more gradual and tentative image of a stern new discipline; there is a degree of reservation expressed through this latter view about the presumptions of the former. But this prevailing unease has disappeared by *Ecce Homo*: Nietzsche here moves through his own history with uncanny assurance, showing no discomfort at all over what he may have "forgotten" about himself, and showing no evidence of confronting his heritage with a stern and deliberate discipline. *Ecce Homo* is clearly not attempting to be complete in its biographical detail and so it would be pointless to list the various "events" of Nietzsche's life that do not appear in its pages as if they must therefore have been excluded or "suppressed." But what is noteworthy are those items that do appear, but which are passed over no sooner than they are named. Jean Graybeal, for instance, has drawn attention to the absence of Nietzsche's mother and sister in the text as we have received it: the "riddle" of Nietzsche's dual-descent describes in great detail the paternal line of ancestry -- Nietzsche's inheritance from his father --but his mother is reduced to a cypher within what is already a riddle. She is merely "something very German" [1:3].<sup>ii</sup> In a similar vein, there is no mention at all

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<sup>i</sup>Henry Staten suggests throughout *Nietzsche's Voice* that this is a typical move in Nietzsche's rhetoric. Against his own more considered and nuanced assessment of the human condition, Nietzsche often goes to great lengths to depict the strong or noble class as *entirely* free from the corrupting influence of any sources of *ressentiment*. Rather than a difference in *degree*, Nietzsche wants very much to insist on a difference in *kind* that separates the high from the low.

<sup>ii</sup>In "Nietzsche's Riddle," Graybeal makes an interesting comparison between the treatment of Nietzsche's mother in the published version of *Ecce Homo* and that found in his proposed revision to the relevant chapter (his editors, past and present, have tended to refuse this substitution, deeming it the product of madness). The alternate passage would have disrupted *any* presumption of *amor fati* in the

of any romantic entanglements: Lou Salomé is presented --briefly --as “a young Russian woman who was my friend at that time” [3:6:1], without the barest hint that Nietzsche had hoped for rather more than a libretto from her. There is much that Nietzsche “knows how to forget” when he is writing; his horizon is rounded and closed in the moment of recurrence, accepting within its borders only that which he can interpret and embrace, that which he can “transform into blood.”

If Nietzsche adopts the less cautious image of forgetting in *Ecce Homo*, this is no doubt because it allows him to present himself as having attained a height above his past, a purity and freedom in his current self-interpretation that would not be possible were he to stress the “invisible chain” of his heritage. *Ecce Homo* aspires --under the aegis of the moment --toward comprehensive affirmation and appropriation. With two notable exceptions, it is overwhelmingly positive in its outlook,<sup>1</sup> at least relative to Nietzsche’s posture in the other works of 1888, and anything that might compromise this stance of radical self-sufficiency is “forgotten.” Even when the unredeemable aspects of the past *are* named in the text, they are quickly passed over.<sup>2</sup> My suspicion is that it is language developed in his *Zarathustra* that makes such confidence possible, or at least, that allows forgetting to be valorized under a different name, for one of the things that the pseudo-Christian lexicon of *Zarathustra* allows Nietzsche to do is to recast this practice as a part of a drama of sacrifice and redemption, trading in the process on the positive valuation of sacrifice found within

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text: “Whenever I seek the deepest contradiction to myself, the incalculable meanness (or commonness) of instinct, then I always find my mother and sister. To believe myself related to such *canaille* would be blasphemy against my godliness. The treatment that I suffer from my mother and sister, up until this moment, infuses me with an unspeakable horror: here works a perfect hell-machine, with unflinching certainty about the moment when one can bloodily wound me --in my highest moments... for there all strength is lacking to defend oneself against poisonous vermin... I confess that the most profound objection to the ‘eternal recurrence,’ my truly *abysmal* thought, is always mother and sister.” [p. 238-40 in Graybeal; the original text can be found on p. 266 of the Colli and Montinari edition of *Ecce Homo*]

<sup>1</sup>The exceptions are the outraged (and outrageous) polemic against the Germans which occupies virtually all of Nietzsche’s review of *The Case of Wagner*, and the description of “rancour after the deed” in 3:6:5; I will address the latter in sections nine to twelve.

<sup>2</sup>I provide a detailed examination of one such case in section ten, though my elliptical references above to Lou Salomé and to Nietzsche’s mother and sister illustrate the same pattern.

this tradition. It is surely not accidental that Nietzsche speaks of “burying” his forty-four years as if this were inextricably linked to the fact that the work of those years “has been saved, is eternal.”

The recalcitrant, the un-affirmable, is buried and forgotten in the process of alienation that precedes re-appropriation.

But inverting the Christian logic (as we might expect), redemption does not involve stripping away the inessential, the accidental, to reveal an underlying and untarnished substance; it takes place through change and modification. The fragment, riddle, and dreadful accident of the past is drawn together in the narrating voice which says “but thus I willed it.” And this is redemption for Nietzsche, as for Zarathustra: the brute facticity of the past --the will’s gnashing of teeth --is overcome in a redeeming affirmation. But not everything returns, and that which returns, returns *differently*: the “thus I willed it” expresses here a transforming incorporation that sacrifices what appears inviolate in the old in order that --reinterpreted or forgotten --it might nourish the new.”

And as it returns in the sacred moment, it is --fittingly --christened with a new name. When the fisherman Simon “forgets” his past --buries it --in order to follow his Lord, he is given a new name. It is as the apostle Peter that he will enter into his eternal life, his past life as Simon --a life dead in sin --is sacrificed in the Moment of redemption. Mirroring, if not mimicking this archaic magic that associates naming with life, and sacrifice with eternity, Nietzsche gives his own name to his eternal life. “Nietzsche” now names what “has been saved, is eternal,” the phoenix that emerges transformed and renewed by passing through death.

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<sup>i</sup>Augustine explicitly positions his text as a sacrifice in this manner: “accept the sacrifice of my *Confessions*,” he prays, “from the hand that is my tongue” [*Confessions*, 5:1].

<sup>ii</sup>The allusions and references here are to *Zarathustra*’s “On Redemption” [2:20], his most detailed account of what is at stake in redeeming the past. The preparatory sacrifice of the whole of the past in order to liberate the present for new possibilities is of course strikingly similar to Descartes’ stance in the *Discourse*, with the all-important difference that it is the essential and timeless truth that emerges from Descartes’ crucible.



## 6) Return of the (Living) Dead:

In one of its aspects, all of this happens in “the moment,” a specific location within the history of Nietzsche (and the history of the world) at which time Nietzsche affirms the value of his own life and life as such. The interleaf epigram is dated; the “perfect day” when the sun stands directly overhead is Nietzsche’s forty-fourth birthday, and it is here, on this day, that Nietzsche assumes a full and masterful possession of his life, a kind of god-like plenitude. Whatever complex decisions lie behind this state, whatever strenuous acts of a creative, interpretive will, Nietzsche shows us none of it in *Ecce Homo*. We do not get to see him grappling with his past, struggling to find, create, or affirm a value in the more problematic aspects of his experience: this has all occurred “off-stage,” prior to the writing of the text. Of his sickness, for instance, he remarks that: “for a typically healthy person... being sick can even become an energetic *stimulus* for life, for living *more*. This, in fact, is how that long period of sickness appears to me *now*: as it were, I discovered life anew, including myself... I turned my will to health, to *life*, into a philosophy” [1:2]. Maybe so, but if this is how “that long period” appears to him “*now*,” this says nothing about how he moved from his initial experience of illness (which presumably was rather less enthusiastic) to this richer, higher perspective. Similarly, the early death of his father, together with his father’s ill-health during his life, has given Nietzsche the capacity “to enter quite involuntarily into a world of lofty and delicate things: I am quite at home there” [1:3], but surely this was not how he experienced this tragic loss at the age of five. Since *Ecce Homo* is written in “the Moment” --on “this perfect day” --it presents Nietzsche as a *result* of certain interpretive decisions (the nature of which we can see in the text), but the means of arriving at these decisions is not part of the image. Nietzsche simply “appears” on the interleaf as someone who has attained the maximal state of liberation from *ressentiment*, a specimen

of human perfection.<sup>1</sup>

But this interleaf is preceded by what appears to be a contrary image in the preface, an image that reveals a Nietzsche who exists as anything but full self-presence in the moment during which he writes:

it seems indispensable to me to say *who I am*. Really, one should know it, for I have not left myself "without testimony." But the disproportion between the greatness of my task and the *smallness* of my contemporaries has found expression in the fact that one has neither heard nor even seen me. I live on my own credit; it is perhaps a mere prejudice that I live. I only need to speak with one of the "educated" who come to the Upper Engadine for the summer, and I am convinced that I do not live. [pref. 1]

The ecstatic affirmation of recurrence on the interleaf, which bespeaks a Nietzsche whose identity is complete and perfect in the eternally returning present of composition, is troubled by a Nietzsche who is dead, or at least, not quite alive outside of a sort of prejudice, a credit drawn on his written testimonial. But plenitude is not forsaken in this image; it is merely postponed. This "dead" writer - dead already for a hundred years, for us, and anticipating his own death as he writes in 1888 -- imagines having in the future not only an effect, but the greatest possible effect: "It is only beginning with me that there are hopes again, tasks, ways that can be prescribed for culture --*I am he that brings these glad tidings* --And thus I am also a destiny" [3:9:2]. Granted that there is no "action at a distance," to have this effect, the dead one must return in some fashion in order to inaugurate these world-historical changes. And this line of thinking is certainly consonant with Nietzsche's constant deployment of (inverted) Christian motifs; the death of Christ that makes salvation possible is simultaneously a promise and anticipation of the second coming. For that matter, the text itself receives its title through an allusion to Pilate's words as he presented Jesus to the masses, and to this

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<sup>1</sup>In this, Nietzsche seems much closer to Descartes than to Augustine. While Augustine provides a detailed account of his intellectual and spiritual development that includes information about the abandoned formative stages in his history (the Manicheans, the skeptics, the philosophers, etc.), Descartes simply refers elliptically to a prehistory behind his current views, and certainly does not dwell on a time when he may have believed rather different things. Like Nietzsche, Descartes appears in the *Discourse* as someone who was essentially *always* wise.

extent, it already anticipates both a death and a return. The “moment” of Nietzsche’s self-affirmation is a unique historical event, but it is an event that will have been completed only in the future.

In Nietzsche’s case, I don’t think that these are simply rhetorical flourishes; he *does* seem to imagine the kind of return from the dead. It is surely not accidental that the chapter which follows the retrospective “why I write such good books,” is the forward looking “why I am a destiny,” for running alongside the thematic of immediate self-possession in *Ecce Homo* is the insistence that “Nietzsche” will only fully become what he is in the future. Speaking of his world-historical destiny as inaugurating “that great noon at which the most elect consecrate themselves for the greatest of all tasks,” Nietzsche writes that this is “the vision of a feast that *I shall yet live to see*” [3:1:4, italics mine]. If we are to take such comments seriously --and they appear frequently enough that I think we must --then we are directed to think of “Nietzsche” not as an author finding consolation in the thought of a destiny that, sadly, he will never know, but rather, as that which will only properly come into its own after this author --a “subsequent piece... of wretched minor fiction”<sup>92</sup> --is dead. The proper imagery then is not that which relates “Nietzsche” to the Moses who leads us to the promised land that he will never see, but that which shows “Nietzsche” to be the (textual) Spirit who comes to us after the self-sacrifice of (the authorial) Christ. The “Nietzsche” who signs *Ecce Homo* in the moment of eternal recurrence, then, is the “Nietzsche” who will be present at the moment of his future destiny, an eternally-living Nietzsche strangely split off from the Nietzsche who --during his “life” --lived only on the credit advanced to him through this alter-ego:

this is the trick of posthumous people par excellence: “What did you think?” one of them asked impatiently; “would we feel like enduring the estrangement, the cold and quiet grave around us --this whole subterranean, concealed, mute, undiscovered solitude that among us is called life but might just as easily be called death --if we did not know what will become of us, and that it is only after death that we shall enter our life and become alive, oh, very much alive, we posthumous people!”<sup>93</sup>

Once again, it is in his name --through his name --that Nietzsche will have this effect, a fact he well

knows: "I know my fate. One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous" [4:1].

With the image of posthumosity --which is present throughout Nietzsche's writings, though unusually prominent in *Ecce Homo* --Nietzsche gives voice to a second aspect of the eternal return. For the gateway moment in Zarathustra is the meeting point of *two* infinite paths; the past stretches out behind, but the future is equally visible from within the archway. The affirmation of destiny is as much a subject of *Ecce Homo* as is the redemption of the past. Through the thought of a posthumous life, Nietzsche ties the sort of death he experiences as a writer to the future in which his name will come into its proper life; the two are not separated such that the one movement would be logically prior to the other, but rather, they are inextricably tied together in one phenomenon. Purchased on the credit of his writings, and at the price of living in the present only as a prejudice, Nietzsche imagines and affirms a future in which he will become what he is. And the expectation of this future life reflects back on the moment of his affirmation, suspending both his life and death as he awaits decision --he is a kind of ghost in the moment, awaiting his return.

Both the figure of the eternal return and the account of his "posthumous" life are explicated in a vocabulary drawn quite clearly from Christian theology, but we know that Nietzsche cannot *really* be inscribing himself within such a grand metaphysics: these must be metaphors, a playful attempt to use his enemy's resources for his own agenda. This is quite likely true, but all the same, we should not be too hasty here. Nietzsche is of course overtly hostile to such an other-worldly perspective, but his use of the autobiographical genre throws him into the thick of it. Even more than most autobiographers who seek to elucidate the structure of the self through an examination of its history, Nietzsche is deeply --if ambivalently --engaged in the rhetoric of "redemption," the moment in which a kind of self-sacrifice leads to an assumption of an eternal life, purified of what

was not properly its own.' We are free to read *Ecce Homo* as a send-up of such conceptions, and the wildly inflated language of the text certainly lends credence to such an interpretive decision, but it strikes me as rather too convenient to interpret every metaphysical moment in Nietzsche's writings as a masterfully executed deconstructive performance. I take no small pleasure in being able to cite Derrida to this effect: "One cannot conclude, in order to outmanoeuvre the hermeneutic hold, that his is an infinite calculus... To use parody or the simulacrum as a weapon in the service of truth... would in fact reconstitute religion, as a Nietzsche cult for example, in the interest of a priesthood of parody interpreters."<sup>94</sup>

There is certainly an element of parody in *Ecce Homo* --there is in all of Nietzsche's later writings --but its primary target is quite likely Nietzsche himself: I at least do not read him as mocking the foolishness of the world from a distance, but rather, as attempting to neutralize and overcome his own deep and ongoing involvement in these beliefs through representing them as ridiculous, as beneath him.<sup>ii</sup> The textual evidence for such a reading is plain enough; laughter is invariably associated with overcoming, most clearly so in Zarathustra ("whoever would kill most thoroughly, laughs"; "learn to laugh away over yourselves"<sup>95</sup>). But the texts are unpleasantly flattened if we read every joke, every hyperbolic wink to the reader, as signalling Nietzsche's mastery of the perspectives involved in the rhetoric he is currently using. There is no *a priori* reason to think that Nietzsche successfully, or fully, escaped the hold of the concepts he despised, or that such an escape is even possible. The issue will partly be determined --to the extent that such

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<sup>i</sup>An obvious and initial divergence between Nietzsche's use of this image and its non-ironic employment in Augustine is that Augustine would be loathe to describe redemption as leading to *self*-possession. The renewed self that emerges from conversion is very much *God's* possession; the self can *only* find its unity or "rest" in God, not in itself.

<sup>ii</sup>This is not to suggest that Nietzsche is not at all smug and derisive in his relation to the outside world; my point is that his critique of modernity is at least double-edged. While he is as confident in his superiority as someone like Descartes, he is often quite open in manifesting his need for such a stance, a *need* which tells against any presumption of calm self-possession and certainty.

questions can be “decided” --by whether we can find in his texts a “naturalized” analog for the language with which he plays, a vocabulary that is not parasitic on sources that it disavows. Without this, Nietzsche’s “overcoming” of metaphysics turns out to be no more than metaphysics with arched eyebrows.<sup>1</sup>

There is at least one such candidate, an analog for Nietzsche’s talk of life and death that --while still mysteriously metaphorical in its own right --is less explicitly tied to Christian theology. In a process that he valorized throughout his career, Nietzsche praises the process of artistic creation where the accumulated energies of the body are released in a unified creative / procreative act. The body, Nietzsche will remind us, is depleted through this process: the greatest possible creative act --a total expenditure --would therefore be accompanied by an evacuated, “dead” creator. The theme reappears in various guises in many of Nietzsche’s writings, but it is most forcefully stated in the *Twilight of the Idols*, where the artistic genius is identifiable by his absolute self-squandering in the act of creation:

*My conception of genius.* --Great men, like great epochs, are explosive material in whom tremendous energy has been accumulated; their prerequisite has always been, historically and physiologically, that a protracted assembling, accumulating, economizing and preserving has preceded them --that there has been no explosion for a long time... The genius --in his works, in his deeds --is necessarily a prodigal: his greatness lies in the fact that he expends himself.... The instinct of self-preservation is as it were suspended... One calls this ‘sacrifice’: one praises his ‘heroism’ therein, his indifference to his own interests, his devotion to an idea, a great cause, a fatherland: all misunderstandings.... He flows out, he overflows, he uses himself up, he does not spare himself --with inevitability, fatefully, involuntarily, as a river’s bursting its banks is involuntary."

The language here, while strong, is entirely congruous with that found in *Ecce Homo*'s

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'Mileur asks some pertinent questions of both Nietzsche and Derrida on this score, noting “the tremendous weight postmodernism puts on the difference made by awareness,” the “ironic difference between using the concepts and language of metaphysics because we have no choice, and really believing them” [“Revisionism, Irony, and the Mask of Sentiment,” p. 207].

<sup>1</sup>TI, “Expeditions of an Untimely Man, 44. As Henry Staten notes, “this passage gives new meaning to the remark in *The Will to Power* that ‘a living thing wants above all to *discharge* its force’ [650]; here the discharge becomes total, catastrophic, a complete evacuation of the energy stored in the system” [*Nietzsche's Voice*, p. 136].

description of the act of composing *Zarathustra*; this “supreme deed” is accomplished through a “tremendous squandering of all defensive energies,” that is the “presupposition of every creative deed” [3:6:5]. In this sense then, it is perhaps appropriate to sanction Nietzsche’s appropriation of the position of death in his writings. The evacuation of the energies of the writer in a unified act of creative production would, or could, bring about both aspects of posthumosity --the living, eternal work that will endure and the expired, exhausted being who pours out without limit into this work. When read along the register of the language of forces --the “Freudian,” economic register of the will to power --death is simply a figure for the result of a total expenditure in a creative act, even if this “total” expenditure is something of a limit condition, rarely if ever attained outside of the “genius.”

I have been writing as if this process were entirely unique to Nietzsche, but in certain respects it is in fact quite common. For Nietzsche, the thought of the eternal return brings into play quite dramatically the negotiation of life and death in the unique moment from which the narration takes place, but autobiography by its very nature is almost inevitably posthumous. In the conceit that a life will be told, the author is necessarily distanced from that life itself, writing from a rhetorically unstable temporal location that is somehow affiliated with death; the text, that is, is always written from somewhere *beyond*. This is most obvious in a work of religious confession such as Augustine’s, where the narration is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) taken to be coauthored by God, and where the notions of sacrifice, death, redemption, and new life find their most natural home. It is no coincidence that Augustine’s *Confessions* ends with his conversion, the point at which his old life is cast off: “Let me not be my own life: Badly have I lived from myself: I was death to myself: in you I live again” [*Confessions*, 12:10]. But Rousseau’s anxiety about completing his text

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I have not attempted to develop the connection here, but it is perhaps hard not to see in this phenomenon a mirror of the connection between *Eros* and the *death drive* in the writings of Freud; expenditure and investment, the “lure to life,” becomes at its limit the very desire to return to the inanimate that is the hallmark of the death drive.

revealed something of the same phenomenon: to catch up with oneself in narrating a life is for that life to be complete. finished --*dead*--and this reveals that the narration itself was always undertaken from such a locale.

The autobiography, unlike the diary, always flirts with death, as its goal, its catastrophe, and also its structural conceit, the privileged location from which the truth --the whole truth --can be told. And there is always life to be found on the farther shore. Even secular autobiographies tend to be religious in this sense, groping constantly beyond temporally-bound earthly life towards a ghostly self-presence outside of it in which one fully *is* --at last --what one *is*. The great early critic of autobiography Georges Gusdorf takes something like this to be a defining feature of the genre throughout any of its various mutations:

[T]he past that is recalled has lost its flesh and bone solidity, but it has won a new and more intimate relationship to the individual life that can thus, after being long dispersed and sought again throughout the course of time, be rediscovered and drawn together again beyond time... Temporal perspectives thus seem to be telescoped together and to interpenetrate one another; they commune in that self-knowledge that regroups personal being above and beyond its own time limits.<sup>96</sup>

In Nietzsche's language, it is as though a bargain has been struck, an impossible form of credit drawn, such that the death of the writer --a mortgage drawn against his or her life --justifies the immortality of the name. And this is of course precisely the logic that Nietzsche will constantly invoke in *Ecce Homo*: "one pays dearly for immortality: one has to die several times while still alive" [3:5:5].<sup>1</sup>

## 7) Transubstantiation:

It is in the thought of the eternal return that all of this is accomplished in *Ecce Homo*. But this is striking, unexpected, for the thought of the return was Zarathustra's "heaviest burden," his

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<sup>1</sup>It is likely significant that Nietzsche describes himself as dying "several times" in order to gain his immortality. I will return to this phrase briefly in section twelve.



“most abysmal thought.” And yet here, as if he were simply reporting an obvious and well-established fact, Nietzsche positions himself as infinitely grateful for his “whole life” --and we know a thing or two about what that included in Nietzsche’s case. Did Zarathustra --the character --ever fully will the eternal return in the text that bears his name? It is a matter of perennial scholarly debate, but let us say for the sake of argument that he did. It is still clearly one thing for a fictional character to instantiate such a perspective on life, and quite another for *Nietzsche* to claim to have orchestrated his own redemption. Does this not strain Nietzsche’s involvement in the rhetoric of Christhood past the breaking point? Or again, is this not evidence of madness, the megalomaniacal presumption that says “I am prepared *to rule the world*”<sup>97</sup> on the basis of what has happened in this moment? I have already cited Roy Pascal’s concern that *Ecce Homo* is a kind of static self-portraiture, a snapshot more akin to a diary entry than to autobiography. Daniel Conway extends and deepens the same concern, for not only is a single diary entry in principle an inadequate representation of an author, but the special properties of the day (or moment) of *Ecce Homo*’s narration make it a uniquely inappropriate reflection of its author:

Readers familiar with Nietzsche’s books know that the subject of *Ecce Homo* resides more permanently in the quotidian world of fragmentation, anxiety, resentment, and disappointment. This Nietzsche cannot be faithfully represented by a single day, much less by the “perfect day” eternalized in the interleaf epigraph; “he” cannot even be reduced to the finite number of episodes recounted by the author of *Ecce Homo*.<sup>98</sup>

Nietzsche --the author --has always been deeply committed to an understanding of the world as a perpetual flux, a world that receives only provisional and tentative meaning through the act of wilful interpretation. If he *really was* presenting himself as having definitively come into full and final possession of his nature in the writing of *Ecce Homo*, we would, I think, be forced to judge the text to be either ludicrously inconsistent with the remainder of Nietzsche’s corpus, or follow such critics as Conway who suggest that the text is simply a parody of such romantic pretensions to “self-actualization.”

But we are only faced with such an unwelcome set of choices if we read the assimilation of names in *Ecce Homo* as all pointing back to their author, where the textual marker "Nietzsche" is taken to refer to a specific, extra-textual individual, in this case, a certain former philologist suffering from chronic gastric complaints. This is of course the natural way to read the text: it is what we are expecting, and perhaps even hoping for --a moment when *the real Nietzsche* will finally step forward unmasked and claim responsibility for the teachings conducted under so many different names. Nietzsche does, after all, begin the preface with the statement "it seems indispensable to me to say *who I am*" [pref. 1], thus encouraging such desires. And furthering this impression, the text has been governed by a great deal of "unmasking" thus far, the various names in the past texts now revealed to be mere pseudonyms for Nietzsche himself.

My suspicion though is that the opposite is occurring. Rather than naming an individual who stands outside of the text as the grounding referent for the variety of other names that circulate throughout his writings, the name "Nietzsche" becomes a part of that textual system itself. We might note that when he implicates himself in the logic of sacrifice and redemption on the interleaf epigraph, it is his forty-four years that are buried; the *work* --the presents of these years --is what "has been saved, is eternal." And this is what we should expect, given Nietzsche's description of other "artistic geniuses." As early as the *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche was already insisting on the intimate connection between creation and death, and significantly for my purposes here, suggesting that the name passes from the dead to the living --that what the name names is the *work* rather than the artist:

he lives best who has no respect for existence... [who knows on the] way to immortality and to monumental history, how to regard it with Olympian laughter or at least with sublime mockery; often they descend to their grave with an ironic smile --for what is there left to bury! Only the dross, refuse, vanity, animality that had always weighed them down... *But one thing will live, the monogram of their most essential being, a work, an act, a piece of rare enlightenment, a creation.*<sup>99</sup>

The name is affiliated in the moment with the textual Nietzsche, the Nietzsche who "lives on," a

Nietzsche who assumes both the past recorded in his name and the destiny to which he lays claim. And so, Nietzsche-text is opposed to Nietzsche-author: two subjects, each with a separate corpus ("I am one thing, my writings are another matter" [3:1]), yet paradoxically unified by a single name: "I am, to express it in the form of a riddle, already dead as my father, while as my mother I am still living and becoming old" [EH 1:1].<sup>i</sup> While the text has an author, just as much as any text, and we may very well find traces of this individual running through the text (particularly where "his" agenda conflicts with that of his character), the "I. Friedrich Nietzsche" who signs the text is more akin to a literary character than to a direct expression and reflection of his author; he is composed out of and constituted by these very texts themselves, and yet also supervenes on them as the name in which they are gathered together into a reconstituted unity.<sup>ii</sup> Already within the preface, Nietzsche describes the site of genealogical investigation --"the hidden history of the philosophers" --as research into "the psychology of the great names" [pref. 3].<sup>iii</sup> The name is the privileged site of thriving life in *Ecce Homo*, and the "subject" of *Ecce Homo* --with all the duality implied in this phrase --is the proper name of its author.

It is once more an image of sacrifice, the author wilfully submerging himself in a new textual body that takes over his name. But if this analysis supports the interpretation of the writer as

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<sup>i</sup>I do not mean to suggest here that this is the unique "solution" to the riddle of Nietzsche's dual descent, though the connections drawn by Graybeal between "mother" and "mother tongue" would add a certain plausibility (and complexity) to what I am suggesting ["Nietzsche's Riddle," p. 232]. The textual Nietzsche "lives on," while the sacrificial author is "a being destined merely to pass by --more a gracious memory of life than life itself" [1:1]; the text inevitably outlives the author. But Nietzsche's riddles do not have single solutions, and I will be returning to this particular riddle from several different vantage points in what follows.

<sup>ii</sup>Elaborating a similar connection, Derrida adds that "if life returns, it will return to the name but not to the living, in the name of the living *as* a name of the dead" [*Otobiographies*, p. 9]; "by its structure, [it] exists and is meant to exist without the bearer of the name. Thus, every name is the name of someone dead, or of a living someone whom it can do without." [p. 53]

<sup>iii</sup>LeJeune generalizes this point in a manner that I find appealing, even if I would not know how to go about substantiating such a claim: "the deep structure of autobiography," he says, "is the proper name" of its author. ["The Autobiographical Pact," p. 20]

assuming a sort of premature death. this is still only half of the equation. If the autobiographer is consigned through this unnatural transaction to a kind of living death --"more a precious memory of life than life itself" [1:1] --is the renounced life thereby successfully transported into the named text? Is the site of subjectivity in fact translated into the textuality that is gathered up in the name? It seems impossible, and yet Nietzsche gives us reason to believe that this was in fact his experience. Consider in this context the following characteristic passage from *Ecce Homo* in which Nietzsche describes his relationship to the productions of *other* authors:

For years I did not read a thing --the greatest benefit I ever conferred on myself. --That nethermost self which had, as it were, been buried and grown silent under the continual pressure of *having to listen to other selves (and that is after all what reading means)* awakened slowly, shyly, dubiously --but eventually it spoke again. [3:3:4. italics mine]

If "having to listen to other selves" is, after all, "what reading means," then it seems that written productions *do* in fact carry within them a form of subjectivity. "Should I permit an alien thought to scale the wall secretly?," Nietzsche says, "And that is what reading would mean" [2:3]. If the experience of reading is properly construed as undergoing the insistent imposition of an alien subjectivity, then surely the act of writing --in at least some circumstances --may be a process through which a subjectivity is inscribed. And if this is possible at all --if there really can be a "psychology of great names" --then the autobiographical inscription of a name on a text will be the privileged site of this form of writing." The practise of auto-bio-graphy, self-life-writing, would --as

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'Thomas Brobjer has given excellent reasons for disputing the accuracy of this claim through providing a detailed examination of the contents of Nietzsche's library ["Nietzsche's Reading and Private Library"]; during the years in which *Ecce Homo* was written, Nietzsche seemed to be reading at a rate of at least one book every two weeks, and quite likely more, and this long after he claims to have virtually abandoned reading. This falsification, whether a conscious lie or not, reveals something of the significance that Nietzsche attributed to reading; he must not be seen to be reading, and/or, must not acknowledge to himself that he is doing so.

"I do not wish to pretend that this is Nietzsche's *only* view on the nature of the reader / writer relationship, or even that it is his considered view --he will also declare at various points in his career that we are fundamentally only capable of reading ourselves [3:1]. In fact, there is a marked and seemingly illogical dissymmetry in Nietzsche's most frequent manner of addressing this issue; when he considers being read, his general inclination seems to be towards concluding that he is unreadable --"I am not read;

if by alchemy --create life in a text, a ghost that would reemerge on every reading to commune with the one who summons it.

It would be comforting in a certain sense if the story stopped here. We would then have an image of a Nietzsche --the author once more --who had cheated death through the creation of a new, textual version of himself, a self that would bear his name and his image in perfect self-sufficiency for all eternity. If this were so, Nietzsche would have accomplished a perfect this-worldly equivalent of the Christian salvation he denied. At the price of sacrificing his natural life, to be sure, but as Diotima says in the *Symposium*, who would not willingly make such a deal in order to perpetuate oneself in the form of a perfected spiritual child? "Those whose procreancy is of the body turn to woman as the object of their love and raise a family... Those whose procreancy is of the spirit rather than of the flesh... conceive and bear the things of the spirit;.. And I ask you, who would not prefer such fatherhood to merely human propagation?"<sup>100i</sup> But the story does not end here. As I have been hinting throughout, I believe there are reasons to think that Nietzsche did not fully recreate himself in his text as one of Diotima's children, and also, that he did not entirely --or consistently --*want* to do so. There are two problems, I believe, that thwart this desire; one internal and one external, or alternately, one which shows a fracture in Nietzsche's appropriation of the past and another that shows his discomfort with the future he imagines. As the problems ultimately mirror each other, the order of presentation is at least somewhat arbitrary, but I will address Nietzsche's relationship to Zarathustra first and then conclude with an examination of the role of the reader in Nietzsche's autobiography.

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I will not be read" [3:1] --yet when he considers himself as a reader, the outside voices immediately threaten to rush in and overwhelm him. I will return to this issue in the second half of my critique.

<sup>i</sup>The secular aspect of this form of immortality is very much in evidence, even when divorced from a writer as explicitly irreligious as Nietzsche. Montaigne as well appealed to the Diotima myth in explaining his desire to write his text, and Blaise Pascal quite astutely criticized him for the implicit heresy in trying to manufacture his own afterlife.

## PART B: CRITIQUE

### (i) *THE PROBLEMS WITH ZARATHUSTRA*

#### 8) The Great Exception:

In the relentless admixture of names in *Ecce Homo*, there is one name that stands out: “one need not hesitate to put down my name or the word ‘Zarathustra’ where the text has the word ‘Wagner’” [3:1:4]. “*My name or the word Zarathustra....*” he says. This wilful equivocation of names is clearly most striking and most significant in this case. As if in open mockery of our attempts as critics to remind ourselves of their difference, oblivious to the ink that would be spilled over this very distinction, Nietzsche is apparently saying that there is no real distinction between “my name or the word ‘Zarathustra;’” we are free to use whichever we prefer.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, this identity is posited precisely in the text that lavishes the most hyperbolically exaggerated praise on a newly idealized Zarathustra, that is, in a text that appears to misunderstand *Zarathustra* quite significantly. Had anyone *other than* Nietzsche written the description of Zarathustra given here, we would almost certainly dismiss it as grossly inadequate, for where the *Zarathustra* text itself was marked by Zarathustra’s incessant gazing into the future, towards the *Übermensch* who must someday come, Zarathustra is presented in *Ecce Homo* as the *Übermensch*: “Here man has been overcome at every moment; the concept of the ‘overman’ has here become the greatest reality... Zarathustra experiences himself as *the supreme type of all beings*” [3:5:6]. The supreme type? But surely Zarathustra suggests only that “man is a rope, tied between beast and overman,” that “what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end,” that “what can be loved in man is that he is an overture and a going under” [Z, pref. 4].<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the Zarathustra whom Nietzsche appropriates is no longer the

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<sup>1</sup>It is not only *Zarathustra* which is governed by a longing for the future of course. While the earliest work --*The Birth of Tragedy* --announces Wagner as the dawn of a new age *already* begun, in each of the subsequent texts, Nietzsche is continually speaking of (and to) a future which is barely thinkable within the present. *Human, All too Human*, for instance, a book addressed to “free spirits,” finds Nietzsche admitting in the preface that the “free spirits” do not yet exist, but with millennialist

bridge or an overture to a higher form of life in the future --the Übermensch, the Dionysian philosopher, the artistic Socrates --but a Zarathustra who is *already* “the concept of Dionysus himself” [3:5:6].

Or at least, he almost appropriates this character: there is a marked ambivalence here that I would like to explore. “Among my writings,” he tells us, “my Zarathustra stands to my mind by itself” [pref. 4], and in case we missed it, he says it again: “this work stands altogether apart” [3:6:6]. In keeping with this, the entire text of *Ecce Homo* is interlaced with the frequent quotations that Kaufmann found so embarrassing. Even when he is not directly quoting from his text, Nietzsche rarely makes it through more than a page or two at a time without some reference to Zarathustra. In fact, Zarathustra provides something like an organizing centre for the text: both *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Gay Science* are described in *Ecce Homo* as anticipating *Zarathustra* in some way. *Beyond Good and Evil* is said to be Nietzsche’s “recovery” from it, and “Why I am a Destiny” preaches the good news of Zarathustra’s incarnation and the possibilities of redemption thereby made available. “One lives before him, or one lives after him” [4:8], Nietzsche says, and clearly, one writes before or after him as well.

I have already cited Huntington Williams’ remark (in chapter two) that “the autonomous self must write its own scriptures,” and though he is speaking of Rousseau, the point seems apt here. “Rousseau’s autobiography,” he says, “is a textual exchange with his own pre-autobiographical writings... Rousseau’s other theoretical, fictional, and dramatic works are present there, just as Scripture is present in Augustine’s *Confessions*.”<sup>102</sup> If this is true of Rousseau (and I think it is), it is even more clearly the case with Nietzsche: Zarathustra’s speeches are treated very much as Nietzsche’s scriptures in *Ecce Homo*. And just as Augustine could not be expected to give a faithful and accurate account of his self-understanding without frequent reference to the biblical texts that so

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longing he claims to “see them coming, slowly, slowly” [pref. 2].

fully infused and informed his world-view. Nietzsche has recourse to *Zarathustra* as an endlessly applicable source of metaphor and illustration in his own self-presentation. There is something about Zarathustra's "halcyon tone" that makes all paraphrase seem inadequate, for though Nietzsche takes evident pride in having invented this language himself, he seems to find it necessary to quote "from the original" rather than composing a new but equivalent expression in his own name. One simply does not tamper with the words of a god; it is blasphemous of course, but even if it were not, how could one hope to improve on the language of a sacred text? In line with this, the citations are introduced with a certain reverence in the text. Typically, Nietzsche tells us that he is about to quote from *Zarathustra*, as if allowing us to compose ourselves appropriately, and indeed, we are given endless instruction on how to hear *Zarathustra* correctly, for "it is a privilege without equal to be a listener here" [preface, 4].

All of this is in keeping with Nietzsche's fondness for deploying the motifs of Christian theology against Christianity, and Nietzsche is certainly enjoying playing Peter or Paul to his own Christ (or Plato to his Socrates, as Nehamas suggests),<sup>103</sup> but one would like to know more about the (anti)Christ who stands at the centre of this narrative, the (new) greatest present that has ever been given to humanity [pref. 4]. His origins, as relayed in *Ecce Homo*, are as "other-worldly" as his Christian counter-part. "If one had the slightest residue of superstition left in one's system, one could hardly reject altogether the idea that one is merely incarnation, merely mouthpiece, merely a medium of overpowering forces... one does not seek; one accepts, one does not ask who gives... I never had any choice" [3:6:3]. With the qualification that "one" does not believe such things anymore --and it sounds very much like Nietzsche is reminding himself of this --he describes himself as a mouthpiece for the gods. And indeed, he seems somewhat bewildered by his own text here, not altogether sure how he did it. Given the very strong language of inspiration --"one accepts, one does not ask who gives" --we could almost say that he is unsure whether he *did* do it; coming from his



“inmost, nethermost regions” [3:6:5], it pours out from an unknown and unknowable source, figured here as the temporary inhabitation of a god. And though Nietzsche is clearly capable of working himself into a frenzy of oracular vision, even for him, *Zarathustra* is unique: “damn it, my dear critics! Suppose I had published my *Zarathustra* under another name... the acuteness of two thousand years would not have been sufficient to guess that the author of *Human, All too Human* is the visionary of *Zarathustra*” [2:4].

This is a curious and unexpected outburst, and Nietzsche does not pause to explain his reasoning. He is clearly quite comfortable assimilating a vast array of other personae to his own name: Wagner, Voltaire, Schopenhauer; why he even has in his spirit, or “who knows? perhaps also in my body something of Montaigne’s sportiveness” [2:3]. But it is *Zarathustra*, his alter ego, who is most difficult to bring into the fold. *Zarathustra* is set against the totality of Nietzsche’s other writings as the exception, and this is bound to be problematic, for Nietzsche has so clearly involved his name with *these* works already. The assimilation of the various names in the corpus to the name of Nietzsche can therefore not be assumed without further ado to include *Zarathustra* as well: “in two thousand years,” we could not guess that *this* name is affiliated with the others.

But what of the key passage in which Nietzsche suggests that we might read “Wagner in Bayreuth” through substituting “my name or the word *Zarathustra*?” It is, in the end, more than a little ambiguous; the picture of Wagner in this essay must be appropriate in some manner for describing both Nietzsche and *Zarathustra*, but this does not necessarily make them identical. It is a partial picture, not a comprehensive profile, and while Nietzsche and *Zarathustra* might share *this* much, either might exceed the other while sharing a subset of common features. Things partially equal to the same thing are not always fully equal to each other. Nor does Nietzsche ever close up the space thus allowed between himself and his creation; he is always on the border of saying it, but never claims “I am *Zarathustra*,” never tells us “I and the Father are one.” Instead, and to quite

different effect, he makes use of the possessive when speaking of his text -- it is always “my Zarathustra,” though he does not show the same tendency to speak of, for instance, “my *Genealogy*,” or “my *Daybreak*.”

Next to the confidence with which he appropriates his other writings, there is something desperate in these possessives, an insistence on ownership that is not at all the same as appropriation (as I argued in my opening pages), and which seems to belie an ongoing uncertainty. For no sooner are the possessives introduced than we are once again asked to “listen to how Zarathustra speaks to himself” [3:6:7].<sup>1</sup> And each time we are so instructed, the *tone* of Zarathustra’s speech is stressed, implicitly emphasizing the disparity between Nietzsche’s voice and Zarathustra’s. Nietzsche may well insist that he is “the inventor of the dithyramb” [3:6:7], but the dithyrambs he gives us are all Zarathustra’s: he never claims this “halcyon tone” for his own voice --his own name --except as its genetic cause. “Such emerald happiness... *did not have a tongue*” before Nietzsche, but once invented, it is a language that “such a spirit speak[s] when he speaks to *himself*” [3:6:7, emphasis added]. The creature keeps escaping the creator, demonstrating an uncanny degree of autonomy within the text. And so, while Zarathustra undergoes a far more grandiose transformation in *Ecce Homo* than any of the other texts, it is not at all clear that it is thereby mastered; there is reason to believe that there is something of an impasse here.

### 9) Zeus and Semele --The Rancour after the Deed:

This impasse in the assimilation of names is revealed most forcefully perhaps in the sequence of *Ecce Homo* that runs from 3:6:3 to 3:6:6, the central chapters in Nietzsche’s review of *Zarathustra*. There are three movements here: a description of the conditions under which

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<sup>1</sup>We are similarly instructed to “listen” to Zarathustra in 1:8, and in preface, 4 as well.

*Zarathustra* was composed, a picture of the author during and especially *after* this composition, and a rapturous profile of the *type* of person *Zarathustra* is. I have cited Nietzsche's description of inspiration above; it is figured as a kind of divine possession, with Nietzsche serving as the vessel for overpowering forces. Intertwined with this talk of possession is the recurring Nietzschean association of artistic creation with pregnancy, creation almost always construed as *procreation* in Nietzsche's texts. The possession / inspiration that "gives birth" to *Zarathustra* turns out to be conjugal: Nietzsche has been sleeping with the gods, just as *Zarathustra* seemed to have had a fairly intimate relationship with a personified Life.<sup>1</sup> But as a trained classicist, Nietzsche would of course have known that such unions are always associated with death or with madness: his own patron deity, the androgynous Dionysus, was created through the union of Zeus and Semele, a mortal woman who was consumed in flames when faced with the full, undisguised presence of her divine consort. The human mind and even the body itself, cannot survive the inhabitation of a god. And sure enough, he informs us that at the time when he was composing his text under the inspiration of his god, "a melody of indescribable melancholy was always about me, and I found its refrain in the words, 'dead from immortality'" [3:6:4]. Now Nietzsche of course does not believe in gods --not even in Dionysus --but the logic of this myth, the death or madness that invariably accompanies an impermissible affiliation with the deities --is strangely unaffected when it is recast as a metaphor for the most profound instance of artistic creation. And in the two sections that follow, it is all too clear that Nietzsche --the disciple of Dionysus --has much more in common with Semele than with her child."

"The years during and above all *after* my *Zarathustra* were marked by distress without equal.

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<sup>1</sup>Interestingly though, the gender roles are reversed in these two stories; Nietzsche is feminized in his pregnancy next to a masculine *Zarathustra*. There is a fascinating gender narrative at play in these reversals that opens onto a rather different paper.

"The quotations found in the next four paragraphs are all taken from *EH*, 3:6:5.

One pays dearly for immortality: one has to die several times while still alive.” By this point I have already suggested a variety of ways in which one might understand the connection posited here between death and immortality, but Nietzsche provides an explication of his aphorism that seems to run in the opposite direction from those previously encountered. It is one thing to sacrifice the past for the present, or the present for the future, but the arrow of Nietzsche’s longing is turned around here: it is now something in the past that is oppressive to the narrator in the present, the distress without equal arising “above all *after*” the great deed:

There is something I call the *rancune* [rancour] of what is great: everything great --a work, a deed, --is no sooner accomplished than it turns *against* the man who did it. By doing it, he has become *weak*; he no longer endures his deed, he can no longer face it. Something one was never permitted to will lies *behind* one, something in which the knot in the destiny of humanity is tied --and now one labours *under* it! --It almost crushes one.

The division between the Nietzsche who narrates *Ecce Homo* and his great creation is highly pronounced here, and while Nietzsche is more at home with images drawn from the classics, his situation bears an uncanny resemblance to the plight of Dr. Frankenstein. There is the same anguishing mixture of sympathy for his creation and pride in his accomplishment, troubled by the fact that the two are now in an antagonistic relationship; Nietzsche is threatened by this great deed which “almost crushes” him. The shifting prepositions --emphasized by Nietzsche himself I should stress --are fascinating in themselves; what he created has turned *against* him, though he cannot *face* it, then it is *behind* him, and finally *above*, pressing down. Looking forward and back --and even up --it seems he has never seen “so many and such good” Zarathustras as on this perfect day.

But why the threat, why the rancour? Why not --for instance --smug self-satisfaction? He does not tell us. Instead, as if this followed obviously, the threat that was only a moment ago a text becomes “the gruesome silence one hears all around one,” almost as if his monster had wandered off. “Solitude has seven skins; nothing penetrates them anymore. One comes to men, one greets friends --

more desolation. no eye offers a greeting.”<sup>i</sup> And note, this is not the typical Nietzschean silence, the blessed solitude in which he retreats from the teeming masses; he *wants* contact this time, only to find it denied, only to find himself transparent, ethereal to others. No one will talk to him, no one can even see him: buried under his text, he has become a kind of ghost. And fittingly (if he is indeed a ghost), the best he can get from others is “a kind of revolt.” Instinctively, and typically, he projects his anxiety outward, onto the people who are resentful of his greatness, though how they have *guessed* at his greatness without having read his books is an open question. *Somehow*, they know, and “nothing offends more deeply than suddenly letting others feel a distance.”<sup>ii</sup> And once the populace is thus outraged by the greatness of Nietzsche, the greatness of his creation, he is in *grave* danger, for a consequence of his great act is an “absurd sensitivity of the skin to small stings, a kind of helplessness against everything small.” As it is in *Zarathustra*, so it is here as well: it is the flies, always the flies who tear down the mighty, the great soul nickel and dimed out of existence by the hordes of angry insects who deny him even the dignity of a noble death (“Flee, my friend, into your solitude: I see you stung all over by poisonous flies” [Z. I:12]).

Or at least, they *seem* angry, they *seem* to be ready to attack *en masse*, but maybe this isn't quite the case. Perhaps it is not so much the magnitude of the attack that is the problem as it is the defencelessness of the creator against *any* attack. “This seems to me to be due to the tremendous squandering of all defensive energies which is a presupposition of every *creative* deed, every deed that issues from one's most authentic, inmost, nethermost regions. Our *small* defensive capacities are thus, as it were, suspended: no energy is left for them.” He is spent, too-sensitive and weak, his

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<sup>i</sup>The imagery of the name buried in silence is repeated later in the text: “Ten years --and nobody in Germany has felt bound in conscience to defend my name against the absurd silence under which it lies buried” [3:10:4].

<sup>ii</sup>To the teeming masses, who are otherwise blind and inept, Nietzsche always grants an uncanny degree of instinctive interpretive insight when they confront the master; they *always* correctly identify the noble type and always recognize him as a threat to their way of life. We might compare this to the famous account given by Plato in the *Republic*, where the philosopher in the cave is a *comic* figure to the general populace, a buffoon who speaks nonsense.

resources entirely depleted (and it is hard not to see Nietzsche anticipating Freud in this curious but characteristic fondness for imagining psychic “energy” as quantifiable, as a reservoir that may temporarily run dry). “I still dare to hint that one digests less well, does not like to move, is all too susceptible to feeling chills as well as mistrust.” It is this *weakness* --the chills, indigestion, and stiff joints --that makes him so vulnerable to others and thereby justifies a certain mistrustfulness: one has every right to mistrust the buzzards circling over head.

But after this brief outburst, he regroups somewhat and moves into a more measured assessment of his situation. All of this concern with others, this excessive mistrustfulness, is “in many instances merely an etiological blunder.” It is his sickness itself, a result of his action, that makes him see danger where it may not be, but we --the outside --are not really circling the body on the plain: all he needs is a herd of cattle to become gracious and magnanimous again. “In such a state I once sensed the proximity of a herd of cows even before I saw it, merely because milder and more philanthropic thoughts came back to me: *they* had warmth.”

And that is it: the section ends with Nietzsche finding solace amidst the cows (the privileged figure of forgetting in the *Untimely Meditations* and in *Zarathustra* we might remember). What fascinates me in this brief meditation is how completely it seems to forget its own purpose: Nietzsche has the insight to (briefly) recognize that the multitudes are not out to get him, nor to tear down his work, but in this detour through the social, he “forgets” his original problem, the rancour after the deed. It is his work that gave him the chills, not us, and he never returns to this problem. He is under his work he tells us, it has turned against him, and he is in distress especially *after* it is done. But rather than returning to this theme and telling us how in his genius for living he has instinctively seized on the optimal means for bringing about a cure, he instead moves into the most rhapsodic praise that any author has ever lavished on his own work. The Vedic poets are “not even worthy of tying the shoelaces of Zarathustra,” Goethe and Shakespeare “unable to breathe” in his air; “let anyone add up the spirit and good nature of all great souls: all of them together would not be

capable of producing even one of Zarathustra's discourses... he has seen further, willed further, been capable further than any other human being" [3:6:6]. Zarathustra is magnanimous in his strength, a yes-sayer, "the highest and the lowest energies of human nature, what is sweetest, most frivolous, and most terrible wells forth from one fount with immortal assurance" [3:6:6].

What has happened here? I don't propose to take Nietzsche *entirely* seriously in his praise -- he seems to be speaking with both a serious and a laughing face at once' --but however it is intended, it leads to a marked contrast. Zarathustra squanders his endless reservoirs of energy with immortal assurance, while poor several-times-dead Nietzsche lies sick and depleted, shivering in the background. "Zarathustra descends and says to everyone what is most good-natured!" [3:6:6], while Nietzsche finds his only solace among the cows. After the depressing image of an incredibly vulnerable Nietzsche in the previous section, we are given a portrait of Zarathustra that can only appear as his opposite, his doppelganger: two characters again, bound by a single name, but Nietzsche has projected onto Zarathustra all of the traits that he no longer has, including --at the limit --life itself." One pays dearly for immortality indeed, if someone else gets it. Nietzsche states: "the psychological problem of the type of Zarathustra is how he that says No and *does* No to an unheard of degree... can nevertheless be the opposite of a No-saying spirit: how the spirit who bears the heaviest fate... can nevertheless be the lightest and most transcendent" [3:6:6]. This may or may not be a reasonable description of the "type" of Zarathustra as he appears in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* --let us leave it to one side. In *Ecce Homo*, the problem of reconciling opposites is resolved in a much more familiar way; divided against himself, Nietzsche absorbs the full weight of the No, freeing his

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<sup>1</sup>Of reading Laurence Sterne, Nietzsche says that "the reader who demands to know exactly what Sterne really thinks of a thing, whether he is making a serious or a laughing face, must be given up for lost: for he knows how to encompass both in a single facial expression" *AOM*, 113.

"It is *very* tempting here to relate the forgoing to a Freudian account of the Ego-ideal, that outgrowth of the ego which is no sooner created than it turns on its creator --"it almost crushes one" --and which imperialistically preserves the right to issue the most contradictory admonishments with "immortal assurance."

creation to bask resplendent in an unbounded Yes. The passage continues, “*but this is the concept of Dionysus once again.*” and yes, it is very much the concept of Dionysus again; the unimaginable freedom of Dionysus to be the most contradictory of the gods is purchased through a human sacrifice, the death of Semele. And so, the riddle of dual descent, which has so many and such contradictory solutions, appears in this context to be the image of an unheard of split in Nietzsche: the author is dead (several times) already, while his character lives on.

It is instructive to compare this situation to the remarks Nietzsche made a mere two years earlier at the outset of his preface to his *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*:

One should speak only when one may not stay silent; and then, only of that which one has overcome --everything else is chatter, ‘literature,’ lack of breeding. My writings speak only of my overcoming: ‘I’ am in them, together with everything that was inimical to me, *ego ipissimus* [my very own self], indeed, if a yet prouder expression be permitted, *ego ipissimum* [my innermost self]. One will divine that I already have a great deal --beneath me... To this extent, all my writings, with a single though admittedly substantial exception, are to be dated back --they always speak of something ‘behind me.’

The “substantial exception” is unnamed in the text, but I don’t feel too far out on a limb in stating that it is *Zarathustra*. Unlike the other works, he is *not* able to present this text as something in his past, something overcome in his ever-increasing health, and so he cannot look back on it with nostalgic fondness: it is certainly no “sea animal basking among on the rocks.” There is *no* evidence --at least, none that I can see --that Nietzsche feels he has surpassed this work in any manner: “I have not said one word here that I did not say five years ago through the mouth of Zarathustra” [4:8]. In light of the foregoing, we might almost reverse this claim; he has not said anything in *Ecce Homo* that “Zarathustra” did not say first through Nietzsche’s mouth. And said better no doubt --in the halcyon tone that speaks “from an infinite abundance of light and depth of happiness” [preface, 4]. So while the other works are doubly “behind him” --already speaking of his past in their composition, then mastered once again in *Ecce Homo* --“Zarathustra” is the name of Nietzsche’s future, his destiny: “You want a formula for such a destiny become man? That is to be found in my



Zarathustra” [4:2]. There is in fact no *possibility* of mastery, if --as Nietzsche says --“my concept of the Dionysian here became a *supreme deed*” [3:6:6], for how does one surpass a supreme deed? In his meditation on history. Nietzsche offers the despairing analysis that human nature is fundamentally “an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one.” But with Zarathustra. “it is accomplished.”

### 10) Magnum Opus:

But surely Nietzsche had more and better things in store for the world than a text written five years earlier? Fate intervened, but we know from his notebooks that Nietzsche had been planning for some time a magnum opus, alternately titled “The Revaluation [or Transvaluation] of Values.” or “The Will to Power.” Even *Ecce Homo* itself makes reference to this fact, ominously announcing that *The Case of Wagner* (1888) would be followed in two years by the “shattering lightning bolt... that will make the earth convulse” [3:10:4], and that the work begun in *Human, All too Human* (1878) “grown hard and sharp under the hammer blows of historical insight (read: *revaluation of all values*), may perhaps one day, in some future -1890! -serve as the ax swung against the ‘metaphysical need’ of mankind --but whether that will be more of a blessing or a curse for mankind, who could say?” [3:3:5].<sup>104</sup> So the emphasis on *Zarathustra* as the “supreme deed” is at least balanced, it seems, by a second supreme deed still to come.

Or maybe not. My reflections on this matter are heavily indebted to Gary Shapiro’s research in *Nietzschean Narratives*.<sup>105</sup> for Shapiro draws attention to just how deeply equivocal Nietzsche was in his account of the projected masterpiece. He begins by observing what is surely true, that Nietzsche’s use of the phrase “revaluation of values” underwent a significant change in 1888, the

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<sup>104</sup>*UM*, p. 61. I call this analysis “despairing,” and it is presented this way in this text, but Nietzsche would later come to find something profoundly vitalizing and praiseworthy in the thought that life is a continual becoming, a relentless forward movement.

year during which Nietzsche was most actively experimenting with different plans for a comprehensive treatment of his thought. Initially, the phrase does not seem to have had a special status in Nietzsche's lexicon; it was one phrase amongst many to denote the kind of genealogical activity in which Nietzsche had been engaged for some time already. But two things happened in 1888: first, the phrase came to stand as the title of a projected book, and second, the "revaluation" became a decisive cultural / historical moment rather than a merely personal event. Alternately, we might say that Nietzsche came to see the "personal" event of his own revaluation as, simultaneously, an axial moment in world history, very much on the model of the resurrection of Christ:

"Revaluation of all values: that is my formula for an act of supreme self-examination on the part of humanity, become flesh and genius in me" [4:1].<sup>1</sup>

But while Christ presumably could have been in no doubt about what his resurrection accomplished, and --moreover --precisely *when* it was accomplished, Nietzsche is rather less certain. At some point during its composition, Nietzsche came to think of the *Anti-Christ* as the first of four sections in the projected magnum opus, and both Kaufmann and Hollingdale take this view to be decisive. But translating the text according to this interpretive assumption leads to some distortions, for where the interleaf of the text simply announces the *Revaluation* as one of the "presents" of this year, both translators add the phrase "the first book of..." before this title.<sup>106</sup> "By such interpretive decisions," Shapiro notes, "the tension between Nietzsche's deferral of his grand project and his perhaps desperate claim that the project is indeed complete is softened and obscured."<sup>107</sup> Such a tension or ambivalence is certainly there, for after completing *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche rather abruptly decided --at least *sometimes* decided --that this text, in spite of having the wrong name, was "identical with the *whole* of the *Transvaluation*. At the same time his expectations for an immediate

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<sup>1</sup>Continuing the conceit, Nietzsche toys with the revolutionary's typical penchant for restarting the calendar: "one reckons *time* from the unlucky day on which this fatality arose --from the *first* day of Christianity! --*Why not rather from its last? --From today?* --Revaluation of All Values!" [AC, 62].

and explosive effect become much more specific; he wants to arrange for the book's translation and simultaneous appearance in seven languages," in editions of one million copies each.<sup>1</sup> These thoughts that will rule the world are no longer coming in on dove's feet, (if they ever were), but in the militaristic costume of Nietzsche's declaration of war on Christianity. But the question remains; has Nietzsche yet written the revolutionary constitution that will rally his troops and serve as their *cri du coeur*, or merely promised it?

The vacillation and uncertainty on this matter reappears elsewhere in *Ecce Homo*, and again the difference between the English and German editions is revealing. All versions of the text include Nietzsche's reference to beginning the preface to the *Transvaluation* on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1888. "immediately after" finishing *Twilight of the Idols*. "engraving sign upon sign on bronze tablets with the sureness of a destiny" [3:9:3]. We know that the text he was thus "engraving" at this time was *The Anti-Christ*. But when the passage concludes, "On September 30<sup>th</sup> a great victory [...]; seventh day:" the leisure of a god walking along to Po river," the English translators leave out the phrase which explains the nature of the victory -- "completion of the *Transvaluation*" [*Beendigung der Umwertung*].<sup>108</sup> Unlike the earlier editorial alteration however, there is a case to be made for this omission: Colli and Montinari, the German editors of Nietzsche's work, chose to include the phrase in their edition of *Ecce Homo*, but note the uncertainty about the passage due to "the erasures and reinscriptions."<sup>109</sup> Nietzsche seems to have changed his mind more than once here, and the author's final intentions are open to interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 145. By way of contrast, Nietzsche's previous sales had been so low that he had been forced to absorb the printing cost of everything including and after the fourth part of *Zarathustra*.

<sup>108</sup>The reference to the seventh day (after creation) echoes the description elsewhere in the text of Nietzsche curling up under a tree to write *Beyond Good and Evil* after the great creative work of *Zarathustra*: "who would guess after all *what* sort of recuperation such a squandering of good-naturedness as *Zarathustra* represents makes necessary?.. it was God himself who at the end of his days' work lay down as a serpent under the tree of knowledge: thus he recuperated from being God. --he had made everything too beautiful. --The devil is merely the leisure of God on that seventh day" [3:7:2].

As a final instance of this uncertainty, the two surviving manuscript title pages for *Anti-Christ* differ in the same way. The earlier one (likely) composed on September 3<sup>rd</sup> reads “*The Anti-Christ. Attempt at a Critique of Christianity. Book One of the Revaluation of All Values.*” while a version composed somewhat later reads simply “*The Anti-Christ. Revaluation of all Values. A Curse on Christianity.*”<sup>110</sup> Again, there is the same change in the claims made for the scope of the *Anti-Christ*: it is upgraded from a mere quarter to the whole of the great text, not at its inception or during its composition, but after the fact. Such ambivalence about the existence of the *Revaluation* suggests that at best we could determine Nietzsche’s *latest* position on the question, but there is no good reason to consider that any view thus obtained should be taken as authoritative, simply because it happened to be the last across the line. Nietzsche was quite clearly in the midst of rethinking this issue when his literary career came to a halt.

There are many ways of construing what is going on here, but (with one qualification), I find Shapiro’s analysis of the situation highly convincing:

rather than complete the work [the *Revaluation*] he turned instead to the composition of *Ecce Homo* which became, in effect, a substitution for a work that was never written. So the real rhythm of Nietzsche’s activities would be the opposite of that given in his bravura picture of himself as proceeding boldly and without pause from one work to the next, completing the Transvaluation and enjoying the well-deserved leisure of a god strolling alongside the Po. This actual rhythm would be one of postponement and displacement in which *Ecce Homo* is substituted for a book that is not written. The text which was to serve as a kind of personal appendix to the event and text of transvaluation becomes a means of not completing either. In effect, Nietzsche writes “Why I Write Such Good Books.” rather than writing his great book.<sup>111</sup>

But this postponement or deferral does not seem to be a mere “putting off” of a difficult task, for Nietzsche’s strange decision here is to find --or attempt to find --his great work *already* complete.

What I would add to Shapiro’s account is that this process is repeated even more forcefully with

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<sup>1</sup>One of the plans for the larger-scale version of the Transvaluation reads as follows: “Book 1: The Anti-Christ. Attempt at a Critique of Christianity. Book 2: The Free Spirit. Critique of Philosophy as a Nihilistic Movement. Book 3: The Immoralist. Critique of the Most Fatal Kind of Ignorance, Morality. Book 4: Dionysus. Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence.”

*Zarathustra* through the very inflation of its status that I have already explored. In fact, the two texts tend to run together somewhat in *Ecce Homo*; both are presented as bringing about simultaneously a great personal and a great cultural effect. In the forward to *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche insists that “this book belongs to the very few. Perhaps none of them is even living yet. Possibly they are the readers who understand my *Zarathustra*.”<sup>112</sup> But we know by this point only too well just how few people are suitably conditioned to have understood “even six sentences” of *Zarathustra*; certainly no one yet alive, or all that near on the horizon. If the *Anti-Christ* is in fact the whole of the *Transvaluation*, the “supreme self-examination on the part of humanity” will seemingly be limited to the most marginal and untimely portion of humanity. And I can’t help but wonder, would such gifted readers even need the *Transvaluation*, whatever it is? The requirements for comprehending *Zarathustra* are made so outrageously high in *Ecce Homo* that it is hard to see how such readers would have anything to gain from another scant seventy pages. What, if anything, remains to be said and done after *Zarathustra*?

*Ecce Homo* has great difficulty in skirting this obvious question, but it is not for lack of trying. In his review of *Beyond Good and Evil* -- immediately after the discussion of *Zarathustra* -- Nietzsche writes: “The task for the years that followed now was indicated as clearly as possible. After the Yes-saying part of my task had been solved, the turn had come for the No-saying, *No-doing* part: the revaluation of our values so far, the great war --conjuring up a day of decision” [3:7:1]. It is a clever gambit: Nietzsche acknowledges implicitly that *Zarathustra* represents a conclusion, an end of the line, but through an appeal to the sort of dialectical structure that he officially despised, he can tease apart the “yes” and “no” aspects of his task as sequential moments, and present *Zarathustra* as the culmination of only one of these. But this will only work if both we and Nietzsche have very short memories indeed, for he has just finished describing *Zarathustra* as “he that says No and *does*

*No* to an unheard of degree,” but who is nevertheless “the opposite of a No-saying spirit” [3:6:6]. It is hard to know what exactly is at stake in Nietzsche’s opposition between a yes-saying and a no-saying, or a yes-doing and a no-doing, but Zarathustra is meant to be a psychological marvel precisely because he exemplifies both of these perspectives at once. In what manner, then, does a task remain for “the years that followed?” Have not both yes and no been said and done already?

Even if Zarathustra were not in some way already a No-sayer --even if he were simply a Yes to which the *Revaluation* provides (or would have provided) a complimentary No --this still tends to give pride of place to the earlier text. The critical aspect of Nietzsche’s thought is taken in all other cases to be *preparatory* for a creative affirmation. An insistence on this developmental sequence runs throughout Nietzsche’s writings, but it is most familiar perhaps in the first speech of *Zarathustra*. “On the Three Metamorphoses:”

To create new values --that even the lion cannot do; but the creation of freedom for oneself for new creation --that is within the power of the lion. The creation of freedom for oneself and a sacred “No” even to duty --for that, my brother, the lion is needed... But say, my brothers, what can the child do that even the lion could not do? Why must the preying lion still become a child? The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred “Yes.” For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred “Yes” is needed.<sup>113</sup>

I tend to agree with Nietzsche that the works after *Zarathustra* take on a darker hue; we can see it in the titles alone, with “Daybreak” and “The Gay Science” standing on one side, and “Twilight” and “Anti-Christ” on the other. But affirmation is meant to be the *goal*, not the prelude, to a critical attack that carves out a freedom of movement for the individual or the culture. However we judge its ultimate success, it is *Zarathustra* that answers to this description, moving through an initial series of largely critical speeches into what Nietzsche took to be the highest symbol of affirmation possible, the willing of the eternal recurrence. If there *is* a magnum opus, it lies in Nietzsche’s past; he has

already accomplished his great task.<sup>4</sup>

### 11) The Pale Criminal:

Standing in the gateway of recurrence, Nietzsche tells his life to himself. He looks back and remembers, and looks forward and sees a destiny. But his forward glance is a troubled affair; it continually threatens to become a repetition of the backward gaze, his future no more than a fatality sealed by his past. If *The Anti-Christ* is indeed the text of a great destiny, this begins to minimize the distance between past and present --the future would have been written only a few weeks ago rather than "five years ago through the mouth of Zarathustra" [4:8] --but it does not resolve the basic temporal problem. Perhaps the desire to reconstrue the status of *The Anti-Christ* is in part a means of defusing the stultifying effect of having his great deed so far behind him, but it is a desperate and unconvincing strategy if this is what it is, for Nietzsche can at best *repeat* the claims made for *Zarathustra*. However high he ratchets up his expectations for the *Transvaluation*, it is hard to see how it can surpass the text which stands "6000 feet beyond man and time" [3:6:1].

How did it come to this, that he would accidentally produce his masterpiece only to recognize it as such after the fact, after his plans to produce the great work collapsed? In a sense, it was inevitable, for "to become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion *what* one is" [2:9]. And this is especially the case. Nietzsche continues, where "the task, the destiny, the fate of the task transcends the average very significantly." If one is thus properly ignorant --without a clue --"the organizing 'idea' that is destined to rule keeps growing deep down," training all of the drives and capacities for their ultimate work. And as he describes his own experience (or as he re-imagines it

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<sup>4</sup>Again, I should stress that my concern is with *Zarathustra* as presented in *Ecce Homo*, not with that text itself or my own estimation of its status; personally, I prefer at least several of Nietzsche's other texts to *Zarathustra*, and while I have nothing more than anecdotal reports to go by, this response does not seem at all uncommon amongst Nietzsche scholars.

here), all seems to have gone according to (unconscious) plan; “considered in this way, my life is simply wonderful.” he says. “I never even suspected what was growing in me --and one day all of my capacities, suddenly *leaped forth* in their ultimate perfection. I cannot remember that I ever tried hard --no trace of *struggle* can be demonstrated in my life.”

There are many meanings embedded here, and no doubt a generous amount of “forgetting” as well, but the description is particularly revealing when read against his account of inspiration. For here too, there was no struggle, no conscious decision; the words “leaped forth,” like Athena from the head of Zeus: “One does not ask who gives.” Zarathustra, born of Nietzsche’s “most authentic, inmost, nethermost regions” [3:6:5], *surprises* him, catches him unawares: he had no idea what was growing inside of him. And we see something very much like this in the prologue to *Zarathustra* itself in the image of the jester leaping over the tight-rope walker:

“Forward, lamefoot!” he shouted in an awe-inspiring voice. “Forward, lazybones, smuggler, pale-face... you block the way for one better than yourself.” And with every word, he came closer and closer; but when he was but one step behind, the dreadful thing happened... he uttered a devilish cry and jumped over the man who stood in his way. This man, seeing his rival win, lost his head and the rope, tossed away his pole, and plunged into the depth even faster, a whirlpool of arms and legs.<sup>114</sup>

The jester leaping over the tight-rope walker, the god burst from the forehead fully armed, the inspiration “that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down” [3:6:3], and the task or destiny that leaps out fully-formed (“I never had any choice”): the great creation is always unbidden and violent in its arrival, oblivious to what it owes to its creator.

But while Nietzsche is free to revel in his privileged role in the divine birth (*blessed is he among philosophers*), he is not --in the end --Semele; he is not consumed in ecstasy at the birth of his text.<sup>1</sup> He is still here, after the birth, still writing. And this creates the problem. Everything he has

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<sup>1</sup>The chapter “The Exploding Hero” in Staten’s *Nietzsche’s Voice* gives a particularly illuminating account of Nietzsche’s strange attraction to the image of the self-consuming annihilation of the creator, linking this characteristic Nietzschean theme to Nietzsche’s fear of / disparement of women (“the perfect woman tears to pieces when she loves” [3:5]), and to Freud’s suggestion in *Beyond*



ever said suggests that he should leave the stage after his great deed, but he refuses to stop writing until (or shortly after) his collapse. And let us not get romantic about Nietzsche of all people. It was *syphilis* that did him in, as near as anyone can tell, *not* an artistic suicide, not the evacuation of the body's energies in a great creative act. Nor was it the voice of the gods ringing in his ears that drove him mad. Is there any doubt that he would have gone on writing for another fifty years, another hundred and fifty, if he had been fated to have them? He may have preached it, "five years ago through the mouth of Zarathustra," but Nietzsche is certainly reluctant to "practise the difficult art of leaving at the right time."<sup>15</sup>

It is in Zarathustra's speech "On Free Death" that Nietzsche praises the difficult art of leaving at the right time, claiming that one should not desire to hang "dry wreathes in the sanctuary of life": "one must cease letting oneself be eaten when one tastes best." But Nietzsche does not leave, and in staying, he begins to resemble one of the other characters in *Zarathustra's* gallery of personae. The "Pale Criminal" is also haunted by the memory of a deed that he "labours under." He is a murderer, a man whose soul "lusted for the bliss of the knife," but this is not at all why Zarathustra believes that he must die. Rather, it is the role that this supreme deed comes to fill in the criminal's self-understanding --his "image" of the deed rather than the deed itself --that makes it a

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*the Pleasure Principle* that "everything living dies for *internal* reasons," and *strives* to die in its own way [p. 311 in Penguin, volume 11]. I am in general agreement with Staten that this particular constellation of beliefs and desires is a recurring theme in Nietzsche's writing, which makes it all the more interesting that Nietzsche so utterly fails to live his own life in accordance with it.

'The same theme is presented even more urgently in AC 36: "To die proudly when it is no longer possible to live proudly. Death of one's own free choice, death at the proper time, with a clear head and with joyfulness, consummated in the midst of children and witnesses: so that an actual leave-taking is possible while he who is leaving *is still there*, likewise an actual evaluation of what has been desired and what achieved in life, an *adding-up* of life... [I]t is above all a question of establishing the correct, that is physiological evaluation of so-called *natural* death: which is, after all, only an 'unnatural' death, an act of suicide. One perishes by no one but oneself." It need hardly be stressed that Nietzsche utterly failed to follow his own maxim; having finished his "adding-up" in *Ecce Homo* and (perhaps) finished his *Transvaluation* as well, the only precondition still missing is the presence of "children and witnesses."

kind of *mercy* that he be killed:

the thought is one thing, the deed another, and the image of the deed still another: the wheel of causality does not roll between them.

An image made this pale man pale. He was equal to his deed when he did it: but he could not bear its image after it was done. Now he always saw himself as the doer of one deed. Madness I call this: the exception now became the essence for him... madness *after* the deed I call this.”<sup>16</sup>

Given how he now sees his former act, the criminal is in a sense “dead” already: as the doer of one deed, a deed in the past, he lives on only as a ghostly after-image of what he once was, his destiny fixed in this one performance that exists at a distance from him. What he *is*, is what he once *was*, which is to say, he is alienated from his own “inmost nature.” Where there is no possibility of overcoming this deed, that is, of reinterpreting or forgetting it, a speedy death is preferable to living on as a drawn out and superfluous epilogue to the event, or at least, thus spoke Zarathustra, in some moods. The *fact* of death is decided once the image of the deed attains supremacy, once it cannot be surpassed, and one actually begins to diminish the nobility of the great deed by remaining as its shadow: “he who has a goal and an heir will want death at the right time for his goal and heir.”<sup>16</sup>

Well then, is the Nietzsche of *Ecce Homo* not a Pale Criminal? “My concept of the ‘Dionysian’ here became a *supreme deed*” [3:6:6]. As I have argued, it is the text that embodies this deed that is above all most difficult for Nietzsche to appropriate, to *master*: he has consistently presented it as his “exception,” the great deed to which he is no longer sure that he is equal. “The great poet dips *only* from his own reality --up to the point where afterward he cannot endure his work any longer. When I have looked into my *Zarathustra* [again, note the possessive]. I walk up and down in my room for half an hour, unable to master an unbearable fit of sobbing” [2:4]. Is this excessive sobbing not a melancholic apprehension of the death that comes as the price of the great

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<sup>16</sup>Z, 1:6. Nietzsche’s “madness after the deed” is a striking instance of what Sartre more generally diagnoses as “bad faith,” though given Zarathustra’s views in “On Free Death,” it is not at all clear that Nietzsche feels it is always self-deception to see oneself as defined by a single task which may lie in the past. *Life* is constantly self-renewing, but the individuals within it may not be.

deed, a fear that “it is all behind him” now? A feeling that --like Zarathustra --he should have “broken” in “speaking his word”? If not actual suicide, should Nietzsche not at least --like J. D. Salinger --have retired into seclusion after his masterpiece, trusting the work to find its own audience rather than committing the breach of taste inherent in serving as his own press agent, trumpeting the merits of *Zarathustra* in *each* of the works of 1888? Why does he not leave?’

Perhaps there is still room for overcoming; perhaps he is uncertain about whether or not he can surpass this deed, and thus he can live on in the space opened up by this indeterminacy. The excessive praise of *Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo* is typically read as either parodic or grossly delusional --it is hard not to find it “embarrassing” if it is the unambivalent, unequivocal expression of a lucid mind. But I wonder, in light of these reflections, whether it might be better read as Nietzsche’s staging of his difficulty in overcoming what he understood to be his potentially defining work. The inflation of *Zarathustra* would thus not be an “objective” assessment of its status as art and philosophy, but an index of Nietzsche’s private struggle to surpass it; the more profound the struggle, the higher the work must be lifted, until it is “6000 feet beyond man and time.” There is no need to “choose” between reading *Ecce Homo*’s *Zarathustra* as a parody (Conway’s approach) and reading it as a “genuine” expression (Kaufmann), when both can be considered as part of the same act. “Overcoming,” for Nietzsche, always involves laughing at what is beneath one, representing the danger as ludicrous, as *past*. The parodic elements (which are almost certainly present) may then be

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‘My interest is in Nietzsche’s self-description, and in his failure to follow his own advice, and it is thus a kind of internal critique. But I cannot altogether hold off passing judgment --even if only in a note. It is the “free death” after the deed that strikes me as “madness,” not the pale criminal’s anxiety. Even *if* one had “a goal or an heir,” would it not reinstate the narrowest form of identity-essentialism imaginable to find one’s worth and potential exhausted in that *one* goal, as if a successful life was one lived solely along one axis? This is “madness” --a betrayal of Nietzsche’s own insight into the composite, collective nature of selfhood, the “subjective multiplicity” of affective centres that *each* mandate a goal of their own. If this is the “style” given to character through the organization of the various drives under a dominant taste, it is purchased a far too high a price. *Life* is messier than this, and the imposition of an artistic plan on his life --which is typically presented as the “healthy” alternative to searching for a pre-given essence --here begins to distort, compromise, and negate the variation of life found within *any* individual, Nietzsche’s spurious claims to have “excluded nothing” notwithstanding.

seen as a part of this process, the hyperbole reflecting both Nietzsche's experience of his earlier work *and* his effort to dethrone it.

But if this is in fact what is going on, it is obviously a dangerous game: overstating idealized images as a means of defusing them --inflating them until they burst, so to speak --may always be shadowed by an ongoing involvement in this staging which is not fully neutralized by irony. If the *need* to overcome is still palpable, it is questionable whether any "overcoming" has in fact occurred. I name and deride many of my own anxieties; catharsis, sadly, does not always follow. We will never know whether Nietzsche really did "weep uncontrollably" when he "dipped into" his previous work, and this very statement may well be a kind of parody that aims at liberating the self for a new task, but in either case, he continued to demonstrate an enormous preoccupation with this text: he was unable to let it go, but also unable to comfortably assimilate it to his present needs. And the strange insistence that there is a new work, either yet to be written or already in existence, may serve Nietzsche's desire to deflect our attention --and his own --from the creeping fear that he had outlived his task.

## **12) The Ghost of Zarathustra:**

All things Nietzschean tend to take on an air of the exceptional: he insists on his idiosyncrasy, his untimeliness, so often that one is tempted to think that *his* problems are absolutely unique. But it is not so: how many actors have complained about type-casting? One plays a part once, and plays it well, and is forever consigned to the role in the public imagination. But a more insidious form of type-casting occurs when the artist's own self-conception begins to mirror and even anticipate the public perception. Long before knowing that I was going to be working on autobiography, I happened to read a very interesting contribution to the genre, Bob Geldof's *Is that It?* Geldof is a popular singer who enjoyed a brief burst of popularity at the start of his career in the

late seventies, followed by a marked drop in sales during the time when he believed he was producing his best work; it is not unlike Nietzsche's own situation, where the attention-grabbing debut of *The Birth of Tragedy* was followed by ever-increasing apathy. But in the midst of decline (and like Nietzsche, facing the humiliation of having to finance his own poorly-selling releases). Geldof was captivated by a news report detailing the famine in Ethiopia, and calling in some old favours, organized a charity recording to raise some funds. Buoyed by the success of the venture, he conceived and organized an internationally televised concert as a follow-up: the "Live Aid" event of 1985, an audacious logistical feat involving simultaneous telecasts from stages around the globe, each one featuring the most popular performers of the day. It succeeded beyond anyone's expectations, reaching what was at the time the largest audience in history and raising millions of dollars for famine relief. He was knighted in due course, and at least briefly had to suffer the embarrassment of being called "Saint Bob," a world-historical irony for someone once expelled from his Catholic school in Ireland for distributing the writings of Mao Tse Tung and Karl Marx.

The title, coupled with the cover photo, tell the story; he stands on stage in the midst of his concert with a fist raised defiantly in the air, millions watching, adoring --but he *knows* with chilling certainty in the centre of this moment itself that he will never surpass what is now occurring. "Is that it," he asks. Like Semele, he should perhaps have gone up in flames; Nietzsche would want it thus. For how does one go on living, knowing that "the knot in one's destiny" is tied, that one will never equal, let alone surpass, this one great deed? The book grapples with the question, made more pressing by the fact that the public showed a subsequent reluctance to buy his new records --it seems that no one wanted to hear a Saint singing about the body.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>At first glance, Geldof does not seem to have much in common with the Pale Criminal. He has not committed murder and his problem is not guilt; rather than being sentenced by the world, he was sanctified. And for that matter, Nietzsche does not have blood on his hands either. But as I read the Pale Criminal narrative, the murder and the ensuing guilt are not in fact central features of

In its answers, it seems at once banal and eminently reasonable, *wise* even --and that is not a word I use lightly. After a brief depression and restlessness with which Nietzsche could no doubt identify, Geldof remembers that he is married, and that he has --he assures us --"two lovely children." Which is to say, he is not entirely, or not *only* an artist; there are people who reflect an image back to him that does not revolve solely around this one deed, and he has modes of self-identification that are not subsumed under a single destiny.

But Nietzsche does not have this, and in saying so, I am not simply pointing to a fact about his personal biography. He is monomaniacally fixated on the image of a *task* --an odd obsession for one who rejects all forms of teleology, and a dangerous obsession too, for it immediately gives rise to the question of whether the work (and thus the life) might have been accomplished already. When Nehamas argues that "Nietzsche" becomes "a literary character" through the process of his writing, submerging his biographical identity in the autobiographical persona that bears his name, I tend to agree;<sup>1</sup> my own conclusions in the first half of this paper were not entirely dissimilar. But "life as literature" for Nietzsche is dangerously close to being his only mode of existence as well as his

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Nietzsche's analysis, except in so far as this guilt reveals the criminal's complicity in the judgment handed down by the court. At the heart of the story is the concept of *self*-judgment, and for this, it is relatively accidental whether one is found guilty, heroic, or anything else. The problem in any of these cases is with being "found to be" anything at all, and with internalizing such a verdict. (The second half of the narrative, in contrast, deals with the psychology of the *external* judge, and this is not a part of my concern here).

<sup>1</sup>I am referring to Nehamas' *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, and particularly to its closing ten pages, where this conclusion is made most explicit. Reader familiar with this text might perhaps have seen traces of its influence on me in my decision to interpret "Nietzsche" as a literary character rather than a biographical author, even if it is also true that my image of Nietzsche departs in a number of ways from that drawn by Nehamas. Perhaps most of these differences devolve from a divergence in focus rather than from a more fundamental conflict in interpretation. In *Life as Literature*, and even more in his recent *The Art of Living*, Nehamas is interested in the possibilities of self-creation made available by the kind of highly personalized, philosophical writing practised by Nietzsche. I share this interest, but here at least, my work has been motivated by an interest in the status of such writing as a kind of *communication*, and this tends to bring to the fore some of the liabilities of living "as literature." An autobiographer's dependence on readers is made inescapable once the decision has been made to create that life through a textual exchange.

primary activity, and this leads to certain problems; there is very little room left open in which to oppose this literary destiny to the desires, identifications, and priorities of a non-textual life.

The point is perhaps made most effectively by comparing Nietzsche to some of the authors I have already considered. If Nietzsche --the biographical, biological author --were simply *making use of writing* as a means of self-discovery and self-creation, the problem would not be so acute. Rousseau, for instance, is interested in revealing himself through writing, largely in order to correct *our* (mis)conceptions about who he is, but throughout this activity, he at least thinks of himself as absolutely complete in the inwardness and security of his own identity. The point is even more obvious in Descartes, where there is not even a hint that the anonymous protagonist of the *Discourse* "is" Descartes. At best, there is a relationship of resemblance between the author and the character, but it is clear that the author has kept himself in reserve behind whatever he has written: we will not come to know "Descartes" through reading the *Discourse*. But Nietzsche inverts this relationship. Where the protagonists of the *Discourse* and the *Meditations* are anonymous "everyman" figures, Nietzsche gives his own name to the philosophical / literary character of *Ecce Homo*. He is, or wills himself to be, this character. But this character has been inscribed as the bearer of a destiny: his identity revolves not around his author's private and incorrigible sense of "being-there," but around the performance of a task, the teaching of a teaching, and that teaching may be finished and completed before its author has expired.

My point is not that Nietzsche should have taken his own life after *Zarathustra* for the sake of consistency, but to honour this one strand of his own teachings, he should at least have stopped writing once he came to suspect that the textual Nietzsche's work was complete. In contrast, Nietzsche-the-author may well have had profoundly experienced modes of identification that are not absorbed into the image of a single task. We know for instance that he was an amateur composer who loved his music very deeply; he had a number of friends with whom he remained involved over

many years: and he had --let us be gracious here --a *complex* relationship with his mother and sister. All of these speak of a Nietzsche who played numerous parts, manifested diverse drives and desires, and became many different people as he navigated the complexities of a variety of different roles. And there is likely much more to him than we now know. Perhaps some intrepid biographer will one day uncover evidence of a here-to-fore undreamt of torrid affair with a neighbour, or indications that Nietzsche was a highly-placed secret agent working for a foreign power. The possibilities are limited only by what we *do* know, and by the power of our imaginations. The fact that such fanciful imaginings seem highly implausible is not what is important; the point is that we *cannot* know the full range and extent of what Nietzsche-the-man took himself to be. But the second point, following close after the first, is that it does not matter all that much. "Nietzsche" now names a character who supervenes on a set of texts (including one that he didn't even write --*The Will to Power*'), and *Ecce Homo* is the biographical portrait of *this* character. "I tell my life to myself," he tells us, and what he tells is the life of a character named Nietzsche, a character who has a destiny in the world that is vitally important, but which might already have been realized. And thus, this character seems to view himself as a dead man, both because his work has been accomplished in the creation of *Zarathustra*, and because his own life can never be more than a mere prejudice before this work is read and received, and its mission and mandate thereby fulfilled.

The focus on a task or destiny that leads to this anxiety-ridden impasse is, I would think, a great corruption of some of Nietzsche's more open and progressive thoughts. The insistence that life must always overcome itself, that no single perspective is complete in itself, and that value claims

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<sup>1</sup>Through examining the status of *The Will to Power* text --a collection of notes that Nietzsche himself did not organize as a text, though they are now "canonical" --Michael Sprinker provides an interesting analysis of the manner in which Nietzsche's "authorship" transcends what Nietzsche the author actually published; "Nietzsche" becomes public property in Sprinker's analysis, as also in mine. [see "Fictions of the Self," pages 332-335]



are always open to reinterpretation --surely grand Nietzschean themes --all suggest that "completion" can never be more than an idealizing illusion. To feel that one's work is finished can only mean that one lacks the strength or courage needed to "go under" once more once a specific task, project, or train of thought has reached its culmination. Ironically, the *Zarathustra* text itself does a much better job than *Ecce Homo* of navigating the conflict between a tenacious desire for interpretive freedom and the desire to fulfill a mission. *Zarathustra* begins the text as a teacher and ends it focussed once more on his work, but as nearly everyone has recognized, this mission has changed a great deal in the interim: his task is constantly renegotiated throughout the text, partly in response to his evolving self-understanding, and partly in response to the exchanges he has with others.<sup>1</sup>

But the rhetoric of "task" utterly dominates *Ecce Homo*, and in a highly inflexible form. It is a text that begins by announcing that "Nietzsche" will soon "confront humanity with the most difficult demand ever made of it," and ends by equating the moment of this demand with the actual "being" of the text's protagonist; "I am a destiny," he says. In between, we hear the story of how this "Nietzsche" ever more fully realized his vocation, with each new book preparing the way, until at last this vocation became not one choice amongst many, but a unique dispensation from an unknown god. The transvaluation of all values becomes "flesh and genius" in "Nietzsche" [4:1] --an immortal destiny still more grand than even Descartes dared to dream of --but that and that alone, is what he is. "One pays dearly for immortality: one has to die several times while still alive" [3:6:5]. In line with Nietzsche's emphasis on becoming, this should mean that one turns against one's cause when it triumphs, that one should resist as strongly as possible the confines of any identity --even a

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<sup>1</sup>To take just the most obvious example, the teaching of the Overman in the prologue all but disappears in the later sections, replaced by an emphasis on the eternal recurrence. The eternal return, for that matter, fades from view in the subsequent texts until it reappears in *Ecce Homo*, brought into uneasy conjunction with the "revaluation of all values," the *new* task that increasingly came to the fore in 1888.

great one --when it threatens to ossify into a role. But in *Ecce Homo*, it seems to mean the opposite. It seems to mean, rather, that one should sacrifice everything to one's task. And this aligns Nietzsche much more closely with Augustinian teleology than with, for instance, Montaignean flux and indeterminacy. But much more importantly, it aligns Nietzsche with Christ. And one must ask, has playing Christ not had its revenge on Nietzsche? Is it perhaps the case that he is troubled by the spectre of the great deed in his past, and drawn to speak ever more insistently of the connection between death and immortality, precisely because he is fixated on this image of sacrifice and atonement, and thereby led to interpret his (literary) life as necessarily standing on one side or the other of the Passion? However "ironic" his use of the Christian narrative, Nietzsche's thought seems to flow quite readily in its channels, even when this distorts the positions to which he is otherwise committed.

But if I could offer yet one more turn of the screw, I would suggest that *Zarathustra* --the book that bears this name --is perhaps best construed as simply the focal point, the imaginative locus, in which Nietzsche reexamines his relationship with his textual corpus. His private battle may be with *Zarathustra*, the great deed, but this battle is reflected in and reflective of the realization that his work will outlast him, that it will be read or not read without his say so, without his correction. His image has escaped him through writing, and while one Nietzsche is happy enough to lend his name to his literary after-life, thereby securing a semblance of immortality, another tries to draw the writing back in as properly his --and only his --possession. But he can do so only through still more writing; his identity spills out of the solitary site of writing --the lonely apartments in so many different cities --and into the public domain. In the last paragraph of his text, Nehamas states that "Nietzsche has succeeded in writing himself into history. But as he also knew, this is not a task one can ever accomplish alone; every text is at the mercy of its readers."<sup>17</sup> The thought is presented as a kind of epilogue, an exhortation to the reader to certify the fact of Nietzsche's transubstantiation into

text. But I doubt that the contribution of the reader can be so neatly separated from the project of turning life into literature, as if it were simply something added on as the completing aspect of a task that Nietzsche could otherwise perform in absolute autonomy.

It is to this problem of readership that I will now turn.

(ii) **THE PROBLEMS WITH READERS**

The inability to communicate one's thoughts is in very truth the most terrible of all kinds of loneliness.

Nietzsche, to his sister, July 8, 1886

**13) The Quest for the Perfect Reader:**

Nietzsche's books are relentlessly open to interpretation, and not just in the sense that everything --according to Nietzsche --is open to interpretation. They are available for the most wildly divergent appropriations because they are written in the most plastic, adaptable manner imaginable. We are free to disparage the Nazi's reading of Nietzsche, and even *right* to do so --*this* is not Nietzsche's thought --but they did not have to work too hard to find what they needed. Nietzsche's style makes "misreading" all but inevitable. But what is constant throughout the various readings and misreadings --almost certain --is that the texts being read are *Nietzsche's* texts: his name will always be associated with Zarathustra, whether Zarathustra is currently masquerading as a Nazi, a humanist, an existentialist, postmodernist, democrat, anarchist, misogynist, irrationalist, romantic, culture-critic, messiah, or anti-Christ. In one short century he has already been each of these things, and each time --in each incarnation --he speaks in Nietzsche's name. Nietzsche defiantly insists, "I am one thing, my writings are another matter" [3:1], but can only insist it in writing; he cannot speak himself out of his book, he cannot point to a beyond in a literature that is designed to absorb everything under his name.

Nietzsche-the-author was spared the worst of what would be read in his name, dying before he had attracted very many readers at all, though it is striking how attentive he was to the responses that he did generate. While assuring us --as artists so often do --that he does not read or heed his reviews ("I feel no curiosity at all about reviews of my books" [3:1]), he is strangely capable of providing exact quotations from a good number of them in *Ecce Homo*. And in almost every case,

he dismisses the critic's interpretation, and uses it as an opportunity to remind us of how he *should* be read. If Nietzsche haunts his texts as a kind of ghost rather than leaving the stage, at least part of what he is doing is attempting to oversee our reading.

But his initial problem is simply finding readers. They are in no short supply today, but as one knows, Nietzsche was all but ignored throughout most of his literary career. This is intolerable for Nietzsche, for if he has in fact endeavoured to carry out a kind of alchemy with his name, sacrificing an extra-textual life for a literary immortality, a posthumous existence, then it is imperative that he be read. And once this necessity has been thought through, the autobiography almost inevitably comes to be thought of as a kind of trap or lure; Nietzsche refers to his writings as fish-hooks in *Ecce Homo*, only to complain that --through no fault of his own --there were no fish [3:7:1]. The plight is common to all secular autobiographers --those who stake their immortality on the propagation and perpetuation of their names --but the imperative exists in a still more acute form in Nietzsche, for as we have already had cause to observe, his name must not only recur down through the ages, but must also have the greatest possible effect: it must be read, and it must be read well.

Perhaps this accomplishment is not out of reach for the self-proclaimed master stylist -- "perhaps I know how to fish as well as anyone?" he says. However, the situation is made immeasurably more complex in his particular case by the fact that the "destiny" professed by Nietzsche is predicated on his radical individuality, his "untimeliness." "Nietzsche" is the bearer of the new glad tidings precisely because he is the subject of "a new series of experiences," and yet he insists within the same work that as readers, we experience only ourselves: "Ultimately, nobody can get more out of things, including books, than he already knows. For what one lacks access to from experience one will have no ear" [3:1:1]. Nietzsche's name, it seems, must simultaneously be heard correctly in order to bring about its proper effect (as well as to validate the life/death transaction that

brought it into being, the credit he has advanced himself in his name), but must also, paradoxically, remain incomprehensible, lest any access to it compromise his stance of absolute novelty. In this regard, it is telling that *Ecce Homo* closes with a repeated declaration of the phrase "Have I been understood?" The question of whether or not he is read (the common autobiographical concern) is superseded by the more vexed question of whether or not his readers have understood him.

And what could *possibly* constitute an acceptable answer to this question for Nietzsche? To be understood is necessarily to be *in common* with one's reader, to be comprehensible within a general structure of experiences, and this would unacceptably compromise the world-historical singularity of the "Nietzsche" who would claim to divide history in two [4:8]. Even for the most "multifarious art of style" ever devised, it is not at all clear that there are linguistic means available for communicating an absolutely novel experience. As he states quite clearly in *Twilight of the Idols*:

We no longer have a sufficiently high estimate of ourselves when we communicate. Our true experiences are not garrulous. They could not communicate themselves if they wanted to: they lack words. We have already grown beyond whatever we have words for. In talking there lies a grain of contempt. Speech, it seems, was devised only for the average, medium, communicable. The speaker has already vulgarized himself by speaking.<sup>118</sup>

So what are the options? An absolute silence preserves the integrity of the message, but at the cost of an unbroken solitude --it no longer *is* a message. On the other hand, a genuine attempt to communicate must accept what is --for Nietzsche --unacceptable, namely, that the novelty of one's experience will be lost in the medium of transmission. "Communication by words is shameless." says Nietzsche in his notebooks. "words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common."<sup>119</sup> And how could what is "common" --a mere repetition of the old --ever inaugurate the new, "an act of supreme self-examination on the part of humanity" [4:1]? The deflationary effect of being misunderstood appears to unsettle Nietzsche's typical conviction that he

will usher in the convulsions of a new age: "And in the end, why should I not voice my suspicion? In my case too, the Germans will try everything to bring forth from a tremendous destiny --a mouse... how I wish I were a bad prophet in this case!" [3:10:3].

I would like to be clear about what is at stake here. The problem is not simply that a "Nietzsche" who is in absolute and full possession of himself is unable to share the wealth of his private experience with the outside world. This is problem that Augustine, Descartes, and Rousseau have --each in his own way --for each is certain that he has a powerful and important truth to communicate, and each is troubled by the limits on his ability to reveal it effectively. But the presumption for each of these writers is always that this communication is a *gift*, a benevolent offering from a self-sufficient individual to a needy world.<sup>1</sup> Like Christ in the gospels, they give without receiving, or at least, without *needing* to receive; there is no lack or absence within them that needs to be filled by the response their gift-giving generates. Or at least, so they would wish to believe, and wish to have *us* believe.

Nietzsche is of course quite strongly attracted to this image as well, and his texts are filled with images of the noble spirit giving to the world out of the overflow of his own superabundance. But at least some of the time, Nietzsche saw that the dynamics of gift-giving can be more complicated than his precursors recognized. The giver needs to be received in order to *be* a giver: a "gift" has not been given unless it is taken up by someone who desires it. If Nietzsche needs to be heard, this is as much for *his* benefit as for ours, for his identity --as he has described it --is radically dependent on the outside world. He *is* a fatality (a destiny, a teacher, etc.) rather than simply being

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<sup>1</sup>The pattern of the self-sufficient individual graciously giving to the world is perhaps clearest in Descartes, for he is not (like Augustine) merely "passing along" a gift that first came from God, and his gift is more universally valuable than Rousseau's "gift" of himself. These are important differences, but they are modifications to a common image. Each has something to *offer* us; none admit to needing anything *from* us.

one who *has* a fate, but this means that “Nietzsche” may “fail to come about;” his identity, as inscribed in *Ecce Homo*, may be a false prediction. Already in the preface, Nietzsche “knows” that he does not live because “one has neither heard nor even seen me.” As Mileur notes, “it is disturbing the way the ‘live’ seems to depend so much on reception and recognition.”<sup>120</sup> The very “love of fate” and affirmation of life that underwrite Nietzsche’s signature in *Ecce Homo*, that provide the structure of the text itself and the identity it contains, are radically and ineliminably dependent on a public readership.

But the stakes --though less obvious --are equally profound in the interleaf invocation of recurrence. There are two paths that stretch out from the gateway of the moment --the past *and* the future; the retrospective gaze so typical of autobiography is matched in *Ecce Homo* by the most far reaching protension imaginable. The affirmation of the moment, the great Yes to life, is faced not only with managing the past, but also with imaginatively appropriating a future, for as much as it is a history, *Ecce Homo* is also an autobiographical record of a destiny. But this is bound to complicate matters. Imagining himself in the gateway of recurrence, Nietzsche is perhaps able to interpret his own past without involving us in the transaction, but his proclaimed destiny will be realized --if at all --in public space; we are implicated in his identity through bringing about (or failing to bring about) the fate to which he has tied his name. And if his death and return are not strictly affairs of the moment but are also spread out in history, then there will be a gap or hiatus between his self-sacrifice and his return. In the present --his present at any rate --“Nietzsche” remains indeterminate, as much “equal parts living and dead” as Schrödinger’s famous cat-in-a-box, and equally dependent on an observer in order to leave this ghostly state. But this once again reinstates his absolute dependence on a “good” reading, for while he will not be here to supervise the manner in which we understand him, it is the use to which we put him that will determine his nature. He may come out of this quite other than he would have hoped. Or he may not be read at all.



And which of these --for Nietzsche-- is the worse fate? He shows signs of both fears in this no-win dilemma, despairing over the thought of being unheard, but despising the inevitability of misreading that will arise if and when he *is* heard. In fact, both of these frustrations can be seen in a passage that I have already addressed from a rather different perspective. In discussing Nietzsche's analysis of the "rancour after the deed," I suggested that there was a slide in his narrative that led him (and us) away from his original, pressing question. Why does one feel threatened or "almost crushed" by one's own artistic creation, he asked, but his answer moved immediately into a discussion of the threatening masses. But in light of the foregoing, it begins to seem that this may not be such a change in topic after all. If Nietzsche's identity depends on how he is read --if he will become any number of different "subjects" depending on the nature of the readings of which his audience is capable --then the outside world is naturally and immediately brought to mind in the most forceful way once his book is "complete" and sent out into the world. Through publication, Nietzsche becomes public, and no sooner has this occurred than he begins to feel that he is too sensitive to the outside world, that he has squandered his "defensive energies." In the face of such maddening dependence, such aggravating vulnerability, he inevitably begins to rage at the world, but it is a hostility grounded on his own need.

But there is a deeper and more pervading fear made manifest in Nietzsche's rancour. Prior to naming the "absurd sensitivity of the skin" to all manner of threats, Nietzsche describes the "gruesome silence one hears all around one... one comes to men, one greets friends --more desolation, no eye offers a greeting" [3:6:5]. When Nietzsche has so many readers today, it is perhaps too easy to forget his situation in 1888. The bitter truth was that no one *cared enough* to attack him: the books that were meant to change the world fell on deaf ears. What I would like to

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'Consider again Schrödinger's cat, indeterminately both alive and dead until it is witnessed, at which point its fate will be decided. Does the cat *want* a witness, or does it prefer indeterminacy to the very real chance of immanent death?

suggest is that Nietzsche's strident insistence that he is engaged in warfare against the entire world, that he is besieged by innumerable enemies, is at least in part a means of imaginatively conjuring up readers. The maddening indifference of the world --which makes *him* angry --is consistently transformed into a hostility directed *towards* him, and the dramatic rejection of his readers occurs only *after* he has first carefully drawn them into existence. Consider: immediately after naming the unbridgeable silence in which no one can even see him (where perhaps it is a mere prejudice that he lives at all), he is, quite abruptly, *all too visible*: "such revolts I experienced... from almost everybody who was close to me. It seems nothing offends more deeply than suddenly letting others feel a distance" [3:6:5]. It is a startling reversal; in the space of three sentences, he transforms a distance that he *cannot* bridge --though he wants to --into a distance that he "lets others feel." Freudian explanations such as "reaction-formation" inevitably come to mind; Nietzsche insists too loudly on exactly the opposite of the anxiety he had ever so briefly indicated. Through the postulation of a hostile public, Nietzsche can present (to himself?) his solitude as a strategic choice, not as a resented fate.

The assumption of a posthumous, literary life that generates these difficulties is unique to Nietzsche only in so far as it arises in an insistently secular context; in other respects, Nietzsche simply repeats once more (as if in a mirror) the founding assumption of Augustine's *Confessions*. For while Augustine does not declare his own fate --and would not presume to do so --his work and his life are governed by his belief in an after-life. His destiny (God willing) is assuredly at the heart of his book. And again, it is a destiny "purchased" ("graciously given" is how Augustine would put it) through a kind of sacramental "death" in the present, a sacrifice that returns more than it gave away. But this is not simply a feature of Augustine's theology that is *described* in the *Confessions*: it is also performatively instantiated in the most dramatic way in his autobiographical practice. Augustine describes the *Confessions* itself as a loving "sacrifice" made to God [*Confessions*, 5:1], a

symbolic representation of the past “given up” for a renewed life in the present, just as his work in the present is a sacrifice of love that looks longingly towards a dreamt of future. And it is this language (if not specifically Augustine) that provides the rhetorical resources for Nietzsche’s semi-ironic repetition in *Ecce Homo*.

But I can’t help but think that Nietzsche gets caught in his own trap here. for in repeating the structure of Augustine’s writing. but without an afterlife (and abolishing this assumption is one of the main purposes of his writing). he exaggerates and aggravates his dependence on others in order to “become what he is.” at the same time as he is so extraordinarily concerned with minimizing it. While Augustine is as prepared as Nietzsche to describe his present as a kind of “death” or ghostly indeterminacy relative to the life that awaits him (“I do not know whence I came into what I may call a mortal life. or a living death [1:7]), his “perfect reader” is assured in advance: against the uncertainty of the present. there is the promise of a future resolution. But there is no god waiting to read Nietzsche’s confession. and no human reader who would not diminish the professed identity in the very act of comprehending it.

The most desirable solution to this dilemma is, for Nietzsche, impossible. The “name” that is heard by all and yet utterly unfathomable, which is universally recognized and yet subsists in the sureness of its own power. is the name of God. For one who is not God, the identity bound up in the name is inevitably destined to a dangerous transit through an outside reader in order to “become what it is.” The divine signature --“I Am who (I) Am” --is thus opposed to the all-too-human “I am what you read.” and the nature of this reading is far from assured in advance. The *pathos* in *Ecce Homo*. the simultaneous need for confirmation and rage against this very need. arises in part from the

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<sup>1</sup>Exodus, 3:14; “God said to Moses, ‘I am who am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I Am has sent me to you.’” There are a variety of possible translations here, including “I am who I am,” and “I will be what I will be,” but each shares an emphasis on plenitude, eternity, and self-presence, an acknowledgment that as a subject, God cannot be identified with His predicates.

fact that through inscribing his subjectivity in the name which says *ecce homo* --“Behold the Man,” Nietzsche --the man --has lost a crucial form of control over his own identity. The easy self-certainty of the Cartesian *cogito* is forsaken for a written-self that is enacted in the disputed territory of public readership. It is precisely this ambivalence of rage and need that is given voice within the first paragraph of the preface --“I have a duty against which my habits, even more the pride of my instincts, revolt at bottom --namely, to say: *Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else*” [pref. 1].

#### **14) Eliding the Subject:**

The great work --had it been written --might have assured an optimal reading. Or so the fantasy goes: there is no shortage of world-historical irony in the various ways in which the gospels have been interpreted. But the gospels have --in a sense --all the time in the world: they can wait for their proper readers, finding them wherever they arise, while the identity of Christ inscribed within them remains unsullied by whatever is read in his name. But this is of course because the gospels refer to a Christ who is accessible outside of the texts; they are an overture or an invitation --a preliminary point of contact --but not a “life as literature.” Christ is not the character whom these texts manifest in “exquisitely elaborate detail” (as Nehamas says of Nietzsche’s texts).<sup>121</sup> But I agree with Nehamas; Nietzsche just *is* the textual Nietzsche, at least in so far as it is the textual Nietzsche whose name is tied to a public destiny, and so his identity cannot be securely grounded in a realm that transcends its readers. A “misreading” makes for a new Nietzsche.

This is of course the nature of textuality itself, and as I discussed in the opening pages, it is the denial of a fixed and grounding meaning in the author’s intention that allows Nietzsche the interpretive freedom to constantly reinterpret and revalue his work. But he shows a marked reluctance to extend the same freedom to his readers when it is he himself who is the text. Better to

remain forever undecided, better to live as a ghost, than to suffer the infinite fragmentation of identity that would result from too many readings. And in line with this, Nietzsche imagines in almost all of his texts that his only “real” readers exist in the future. These future readers stands at a distance from Nietzsche that must necessarily remain indeterminate; they must be near enough to validate his prophetic declaration of a world-historical destiny, but far enough away to avoid compromising his untimeliness.’ Despite Nietzsche’s insistence that “here, no ‘prophet’ is speaking” [pref. 4], this is certainly reminiscent of the “unfalsifiable” structure of biblical prophecy. When Nietzsche has had his effect, then we will know that he was properly read and therefore that his name remains vital and active, but if the contrary were true, how could we ever know; when might a sufficient length of time have passed without the occurrence of a moral cataclysm inspired by Nietzsche’s name, such that we could safely say that he was wrong? Through an indefinite deferral of the time of the validating reading, “Nietzsche” can continue to live on his own credit, a debt that will seemingly never come due.

In the meantime, Nietzsche does everything he can to prevent our premature reading of his name. The structure of Nietzsche’s name in *Ecce Homo* is intentionally masked; it is a name that is forged in the riddles which permeate and bookend *Ecce Homo* as a text. Immediately after declaring that he will tell himself his life --the life offered up in the name that has just signed the preface --

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‘There is a parallel, though less pronounced structure in the geographical --rather than temporal -- proximity of the perfect reader: everywhere but in his native Germany, his readers are “nothing but first-rate intellects and proven characters, trained in high positions and duties: I even have real geniuses among my readers. In Vienna, in St. Petersburg, in Stockholm, in Copenhagen... everywhere I have been discovered: but not in the shallows of Europe, Germany” [3:2:2]. It is interesting to compare this remark to a strikingly similar one offered by Montaigne, but note especially the interpretation of the phenomena that Montaigne adds at the end: it seems curiously appropriate for Nietzsche: “In my region of Gascony, they think it funny to see me in print. But the further from my own haunts my reputation spreads, the higher I am rated. In Guienne I pay the printers; elsewhere they pay me. It is on this accident that men rely who conceal themselves whilst they are alive and present, to gain a name when they are dead and gone. I am less ambitious; I cast myself upon the world, solely for my present advantage. When I leave it --that is that!” [3:2, “On Repentance,” p. 240 in Cohen]

“Nietzsche” makes this very “I” the subject of a puzzle: “I am, to express it in the form of a riddle, already dead as my father, while as my mother I am still living and becoming old” [1:1]. I have already gestured towards one or two possible readings of the riddle --there of course are others. In fact, there are *too many* other readings. Once the name has been signed as a riddle, there is an explosion of possible readings, each of which must be navigated as we seek to come to terms with the text. The “name” that is a riddle becomes a false-name, a maze through which we must pass en route to the true name that --presumably --lies behind it. And as the name is *pluralized*, it ceases to refer in any univocal way to its text --it names too much --and “Nietzsche” ceases to be the true name through which the text receives its life; Nietzsche, the author, has transformed his proper name into a mask.<sup>1</sup> The structure of the riddle is repeated and compounded at the other end of the book, as the “I” inscribes itself within the space carved out by yet another strange duality: “Have I been understood? *Dionysus versus the Crucified*” [4:9]. On Derrida’s reading, the riddle again transforms the once-singular name into an unnavigable and ultimately masking plurality:

*Dionysus versus the Crucified*, Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*. Christ but not Christ, nor even Dionysus, but rather the name of the versus, the adverse or countername, the combat called between the two names --this would suffice, would it not, to pluralize in a singular fashion the proper name and the homonymic mask? It would suffice, that is, to lead all the affiliated threads of the name astray in a labyrinth.<sup>122</sup>

And so, to offset the risk of being read too soon, too poorly, and by too many, the name itself is disguised, and its proper reader postponed.

But most of all, there is the central “riddle” of the text, the mystery of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. “In order to understand anything at all of my Zarathustra, one must perhaps be similarly conditioned as I am --with one foot *beyond life*” [1:3]. Nietzsche --the ghost-writer of Zarathustra’s

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<sup>1</sup>Mileur comments, “we are familiar, of course... with irony as a device to hold one’s precursors at a distance: we are less familiar with it as a primary means of achieving distance from the audience as well. We might speculate that the rise of the ironic corresponds to an increasing sense of alienation from and uncertainty about those who are receiving all this writing” [“Revisionism, Irony, and the Mask of Sentiment,” p. 226].

autobiography --is thus conditioned, but is anyone else "similarly conditioned?" Does this not restrict the community of Nietzsche's readers to one, to Nietzsche himself? The gross inflation of Zarathustra may in the end have as much to do with projecting himself into a name that *cannot* be heard as with staging his own overcoming (or its failure). He needs to be heard, but heard *at a distance*, incompletely, for to be heard fully would mean that he was heard as some-thing, and Nietzsche fears above all being frozen in place: "every profound thinker is more afraid of being understood than of being misunderstood."<sup>123</sup> Identity equals death in Nietzsche, and while living on as a ghost is far from ideal, it is better than the closure that signifies death. But if he seems to want us nearby --warm and interested like a herd of cows --he certainly does not want us close enough to call in his credit. For what on earth would Nietzsche have to say to someone who looked him in the eye and said "I am listening; speak your piece"?<sup>1</sup> I have my suspicions. In short order, it would be determined that this listener too was a "decadent" all along, unable to understand, and thus not worth speaking to: nothing would be said. But we will never know for certain, for Nietzsche has denied us access.

#### **15) The Liberation of Solitude --Waiting for the Echo:**

There is a certain delicacy about this philosopher who praised hardness, but who also felt that the great spirits were always in extraordinary danger around the common (and who *isn't* "common"?). We may in the end hear more from him if we respect his shyness and anxiety and discretely listen in, unobtrusively. For is he not liberated to speak more freely --to the extent that he does --precisely *because* of his lack of an audience, a lack on which he insists perhaps too often?

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<sup>1</sup>One could easily say the same of Rousseau. If he were forced --somehow --to give up his insistence that the universal conspiracy against him distorts absolutely everything he says, if he had his sympathetic listener, even once, and could not deny it, well then --what precisely *is it* that he had wanted to say all this time?

Who is he telling that he has no readers? Why does he stress at such length how difficult it will be to read him? On this point, it pays to have read the autobiographers who came before Nietzsche, for we are perhaps too inclined to take him at his word otherwise. Yes, Nietzsche is difficult to read, and we do have to adopt different practices for his texts than for those of others. But *each* of the other authors I have considered here says the same thing, each worries about being understood or misunderstood, and each meditates at length on the most appropriate language to use for communication. In chronological progression, the sense that they will be misunderstood increases. Augustine frankly acknowledges the need for divine charity as the ground for proper communication and condemns the multitudes whose hearts have not been opened to charity through Christian love. But there is at least a clearly identifiable community who *can* hear him correctly. Descartes makes quite a show of being baffled by those who misunderstand his allegedly clear and distinct teachings, but he leaves us in no doubt that the vast majority of his readers fall into this category. By the time we reach Rousseau, the breakdown in communication is exaggerated into a universal conspiracy to prevent his books from appearing, or to corrupt their content.

True, much of this anxiety about misreadings can be attributed in a fairly straightforward way to an expression of perceived vulnerability in the act of self-exposure. I would not deny it. But there is another side to this; if misreading is inevitable, and more, if there are no readings at all, either good or bad, then one is free to say what one will. And how often have I used this very piece of self-deception to break through a bout of writer's block? Pretending that what I am writing is "for myself alone" --a random discontinuous entry in a writing journal --the ideas begin to take shape again, sheltered from the interference of an internalized and enormously critical other. In fact, the opening pages of the *Reveries* inscribes exactly the logic that concerns me here: side by side. Rousseau claims absolute candour *and* a complete and utter solitude. But the performance undercuts itself; to whom, in his solitude, is Rousseau pledging his sincerity? Like Augustine, he speaks to be overheard --we can almost hear him raising his voice.



In *Ecce Homo*, the tension is more explicit, embodied in the structure of the double-opening to the text; “Hear me.” and “above all, do not mistake me for someone else” Nietzsche says in the preface, but then on the interleaf --still before the text has properly begun --he is suddenly addressing himself rather than us: “and so I tell my life to myself.” Nietzsche does not tell us (or himself) how these two audiences condition each other, but I find it revealing that the address to the other (against which his pride revolts), comes first. Again, it is the structure of overhearing, of “listening-in,” the priest safely behind the screen of the confessional, or the mute analyst sitting out of sight behind the free-associating analysand: hear me, but graciously pretend not to. I will pretend to myself (and to you) that I address only my soul, that I commune only with my reflection, but secretly wait to hear the confirmation of an echo. And perhaps every Narcissus needs an Echo.

But as François Mauriac warns us, “an author who assures you that he writes for himself alone and that he does not care whether he is heard or not is a boaster, and is deceiving either himself or you.”<sup>124</sup> Or both. It is so tempting to sympathize too readily --or too completely --with Nietzsche: poor long-suffering Nietzsche, producing these works of such monumental brilliance and novelty, but unrecognized in his day. “I tell every one of my friends to his face that he has never considered it worthwhile to *study* any of my writings: I infer from the smallest signs [why must it be from the “smallest signs”?] that they do not even know what is in them” [3:10:4]. As if to balance the scales, to make up for the blindness of his contemporaries, I feel myself drawn unreflectively into painting Nietzsche in the heroic colours of the suffering artist. There is little doubt that this is Walter

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‘I am reminded here of a passage in Augustine’s *Confessions* that I discussed in chapter one (section five); speaking of the Manicheans, Augustine says, “I wish that they had been somewhere near me at that time, while I did not know that they were there, so that they could see my face and hear my voice as I read Psalm 4 at that time of rest, and perceive what that psalm wrought within me... Would that they could have heard me, while I did not know that they heard me, so that they would not think that I said for their benefit the things that I uttered along with the words of the psalm. For in truth I would not say those same words, nor would I say them in the same way, if I knew that I was being heard and seen by them.” [9:8]

Kaufmann's Nietzsche --he makes the familiar Van Gogh comparison in his introduction<sup>125</sup> --and since like most English readers it is Kaufmann's translations that I use, it is hard not to absorb the myth along with the text. To be fair to Kaufmann, we know the historical situation to which he was responding; to recuperate Nietzsche from his recent incarnation as a Nazi, a powerful new myth was needed, or a new history if one prefers. And to be fair to Nietzsche, it is not entirely a myth either: there *is* something admirable about Nietzsche's creative accomplishments. For those of us who do not work well in seclusion, without the regular interaction of peers, it seems a staggering feat to have produced *Twilight*, *Anti-Christ*, and *Ecce Homo*, all within a year, and all without workshopping the material in conferences or pre-printing excerpts in journals. But I wonder whether a better description might have it that Nietzsche was creative and original not in spite of his lack of audience, but because of it. Posthumous-Nietzsche wrote for a future, and the future does not (yet) exist: an imaginary landscape, one is free to populate it with "free spirits," the Overman --whatever one needs. It is not, I think, a chronological tomorrow, but rather "the day after the day after tomorrow," as Nietzsche says, an alternate time line running beside every now. Nietzsche, for whatever reasons (I have suggested some), *needs* to feel he is unheard, unaffected, but also that he *will be* heard. The future is the form in which Nietzsche addresses the present from the security of a distance.

#### **16) A Haunting Lack of Closure:**

To return to my beginning then, is *Ecce Homo* fundamentally different from Nietzsche's other works? Is it in fact an "autobiography," rather than simply "autobiographical" (as his previous works had been)? As with so many things where Nietzsche is concerned, it is an impossible question to answer in either direction: both answers appear to be true at the same time. This impossible duality, as I see it, arises on the basis of a difference between the past and the future in *Ecce Homo*. In so far as autobiography is an enclosed, private system in which the past is appropriated, *Ecce*

*Homo* is an autobiography; it situates itself as the site in which the textual history of an author is selected, transformed, and federated under a single name. But when it looks forward, it confronts an “outside,” a reader who is needed to register this subject-signature. The guards immediately go up, and Nietzsche the author begins to mask his premature and compromising self-disclosure by denying the very reading he requires: “That today one doesn’t hear me... is not only understandable, it even seems right to me. I don’t want to be confounded with others --not even by myself... My triumph is... [to] say, *I am not read, I will not be read.*”<sup>126</sup>

Not only do we hear in this remark the familiar rejection of his contemporaries, the readers of “today” who cannot hear him accurately, but also the stronger claim that “I will not be read.” In a rare exception to the future reader fantasy, Nietzsche actually denies *in principle* the possibility of a validating reading --and this, remarkably, is presented as his “triumph.” His signature becomes all but illegible here. Already one foot into his new “life as literature,” Nietzsche abruptly pulls back, preferring a suspended and indeterminate existence to one that is compromised by a dependence on the other, and *Ecce Homo* becomes an autobiography that effaces its own subject in order to protect it. Nietzsche “remains a kind of phantasm or ghost,” Staten concludes, “who does not inhabit the text but haunts it... What makes this phantasm disturbing,” he continues, “is that it seems to be the “real” Nietzsche, the only Nietzsche that ever managed to come into being, as though this were not only all that is left of him but also all there ever was.”<sup>127</sup>

It is a text, I would suggest, that can’t quite decide what it *wants* to be. Wanting both to embody himself within a literary work, and to deny the reading that alone would justify the effort, “Nietzsche” hovers undecidably between his life and his writing, a ghost left stranded between two machines. But his complicity in both the autobiographical practice, and in its subsequent deferral, lends a strange emotive colouring to the work as a whole; now a subject is present, now he is gone.

**“ON THE DIFFICULTIES OF READING NIETZSCHE”: A Concluding Preface**

*“I obviously do everything I can to be ‘hard to understand’”*

*Beyond Good and Evil, 27*

**17) Labyrinth:**

“Autobiography, it seems, is both impossible and inevitable.” Writers are “engaged at all times in inadvertent autobiography,” but given Nietzsche’s critique of the subject, “there is no longer any thing to talk about, and no one to do the talking.” Like most commentators on Nietzsche, I extracted a seeming paradox from the texts to launch my own exploration. And it hardly matters which one, for as one knows, each such polarity in Nietzsche’s writings tends very quickly to bring in the others as well. A strange compulsion rapidly takes over, almost as if a game has begun: once I have thrown myself into the centre of the labyrinth of Nietzsche’s logic, will I be able to find my way out again?

The opening moves always seem obvious --suspiciously so if this is indeed a labyrinth. I might begin like this: There is, in the end, no contradiction here. When Nietzsche says in *Beyond Good and Evil* that philosophy is “unconscious memoir,” this claim must be read in light of his understanding of force, or “will to power.” The citation continues, “in the philosopher... there is nothing whatever that is impersonal: and above all his morality bears decided and decisive witness to *who he is* --that is, in what order of rank the innermost drives of his nature stand in relation to each other.” The traditional “who” of autobiography becomes a “what” here, a dynamic relation of drives, and *Ecce Homo* echoes this emphasis; its subtitle, significantly, is “how one becomes *what* one is” --not *who*. As every action, but perhaps especially philosophical writing, inevitably betrays the presence of a pattern of forces or affects that requires precisely *this* action, it betrays who --or *what* --is writing.<sup>i</sup> Far from contradicting it then, the claim about the inevitability of autobiography

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<sup>i</sup>Freud of course generalizes this idea into an elaborate “hermeneutics of the soul” --lies, fantasies, jokes, and dreams can never fully hide the desire which informs them, provided one knows

turns out to *presuppose* Nietzsche's critique of the subject. There is no autonomous and inviolate ego that possesses the experiences outlined in an autobiography: such a creature is only "a fiction added to the deed."<sup>128</sup> a result of desire or affect rather than its bearer. The constellation of drives and desires that produce a personal history cannot avoid being manifest in whatever that person does or fails to do, since such forces "cannot hold themselves back," reigned in by an ego that decides when they will and when they will not be granted expression. In claiming that philosophical writing is, in the end, "involuntary and unconscious memoir" Nietzsche effaces the distinction between autobiography and philosophy, but he does not in any way contradict his stand against "soul atomism."

True, there would need to be a great deal more detail to complete this story satisfactorily --at the least, an account of how force can be reflected in on itself, the "internalization of man" that breeds consciousness. Such an account, which might proceed by reading consciousness and conscious will through Zarathustra's claim that "the creative body created the spirit as a hand for its will,"<sup>129</sup> would be necessary to overcome the natural tendency to treat the will as a faculty possessed by a (conscious) agent. There would be some delicate moves involved, but fortunately the steps along this path have been marked out in advance by those who read Nietzsche primarily or exclusively through the lens of the language of forces:" guided by these threads, it seems

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how to read through these expressions. The Freudian catalogue of defensive mechanisms --repression, reaction-formation, gain-from-illness, transference, etc. --may perhaps be seen as an extension and codification of the tools implicit in Nietzsche's genealogical readings.

<sup>128</sup>*Zarathustra*, "On the Despisers of the Body." Nietzsche's views on this are again strikingly similar to Freud's. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud is insistent that --whatever their subsequent relationship (and this is a complicated caveat) --the ego develops originally *out of* the id, and in response to *its* needs.

"Gilles Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy* remains one of the most sophisticated and illuminating readings along these lines. It does, however, lean quite heavily on a rather small number of passages from the *Genealogy* and *The Will to Power* in the crucial second chapter, wherein Deleuze develops his theory of active and reactive force. But I am in no position to cast stones, having relied almost exclusively on one passage --GM 2:12 --in order to forge the link between appropriation and

tantalizingly possible to move through Nietzsche relatively quickly and cleanly.

So why then did I fail to do so in the preceding essay? Why did I bring up Nietzsche's critique of the "subject" only to rush away from it as quickly as possible? I think because I sensed a can of worms opening; better to be a little vague than to bring up an exegetical problem one cannot solve. at least, if one's goal is to demonstrate a mastery of / over one's materials. For how could I have integrated the foregoing observations about force into Nietzsche's talk of self-mastery, of controlling one's (perspectival) pros and cons? What is it that is doing the integrating, that is "imposing a single taste" on this plurality of drives? Consider --as an almost randomly drawn sample --this passage from the preface to *Human, All too Human*:

You shall become master over yourself, master also over your virtues. Formerly they were your masters; but they must be only your instruments beside other instruments. You shall get control over your For and Against and learn how to display first one and then the other in accordance with your higher goal. You shall learn to grasp the sense of perspective in every value judgment --the displacement, distortion and merely apparent teleology of horizons and whatever else pertains to perspectivism.<sup>129</sup>

Someone, or some "thing" is issuing *oughts* here; must there not be an addressee who *can* carry them out? To whom, or to what is "Nietzsche" (whoever and whatever *that* might be) talking, and through what Herculean contortions of analysis will I transform this language which sounds on the face of it so voluntaristic into something compatible with the language of pure force? For such language is far from incidental in Nietzsche --it is on virtually every page. And I wonder, as so often before, what percentage of a text we can interpret as saying something *other* than it appears to say before we lose exegetical credibility, before it begins to seem that we have approached the text with an interpretation already in hand?

And another wall I have hit before: if --against the odds --I find an answer that satisfies me, have I not thereby "systematized" and "totalized" Nietzsche, ignoring his claims to conduct his

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reinterpretation.

thinking as a series of discontinuous experiments which yield *regional* results rather than a comprehensive design? "I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity."<sup>130</sup> Again, such remarks are far from occasional. How do I justify the claim to have discovered a subterranean architecture lying beneath the shifting surface of Nietzsche's texts without presenting Nietzsche-the-author in an altogether incredible light, as a kind of gnostic master who has secreted away a complex and complete teaching that I will now profane by exposing it to the masses? What right do I have to assume against his explicit claims that such a unifying structure exists? Or if it is there, this hidden city, but Nietzsche did not hide it *himself*, am I not forced into the uncomfortable position of implicitly claiming to have written the *magnum opus* that Nietzsche never quite managed to produce, the text that ties together all of the loose ends that Nietzsche left scattered throughout his corpus --in short, a better Nietzschean than Nietzsche?'

Something has gone very wrong here, and Nietzsche is far from innocent of it. The moment one tries to speak intelligently about these impossible books, one is very near to looking a fool. As I read Nietzsche again --both his texts and my own text *on* him --I cannot shake the feeling that like Alice with the Queen of Hearts, I have been drawn unwittingly into a game where Nietzsche reserves the right to both set and change the rules; "*Catch me if you can!*" --and he promptly disperses himself in a set of texts that refuse to stand still. And if this is my common experience with

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'Perhaps I should put some names on these approaches, though they are in the end ideal types: no one author is likely to read Nietzsche exclusively along merely one axis. But as I have suggested, Deleuze is overwhelmingly occupied with the dynamics of force in Nietzsche (at least in his early text, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*), while Kaufmann's existentialist Nietzsche (in *Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*) is a creature concerned with free self-creation. Heidegger of course is famous for finding the hidden city in Nietzsche's notebooks (in his four-volume monument: *Nietzsche*), while Derrida, in contrast, provides the outstanding example of a shifting, protean Nietzsche whose texts actively resist unification (in *Spurs, Otobiographies*, and in numerous occasional references). It strikes me that part of the enormous appeal of Nehamas' *Life as Literature* must surely derive from the fact that it at least attempts to take each of these features of Nietzsche's writing seriously, though its concluding chapter tends to subordinate both force and pluralism to a unique reading of Nietzsche as self-creator, creating the impression that Nietzsche's writings are all organized by a central project (the re-presentation of himself as an exemplary, literary character).

Nietzsche, it is all the more extreme with *Ecce Homo*. *Ecce Homo* presents in the most highly magnified form the textual difficulties --the experiential difficulties --that one encounters in all of Nietzsche's work: the willful and repeated contradiction, the insistence on the text's personal and provisional nature, the relentless play of irony and hyperbole, and the extreme sensitivity to context, each of which seem to deny us the possibility of extracting any selected part of its substance for propositional analysis. In the preceding essay, I devoted a great deal of attention to the preface, the interleaf, and to the three sections of *Ecce Homo* that run from 3:6:4 to 3:6:6. Someone will have asked --and will have been right to ask --why *these* passages alone are of such exceptional interest. There is no single term or concept that legitimately provides an Archimedean point, a fixed position from which to read the rest of *Ecce Homo*, or for that matter, any of Nietzsche's writings.

Or at least, this has been my experience with Nietzsche. To clarify, I am not wanting to rule out *a priori* readings that aim to elucidate the "structure of Nietzsche's thought," nor to dismiss the work of those commentators who do find or aim to find a coherent and unified teaching in the texts. I can't find it; that doesn't mean it isn't there.<sup>1</sup> Nor, on the other hand, am I declaring my allegiance to those who understand the incredible difficulty one has in unifying "Nietzsche's thought" as his greatest technical accomplishment, the performative enactment of his repudiation of discipleship. Or at least, I am not sure whether to construe this phenomenon as an accomplishment to be celebrated. My concern in each case is that we might be overextending the principle of charity, either through making Nietzsche *coherent* in spite of appearances, or through interpreting his fragmentation and

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<sup>1</sup>I should also stress that even if it turned out (from "God's perspective") that Nietzsche's major thematic positions are incompatible, that there is no way out of the maze, this would not invalidate the insight garnered by those who have questioned the integration of these various teachings. The exegesis and analysis that such an effort presupposes helps to clarify the conceptual geography of Nietzsche's texts, and exposes numerous previously unsuspected connections. I don't mean this to be faint praise; I am frustrated by Nietzsche, but I continue to learn quite a lot from the ongoing discussion, especially perhaps from those whose approach differs substantially from my own. Except in darker moods, I am by no means suggesting that we "change the topic."



“undecidability” as the expertly *controlled* implementation of his anti-dogmatic and perspectival commitments. Nietzsche is human, all too human, not the infallible master. Why is it so tempting to turn this philosopher who claimed to have hated disciples into a saint? Why are we *kinder* to the philosopher who praised malice than we are to so many other philosophers? And why not simply give him up for lost when he faces us with such intractable difficulties, puzzles that may have no solutions?

**18) We Bold Searchers --Theseus in the Labyrinth:**

I have been saying “we” quite a bit here, and perhaps I should shift back to “I:” this is, after all, *my* experience of Nietzsche. But the plural is not innocent or accidental: it anticipates and hopes for conformation that it is *Nietzsche* --not *me* --who has created the problem here, not my lack of perspicacity, but Nietzsche’s obscuritivist tendencies. The plural is often a seductive strategy in writing; it draws the reader into solidarity with the narrator, makes the reader a kind of crypto-author, complicit in what is being said. And while this pluralization of authorship achieves a kind of intimacy, it also, in a different way, distracts unwelcome attention from the speaker; it provides a kind of protection even while seeming open and inviting. For if, as reader, one is also partly narrator, this collapses the distance that supports objectivity. I am reminded here of the famous “gestalt switches” found in so many psychology texts; the picture is not responsible for the fact that a viewer sees either a duck or a rabbit. Judgment becomes a tricky affair when one’s own self has been used to flesh out the persona of this narrating “we.”

It is also of course a fantasy, for a real reader --unlike the one in the text --will not necessarily be fooled by grammar. In writing the epilogue to a new printing of his groundbreaking *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth chastized his younger self for precisely this reason. There were, he noted, quite a few “we’s” in his text:

something is wrong in these confident ‘we’s,’ something worse than a mere stylistic tic. I am shocked at the confidence my younger self sometimes shows in reporting how ‘we’ respond. Who are we, here? ‘We’ flesh-and-blood readers are unpredictable, and no one can speak with high reliability about us. The book often sounds as if its author did not know about that. Yet every classroom and every staffroom debate has taught me differently.<sup>131</sup>

A real reader can opt out of the “we” at any point, and worse, can dismiss the plural as mere pretense, the cloak worn by a particularly needy “I” who is unwilling to openly declare a desire for community.

But it won’t always be easy to do so. Nietzsche too oscillates relentlessly between the singular and the plural in his address to his readers, but his plural is even less innocuous than most. If the “we” that I have been using is the typically coaxing and confidential plural of academic discourse, Nietzsche’s “we” is a rather different affair. It is used almost exclusively in cases where the speaking subject is enjoying the most expansive and robust vibrancy and health: it is typically *we* bold explorers, *we* free spirits, *we* “argonauts of the ideal” who will brave Nietzsche’s uncharted seas. One reminds oneself --I remind myself --that I may not *want* to be a “comedian of the ideal” or a “bridge to the Overman.” but it is hard to avoid being absorbed into this so-solicitous plural. Nietzsche may well rail against the errors embedded in our grammar, but he is quite willing to exploit them too: he knows perfectly well how difficult it is to resist the instinctive tendency to identify with the subject position marked out in a text.

And how gracious of him, in the midst of raging against the madness of millennia, to exempt *me*, his reader, from his otherwise comprehensive condemnations, to assume that I am --like him --

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<sup>131</sup>This particular phrase is taken from the penultimate section of *The Gay Science* [382], but the greater portion of Nietzsche’s texts end (and often begin) with a stirring call to arms addressed to one “we” or another (free spirits, hyperboreans, premature births, etc., etc.). It is certainly true that the various personae of the plural are hard to reconcile --are we “comedians of the ideal” compatible with we “Argonauts of the ideal”? --but this does not affect the tendency towards identification; the wonderful thing about indexicals is that they remain the same across any number of predicates.

*above it all.*<sup>1</sup> It is only after the fact that I remember that every reader is similarly included, that “we” does not mean just Nietzsche and I in a private tête-à-tête, but even here I can take consolation in the fact that it is only the limited community of Nietzsche’s readers who share in the privileges of the elect. “We” can be a club, a cult, or in Derrida’s memorable phrase, “a priesthood of parody interpreters.”<sup>132</sup> Katherine Mansfield makes the point when speaking of novelists and their readers, but it could as easily be said about Nietzsche (or Augustine, or Descartes, or --especially -- Rousseau): “the truth is that every true admirer of... novels cherishes the happy thought that he alone --reading between the lines --has become the secret friend of their author.”<sup>133</sup> Perhaps this is not everyone’s truth, but it is increasingly clear to me that it is mine. If I am drawn to sympathize with Nietzsche, it is at least in part because he has so forcefully presented a position for me to occupy within his texts, and has gone to such extraordinary lengths to praise the individuals who occupy this position.

And the effect of this seduction only increases with time, for Nietzsche ties his plural form of address to the future tense. “We philosophers of the future” exist only in the future, as I discussed in the preceding essay. Well then, over a hundred years have now passed; surely the future is at hand. Surely *I* am the future that Nietzsche imagined, the destined reader that he prophesied for himself. *We* so routinely invoke Nietzsche’s name --along with Freud and Marx --as signalling the dawn of our own intellectual era: we *must*, therefore, live in the age of Nietzsche’s imaginary future.” Mustn’t we? Nietzsche’s plural can thus cater at the same time to our private aspirations toward

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<sup>1</sup>Kierkegaard mocks and plays with this very conceit in the opening to *Repetition*. The first words of the text are an invocation of this “singular” reader: “My Dear Reader! Forgive me for addressing you so familiarly, but we are, after all, *unter uns* [by ourselves]. Although you are indeed fictional, you are by no means a plurality to me but only one, and therefore we are just you and I.” [p. 183].

<sup>132</sup>Deleuze, for instance, takes it as obvious in the opening of his essay “Nomad Thought” that “probably most of us fix the dawn of our modern culture in the trinity Nietzsche-Freud-Marx.” [p.142]

greatness *and* to our cultural yearning to have somehow transcended --or at least escaped --the Victorians, the Enlightenment, or whichever era it is that we are currently anxious about --to be something new.

But at the same time, there is an "I" who remains aloof, an "I" who is also Nietzsche. And this I is aloof precisely because he is silent, a subject with whom it is impossible to identify because his primary characteristic is that he is unavailable. Consider a partial list of Nietzsche's self-attributed predicates: he is solitary, hidden, subterranean, veiled, masked, silent, hermit-like, concealed, posthumous... the list could obviously be extended. I will condense it instead, letting a single instance stand for many. "I am solitude become man,"<sup>134</sup> he says, in a remark excised from the published edition of *Ecce Homo*. It is a stark and haunting claim, the more so because it is not said (as it would be in Rousseau) as a curse, or (as in Descartes) as an aspiration. For Nietzsche, it does not express his current relation to community; it expresses something much closer to an ontological condition. Unlike others, who may *happen* to be alone at some time, this Nietzsche just *is* reified isolation --questionably human, a pure and absolute negation of community. And this completes the tendency to view Nietzsche as somehow more than all-too-human; like Christ, he is with us, in solidarity with his "disciples," but somehow absent at the same time, *exceeding* what we have been able to see. The garrulous Nietzsche who wanders with us through the texts has as his shadow an inscrutable, unknown one.<sup>1</sup>

And Nietzsche does everything he can to make sure that we notice the fact: as Mileur notes, Nietzsche cannot seem to stop drawing attention to the inordinate cleverness of his own

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<sup>1</sup>If I might venture a speculation here, part of Nietzsche's delight in *Zarathustra* may derive from the fact that its narrative structure allowed him to emphasize the disparity between how Zarathustra speaks to himself and how he speaks to the world, while at the same time somewhat masking the fact that both of these kinds of speech in the text are addressed to *us*, Nietzsche's audience.

dissimulation and masking, his doubleness or hiddenness.<sup>1</sup> But he can only do so by playing two roles at once, the incessantly chattering Nietzsche talking constantly about his silent friend. And so, once more, there are two Nietzsche's --the mother who always talked too much and the always-already absent father, the silent and inscrutable one: "talking much about oneself can also be a means to conceal oneself."<sup>135</sup>

Have we come full circle then? For it is precisely such a division that I sought to elucidate in Augustine's text --a silent, prayerful confession of love lying behind the confession made "in a manner that men might hear." And also Rousseau. The narrative here may or may not be a pack of fictions, but it contains as its silent and disguised communicate a feeling for Rousseau's presence, for the sheer fact of his being-there as one who has loved and who has lost, transmitted through the medium of a lengthy and maddeningly unfocussed text. But if we have indeed come full circle, things look rather different when approached from the other side, for the presuppositions behind this phenomenon have changed substantially in the meantime. In Augustine, there is a theology that justifies this doubled communication, the splitting off of a silent confession from the spoken one, for the text is at least trying to point outside of itself; Augustine is trying to direct our attention towards God more than towards himself. But for Rousseau, and for Nietzsche, the silence does not reflect the fact that a second audience is listening in at the same time as we are. The "silent confession" for these authors never leaves its source; it merely registers --even *insists* --that there is something immensely important that these otherwise so revealing and loquacious authors have not said. However "personal" they become, we cannot know them, cannot *judge*, for what is most pertinent to the assessment has not been made available.<sup>ii</sup> Perhaps they don't even know what it is themselves --

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<sup>1</sup>In "The Mask of Sentiment," Mileur suggests that "despite his assertions of gaiety, [Nietzsche's] mask is anything but superficial even on the face of it, and, in the end, however indirectly, he cannot resist drawing attention to the cleverness of his own *dissimulatio*" [p. 205].

<sup>ii</sup>Augustine: "[B]ut neither do I judge myself. In this manner, let me be heard." [10:5]

only that it is there.

And this begins to sound suspiciously like Freud's account of melancholia. for here too, communication is "doubled."<sup>4</sup> A salient feature of the melancholic, for Freud, is a strange coupling of an insatiable desire to speak and an absolute silence: it is a talking that never seems to get anywhere. The talk of course is a *screen* for the silence --a way of covering it up --but in its elaborate and noisy circles, it is also a way of marking out and drawing attention to the fact that something remains unsaid and unexpressed in the centre. And as with Freud's melancholics, the endlessly circling wheels of speech seem to point insistently back toward this mysterious gap, the unspoken origin of the external text.<sup>4</sup> For what precisely are "we" looking for --guided by Nietzsche --we philosophers of the future, we brave and intrepid explorers, if not Nietzsche himself?

The *perfect reader* --and Nietzsche returns obsessively to the delineation of the perfect reader: no less than Descartes, Nietzsche *insists* that we read him in a very particular way --this perfect reader is "a monster of courage and curiosity; moreover, supple, cunning, cautious: a born adventurer and discoverer" [3:1:3]. I will bypass the obvious interpretation; we are meant to read Nietzsche carefully, to ponder attentively. Of course we are; every writer desires this. What is unique in Nietzsche is the complete absorption of the "reader" into the imagery of the classical

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<sup>4</sup>In *Mourning and Melancholia*; see also Judith Butler's argument --highly suggestive in the present context --that melancholia is not simply the result of a loss that the ego cannot properly grieve, but that an *originary* and ungrieveable lack generates the ego itself; a life story --the story of an ego -- would thus be the story of something "incommunicable and recalcitrant" concealed within an accumulated history ["Psychic Inceptions: Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage," in *The Psychic Life of Power*].

"It cannot be entirely without import that this is precisely the "drama" of *Zarathustra* as well. The text develops around Zarathustra's unwillingness to speak his most abysmal thought, even after he knows it, for fear that he will "break" in the speaking. Interestingly in this context, he *never does* -- unequivocally --speak his great word; it is presented circuitously and indirectly through other characters --his animals, the dwarf, the soothsayer --to whom he responds with either laughter or anger. Zarathustra's authorized version of the thought of recurrence never does appear. What then do we know of "the psychology of the type of Zarathustra," especially given that he speaks "otherwise to his pupils than to himself" [Z, 2:20]?

mythology that Nietzsche knew and loved so well. Where Augustine asks for charity, Descartes for attention, and Rousseau for sympathy (or its opposite, judgment), Nietzsche wants *heroism*. We are told in *Daybreak* to move slowly “looking *cautiously* before and aft... this book desires for itself only perfect readers and philologists: *learn to read me well!*”<sup>136</sup> And again in the forward to *The Anti-Christ*, “the conditions under which one understands” Nietzsche include “strength which prefers questions for which no one today is sufficiently daring; courage for the forbidden; predestination for the labyrinth.” Like Theseus, we are to tread carefully (for there is *danger* afoot),<sup>1</sup> but boldly, heroically, through the labyrinth. And what we are to search for, I think, is the inscrutable hybrid creature who --legend has it --lies somewhere within.

But while he will guide us into the maze, it is not at all clear that he wants to be found.

Consider the following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

In the writings of a hermit one always also hears something of the echo of the desolate regions, something of the whispered tones and the furtive look of solitude... When a man has been sitting alone with his soul in confidential discord and discourse, year in and year out, day and night: when in his cave --it may be a labyrinth or a gold mine --he has become a cave bear or a treasure digger or a treasure guard and dragon: then even his concepts eventually acquire a peculiar twilight colour, an odour just as much of depth as of must, something incommunicable and recalcitrant that blows at every passerby like a chill. The hermit does not believe that any philosopher --assuming that every philosopher was first of all a hermit --ever expressed his real and ultimate opinions in books: does one not write books precisely to conceal what one harbours?<sup>137</sup>

In one convoluted passage, Nietzsche says so much, registering so many conflicting desires and convictions. He is sure there is a maze of a kind --and as its architect he should know --but is there

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<sup>1</sup>The intoxicating rhetoric of “danger” here is no doubt partly to flatter the reader’s sense of moral daring, but if we are less convinced than Nietzsche that the world will surely attack us the moment we adopt a different set of values, it can ring a little hollow. My suspicion is that such talk has a more serious referent as well. As much as it is true (as I have stressed throughout) that the various “for myself alone” monologues in autobiography are meant to be overheard, it is also the case that the overt moments of *dialogue* in autobiography --where an imagined reader *is* addressed --can often mask a *monologue*; the imaginary friends who populate the writings of both Rousseau and Nietzsche facilitate a speech that returns to its sender, a postcard addressed to oneself. With this in mind, the “courage” of the reader may in fact be a reflection of the courage required by Nietzsche himself in his relentless self-analysis.

gold at the centre or a Minotaur? Is he mining or guarding? And is this treasure fool's gold --does it smell of genuine depth or only of must? My suspicion is that Nietzsche does not know the answer to these questions, and cannot know --on his own. Without a reader, he is haunted by mistrust of himself, furtively hiding he-knows-not-what: he and even his concepts have acquired a peculiar twilight colour, an image that evokes simultaneously a great hiddenness and the shading off between day and night, life and death. But if this is a labyrinth, it is a strange one indeed, for the creature within is hiding from us just as surely as he is drawing us in. "Does one not write books precisely to conceal what one harbours?"<sup>i</sup> As I suggested in the previous essay, he seems to want us nearby, but not face-to-face. Or at least, this is the result; perhaps, in light of the foregoing description, it would be better to describe his relationship to his readers as deeply ambivalent. One Nietzsche courts us while the other Nietzsche turns us away.

### 19) Genealogy:

And if one were to suspect all of this, as a reader, what might one do? One might grasp hold of whatever threads present themselves and seek the Minotaur in the maze, the ghost in the machine. Or one might balk at the very seduction that leads one to want to do this; one could read against the grain as it were, ignoring Nietzsche's coercions. In the preceding essay, I seem to have done both at once --wanting to find a Nietzsche to call my own, but also very much wanting to avoid being drawn into the attempt to find a solution, a way through. And there seemed to be a simple enough way to step out of this frustrating endeavour, and that is simply to ask the kind of question that Nietzsche

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<sup>i</sup>Once again, he sounds so very much like Rousseau --whom he despised in such an unbalanced, un-nuanced fashion --for how different is his own claim from Rousseau's: "the decision I have made to write and hide myself is precisely the one that suits me" [*Confessions*, 3:116]? Could it be that part of Nietzsche's hatred for Rousseau stems from the fact that Rousseau revealed far too obviously some of the desires and anxieties that Nietzsche thought ought to be better concealed? Might the similarities not be more important than the (significant) differences in accounting for this unmitigated loathing?



himself so often asked: if *Ecce Homo* is a labyrinth, what sort of person would need to construct such an edifice? For this task, one need not address the vexed question of whether there is or is not an overall structure to the work. It is enough to chart the lineaments of the text --where it seems to move in contrary directions, the themes that attract the greatest enthusiasm, the theoretical claims made throughout in so far as these allow Nietzsche to present himself in a certain way or position the reader in other ways. Henry Staten's book on Nietzsche must have resonated even more deeply with me than I had originally thought, for I have very nearly reproduced his preface: "unlike the normalizing interpreters," he says, "I do not claim to be excavating what Nietzsche really thought underneath the ellipses, obscurities, ambiguities, confusions, and contradictions, but mapping the textual topography within which all these take place, or take their place."<sup>1</sup>

The value of such an approach is made clearest by a piece of fiction. Albert Camus once wrote a strange novella --*The Fall*--that has been much on my mind as I read the various philosophical autobiographies; it applies everywhere, but perhaps most of all to Nietzsche. One character speaks, confessing his crime, while the other "character" in the story never says a word -- he only listens. But that listening other plays an immense role in shaping the unfolding narrative. Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the protagonist, is desperate to speak and buttonholes a stranger in a seedy Amsterdam pub. But once he has his listener, his determination to make "confession" is derailed, turned into a justification before the crime has even been revealed, and all of humanity is implicated in the charge. In the end, we are not even sure that what appears to have been confessed in fact *has*

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<sup>1</sup>*Nietzsche's Voice*, [p. 3]. Such a reading style has gone by different names at different times. It has strong affinities to psychoanalytic modes of reading; it is also frequently called deconstructive -- though the proliferation of concepts that have been called "deconstructive" makes this a less and less informative label. Uncomfortable with the accumulated connotations of either of these terms, Staten's neologism is "psychodialectic," which he defines as a mapping of "the interaction between the libidinal economy of a text and its logical and dialectical structures" [p. 2]. But I am comfortable using Nietzsche's own term; I will call it genealogy.

been confessed, and certainly not sure what parts of it are true.<sup>i</sup> It does not matter, Clamence tells his listener, for as Nietzsche might have suggested, it has at the least been “unconscious memoir.”

necessarily a revelation of the truth even if it corresponds to nothing in history:

I know what you’re thinking: its very hard to disentangle the true from the false in what I’m saying. I admit you are right... You see, a person I knew used to divide human beings into three categories: those who prefer having nothing to hide rather than being obliged to lie, those who prefer lying to having nothing to hide, and finally those who like both lying and the hidden. I’ll let you choose the pigeon hole that suits me.

But what do I care? Don’t lies eventually lead to the truth? And don’t all my stories, true or false, tend toward the same conclusion? Don’t they all have the same meaning? So what does it matter whether they are true or false if, in both cases, they are significant of what I have been and of what I am? Sometimes it is easier to see clearly into the liar than into the man who tells the truth. Truth, like light, blinds. Falsehood, on the contrary, is a beautiful twilight that enhances every object.<sup>138</sup>

In the previous essay, I made almost no attempt to sort out the lies and the truth in Nietzsche’s story about himself. I could have asked --but didn’t --whether the eternal recurrence is a coherent, sensible doctrine. I could have pressed harder on the “distortion” (the lie) in Nietzsche’s claim to have gone years without reading a book. Instead, I let these things stand, and sought to tease out of the text the role these items play in an overall pattern. *Who* needs to claim that he hasn’t been reading, and why; what does the thought of recurrence allow Nietzsche to say, and what does it allow him to conceal? To this extent, I was mimicking a standard Nietzschean strategy --offering a genealogical critique rather than either a logical dissection of the doctrines or an historical analysis of Nietzsche’s putatively biographical claims. I have done the same, more or less, with each of the other authors I have addressed in this text.

But such an approach has unavoidable risks. To take but one example, I have never found

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<sup>i</sup>The “crime” involves Clamence’s apathetic inaction in the face of suffering; when he hears a woman jumping off a bridge behind him, he does not turn around to help. The story is typically read as Camus’ indictment of the global indifference to the holocaust, and this may very well be “true,” but like Nietzsche’s own texts, Camus does not prescribe a single, specific interpretation. It is left for the reader to finish the story here by becoming active in its interpretation rather than simply receiving it passively, which is entirely appropriate if Camus is indeed concerned with apathy and passivity.

anyone who is convinced that Nietzsche “correctly” diagnosed Christ in *The Anti-Christ* or in *Beyond Good and Evil*.<sup>139</sup> or that his idiosyncratic “psychology of the redeemer” was warranted by the gospel texts. Genealogy is “subjective” to this extent: it uses the writer’s own response as one of its diagnostic tools. And this gives it certain characteristic strengths: in exceeding the text, in bringing his own interests so explicitly to bear on the characters he reads. Nietzsche is able to say more and different things than a disinterested spectator ever could. But the price is that he reveals at least as much about himself as he does about his putative subject. Genealogical critique along Nietzschean lines questions the questioner; did *Christ* need to be loved by all, as Nietzsche claims, or does Nietzsche need *not to need* such love? Perhaps there is no reason for an “or” here: both could be true. But to assess whether Nietzsche was correct about Christ, we are (at the least) led back to the gospel accounts, while to assess Nietzsche’s own stake in this, we need only question what sort of person would need to make the kind of diagnosis found in *Anti-Christ* 29 or *Beyond Good and Evil* 269. No one *forced* him to offer an opinion about Christ; as he keeps reminding us, no one is even reading his writings. What is it, then, that leads him to draw, or even *over-draw* such an idiosyncratic portrait of Christ?

I have been speaking as if Nietzsche did not know this, as if he would be caught off guard to discover that he had revealed a great deal about himself. This is of course not true. In fact, the passage in *Beyond Good and Evil* that describes Christ’s “infinite need for love” is fascinating in this regard, and serves as a useful illustration of the point I wish to make. I cited a part of this text in the preceding essay: “the work invents the man; the author as he is subsequently revered, is a wretched piece of minor fiction.” But this artistic work which “invents” the man is also said to be a kind of revenge against life, an attempt to “try to conceal some fracture;.. some inner contamination.” The work which thus conceals the mortal failing is made public, and the response of the works’ “intoxicated flatterers” allows the artist to internalize both the praise and --eventually --the image

projected in their own work; it is an indirect route to self-affirmation. But at this point the discussion abruptly veers into a diatribe against the “clairvoyance” of women in “matters of suffering;” they see through the veneer of the work to the suffering behind it. they read *too well*. and Nietzsche is far from praising the exegetical powers of women in this. The pity that accompanies this clairvoyance inverts its value: it is now a travesty to be well-read rather than a blessing, and grossly indiscreet of woman to have seen such naked need. Hatred of pity is thus aligned, somewhat indirectly, with a fear of exposure, which in turn leads back to the concealed “inner fracture” that the artist has found in himself --or at least suspected.

It is at *this* point that Nietzsche begins to speak about the Christ’s infinite need for love, and his consequent attractiveness to women. But the Nietzsche of *Ecce Homo* is *also* well loved by women: “they all love me --an old story” (the famous line that follows is interesting here --“the perfect woman tears to pieces when she loves”) [3:5]. When Nietzsche concludes this rich and convoluted entry in *Beyond Good and Evil* with a single remark set off from the rest --“But why pursue such painful matters? Assuming one does not have to-” --he knows whereof he speaks: it is precisely *his* issue that he has been discussing, and the only thread available to tie together a discussion of artistry, communication, pity, woman, and Christ is Nietzsche himself. “One should speak only when one *may not stay silent*; and then, only of that which one has overcome,”<sup>140</sup> he says, and he says it more than once. It is an open question whether or not Nietzsche did “overcome” the need to communicate, the need for love (and I find it somewhat distasteful to call this “overcoming”), but at the least, it is obvious enough that the constellation of affective states that Nietzsche connects with the terms “pity” and “love” presented an ongoing site of concern.<sup>141</sup> The genealogist is always present in the commentary, always open to being the next subject of such a reading. And there is an instructive parable here: there are surely by now more psychoanalytic studies of Sigmund Freud than of any other character, real or fictional.

So what is my own role in what I have said thus far? On the one hand, I have imagined *Ecce Homo* as a labyrinth and diagnosed my conceptual problems with Nietzsche as arising from accepting these terms, terms that prompt me to try to find a way through. I instead sought to study the structure of the maze itself, to learn more about its architect. And seemingly, Nietzsche cannot hide from me here: whatever he says is something that he *has to say*. Maybe he means what he says about *Zarathustra*, maybe it is a parody, maybe he was going insane as he wrote it, but the contrast between himself and Zarathustra still stands; he reveals an ongoing uncertainty about his relationship to his work, a feeling of conflict between the two, through the simple fact that he feels it necessary to make the topic thematic. Changing the rules, becoming active rather than reactive in relation to the texts, I have granted myself the privilege of an aerial view, the security, immunity, and superiority of the critic.

But as I have said, genealogy turns: the desire to be *above* Nietzsche is open to question. Nor is it too hard to see what is at stake for me in this --a desire for mastery, a desire to overcome Nietzsche, a desire to "have done with him." I discover / project into Nietzsche, through the "strangest objectivity possible," my own anxiety about communication, in order to address it at a distance. I will overcome this fear of dependence, this desire for and hatred of judgment by representing it in Nietzsche as vaguely ridiculous. I *will* myself toward openness by attacking the drive toward privacy and solitude in Nietzsche, in Descartes, and in Augustine. And what were Nietzsche's *own* readings of Wagner and Schopenhauer, Christ and Socrates, if not simply the movements of his endeavour to overcome his influences, that is, a kind of therapy? Nietzsche's overcoming of his "teachers" was a self-overcoming --his fears and anxieties projected and embodied in another as the site of a staged battle for autonomy. And he as much as tells us this over and over again:

“every growth is indicated by the search for a mighty opponent... The task is not merely to master what happens to resist, but what requires us to stake all our strength, suppleness, and fighting skill --opponents that are our equals” [1:7].

“I caught hold of two famous and as yet altogether undiagnosed types. as one catches hold of an opportunity. in order to say something, in order to have at hand a few more formulas. signs. means of language... I do not wish to deny that at bottom they speak only of me” [3:2:3]

“this is the strangest ‘objectivity’ possible: the absolute certainty about what I am was projected on some accidental reality --the truth about me spoke from some gruesome depth” [3:1:4].

The “truth” about Nietzsche --at least as he perceived it --did indeed speak from a “gruesome” depth in the name of others. and perhaps he is right in saying that the particular targets of this projection were merely “accidental” realities; no one else has ever seen Schopenhauer in quite the manner that Nietzsche does. and it is certainly the case that we learn about Nietzsche more readily than we learn about his putative targets when we read his work

But the logic of this “strangest objectivity possible” is carried over in reading Nietzsche himself in a Nietzschean manner. I am reading Nietzsche, assessing him from a height. but inevitably I have found an “accidental” Nietzsche --one who answers uniquely to me --and I am vulnerable to the echo of whatever I hear in him.<sup>1</sup> “For what one lacks access to from experience one will have no ear” [3:1:1]. That vulnerability, perhaps Nietzsche’s revenge on me, is revealed in the very project I had set myself in the preceding essay. I was reading *Ecce Homo* to find a person. I *was*. and *am* interested in Nietzsche, made to feel interested in this character who says “do not

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<sup>1</sup>Whatever its other merits, this analysis of my relationship to Nietzsche’s texts begins to clarify for me why --yet again --I have found myself writing about an author who gets under my skin. My own text partakes in some of Nietzsche’s “strangest objectivity possible;” I have found a set of authors compromising their personal vision, their real desire to communicate, through fear of a set of readers imagined as judgmental. I stand by this --it is there to be seen --but I have perhaps been too quick to see it, and unreasonably concerned when I have seen it. It can’t be coincidental that this thematic has come to dominate my work at a time when I am tentatively experimenting with a more personal, subjective mode of scholarship, all the while knowing that the results will be subjected to the scrutiny of a formal “defence.”

mistake me for another” [pref. 1]. I can --in one mood --enjoy the textual complexities, the ambiguities, the rhetorical pyrotechnics, but my affective interests inevitably disrupt my purely cognitive ones: I cannot read *Ecce Homo* as the textual equivalent of an Escher<sup>142</sup> drawing, a formal exercise in disrupting my perceptual habits. Playing on my own desires, Nietzsche makes me want to know him, and for all that is said about the critique of the subject in *Ecce Homo*, it matters very little to me whether the “Nietzsche” I find is an essential, enduring ego-consciousness, a self-constituting narrative, or simply a temporary conflagration of interests and desires that happened to author a text. In my essay, I have seized on the concept of the proper name, guided by the reflections of both Derrida and Philippe LeJeune on its significance for Nietzsche. But as much as my reflections on the role of the proper name in *Ecce Homo* respond to a phenomenon that does seem to occur in the text (Nietzsche *does* talk quite a bit about names --his own and others), my appeal to the “name” as an interpretive category is also a way of fixing “Nietzsche” in place. However protean the “subject,” there is *something* that answers to the name Nietzsche; it is somebody or something’s autobiography. And why else does one read an autobiography other than to know the author?’

But here the terms of mastery and submission threaten to undergo a classically Hegelian reversal: I am left studying Nietzsche, searching for him, seeming to need something from him. I seem to desire, obsessively, to chart and demarcate the lines of psychic tension in *Ecce Homo* from a distance --to show how Nietzsche’s anxieties are reflected in his writing. From such a position I can pity him, share in the pathos of human suffering revealed in this tragic display of thwarted passion, incomplete desire. Looking back on the previous chapters, I note a characteristic pattern in how I have read my other authors: their accomplishments are duly (and genuinely) praised; then they are

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<sup>1</sup>Answer: For any number of other reasons of course. A better question might be: Why do I read autobiographies solely in the hopes of achieving a kind of personal intimacy with their authors, and then spend 300 pages accusing them of failing to comply? Why do I take the evasiveness *personally*?

chastized for their evasiveness; then --magnanimously --concessions are made and sympathy granted; and finally --in the midst of this *pitying* --I begin to make my own confessions. But it is so hard to pity Nietzsche. for I cannot get above him: I am always haunted by the possibility that I am reading myself rather than Nietzsche. that HE is doing this to me. that "Nietzsche" stands aloof and mocking behind the text into which he has enticed me. The irony, masking, and contradiction of the text mean that I can never posit with any great assurance a connection between its dynamics and the author behind it. *Where* is Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo* --and how can I still be asking this. so late in the game? What is doctrine. what is experiment. what is performance. what is seduction in this book? It seems imperative to know. not as a scholar, but as a reader; the text is a display of both power and vulnerability. and as such. it makes me *feel*. But am I beguiled into investing so much of myself into a mirage. a magician's act? And what. precisely. is at stake in this anxiety --how am I hurt if I am duped?

## 20) "Fundamentally, We Experience Only Ourselves"?

I know that I am not the first to end up here; others have been deeply ambivalent about their own sensitivity to Nietzsche's style of seduction, which withholds what it seems to promise. And some have even escaped, or seemed to escape. from the labyrinth. Of these, I am most impressed by the efforts of Henry Staten and Charles Altieri. Each seeks to overcome Nietzsche. and I believe I mean overcome here in a Nietzschean sense. Each begins with open admiration for the breath-taking accomplishment of *Ecce Homo*<sup>143</sup> as a self-staging that is paradoxically both vulnerable (as all public

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<sup>143</sup>It strikes me that this is an important question, but it is one I don't feel I can answer at present. Phrases like "betrayal of trust" come to mind, but then seem grandiloquent. As Nietzsche saw it, the issue is not primarily whether or not one's trust has been honoured, but whether --retrospectively --it was worthwhile to have trusted the author: "One has to surrender unconditionally to Sterne's caprices -- always in the expectation, however, that one will not regret doing so." [AOM 113]



self-presentation must be) and yet (nearly) impenetrable. I think of this in contrast to Rousseau, a writer who seems routinely (though not ubiquitously) unaware of what he is exposing, the need for validation that is glaringly obvious to everyone else. It is easy --perhaps too easy --to read Rousseau from a position of security: the textual effects through which he seeks to operate on the reader seem nearly transparent, and one can feel that they know what they are, where they are, and what they are doing. Addressing Rousseau, I felt compelled to *complicate* the text, to show that he may be craftier than his reputation suggests. Not so with Nietzsche. The text is over-saturated with style. Any statement might be --and likely is --contextual, which is to say that it cannot be definitively interpreted until it is related to the vast textual apparatus that comprises Nietzsche's oeuvre. And, if we let Nietzsche away with this, if he is "allowed" to intentionally write his text(s) as a labyrinth of deferred meanings, then they will never point back to him: I will only, once more, find myself coursing through the circuits of his machine.

But Altieri and Staten think they have outwitted the master. After god-knows how great an investment in Nietzsche, each has concluded that there is a certain pattern to the maze. For each, Nietzsche's writing is governed by a dread of the other and a fear of irrecoverable loss, a fear revealed in his over-reliance on irony and in his internally inconsistent depiction of the noble's relation to the outside.<sup>1</sup> Altieri asks --in italics no less --"*how far can irony go before its play with multiple contradictions begins itself to appear as an attitude not chosen in freedom but desperately grasped as a way of reducing vulnerability and allowing one to wallow in self-justifying contradictions?*"<sup>144</sup> The suggestion is that in Nietzsche, "irony appears as partly only another

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<sup>1</sup>It is Altieri who is more concerned with irony [and see also Jean-Pierre Mileur's "The Mask of Sentiment" for a related and interesting treatment of the function of irony in Nietzsche and Derrida]. Staten's concern throughout is with Nietzsche's inability to keep his binary oppositions distinct, whether the division is between master and slave or any one of countless other similar divisions, and with Nietzsche's stake in compulsively returning to this impossible attempt to keep the high and low separate.

strategy for idealizing oneself in attitudes one need take no responsibility for.”<sup>145</sup> I agree. But why with such relief? The need to speak with both a serious and a laughing face at the same time turns out to be *a means of avoiding ego-responsibility*, and I cling to this like a talisman when approaching the text. I am in charge, so long as I have this. Nietzsche is not eluding me with his rhetoric: his relentless obfuscation and destabilization of his putative meaning reveals *a need for such defensive strategies*. He’s scared of me --the reader. Let this be true, and I can once more become gracious and magnanimous, charitable in my reading, as Nietzsche tells us the strong invariably are towards the fragile convalescents. And perhaps this is another reasons why I am so much kinder to Rousseau than to Augustine, Descartes, or Nietzsche; the need for a sympathetic reader is so palpable in Rousseau --his pretense of autonomy so shallow --that I can pity him.

But what has happened here? My anxiety has miraculously become Nietzsche’s, if I am to believe myself. A few pages ago, I was worried about how *my* work would be received, and now this turns out to be precisely what is “wrong” with Nietzsche. Unlikely. And why, at any rate, must one of us submit? Why must it be a “fight to the death,” where recognition flows in one direction only? This is not how I read other texts. But I am increasingly convinced that autobiography is a kind of dare or taunt. When Montaigne begins his *Essais* by telling us that he will be naked within, the implied vulnerability goes hand in hand with sexual bravado. Something about this gesture requires reciprocation, not so much as a matter of courtesy and respect, but more as a means of meeting an implicit challenge. Will I be so gauche as to enter the text fully clothed?

And suddenly I am eleven years old once more, playing “truth or dare” with my friends after staying up too late telling ghost stories. The games seem to have run together at some point in the intervening years, and I now find myself demanding the truth from a set of ghosts, ghosts in which I am not sure I even believe, and in return, feeling dared to tell the truth back. But I am haunted by

the fact that Augustine died a very long time ago, and that even Nietzsche has long since returned to the earth. "A trivial piece of evidence," Derrida says, "but incredible enough when you get right down to it, and when the name's genius or genie is still there to make us forget the fact of his death."<sup>146</sup> It may be that I am captivated by this genie, this ghost. Perhaps the text was not left for posterity as proxy for a departed Nietzsche, but rather as a prankster's trap, a "riddle" with no solution. And it may be, in asking such questions, that I only thought I left the labyrinth.

But am I really trapped? Is this not a little grandiose? For I know throughout all of this that, should I ever really want to, I can stop reading Nietzsche, just as I can stop reading Rousseau, and Augustine, and Descartes: there is no external mandate that requires precisely these texts, these authors. I can stop writing anytime I want... I say, at the end of a chapter that is already twice as long as the others, and twice as long as I intended: "once one is well on the road," says Montaigne, "it is difficult to close a discourse and break it off."<sup>147</sup> It would take so little to stop, to give up this unhealthy interest in the departed, to give up this melancholic speech that inscribes endless circles around its subject but in the end speaks only --but tirelessly --of itself, endlessly postponing closure and decision out of the anxiety (so well documented in the works of both Nietzsche and Sartre) that closure and identity are the harbingers of a kind of death --an association that calls to mind Rousseau's defiant and despairing image of standing --text in hand --on the day of judgement, ambivalently wanting and not wanting the very judgment that he is there to receive, and hoping through sleight of hand to substitute his own uncertain verdict through inscribing a series of preemptive confessions in his text (which seems, now that I think of it, not unlike preemptively appending a genealogical self-criticism to the final chapter of a work that remains uncertain as to whether it has said too much or too little, or perhaps simply circled around a point that remains incommunicable and recalcitrant at its centre, a point that would be reflected in the *truer* text that lies in scattered notes, forgotten computer files, and endless napkins in coffee shops, but that is really

--*trust me* --far better, far more important, far more of a revelation than anything that I have said here); it would take so little to stop, simply a final period and it would be over, left up to the reader, no longer an imperfect tense.

## **AFTERWARD:**

Shall my experience have been my personal experience alone?... Today I would like to believe the reverse; again and again, I feel sure that my travel books were not written solely for myself

Nietzsche, *AOM*, preface, 6.

Here you have not my teaching but my study: the lesson is not for others; it is for me. Yet for all that, you should not be ungrateful to me for publishing it. What helps me can perhaps help somebody else.

Montaigne, "On Practice"<sup>148</sup>

The conclusion to the previous chapter could perhaps have been the last word in this book, but I am reluctant to leave the stage with an anxiety-ridden run-on sentence. It seemed important to register my own involvement with the issues I have been discussing --I didn't want to appear to be casting stones from on high --but it also seems important not to let that seductive species of melancholia be the end of the story. One of the dangers of autobiography (and one of its potentials as well) is that the written text that is produced as an *expression* of one's character can come to exert its own subsequent influence *on* character; you write what you are, but then become what you have written. A certain care is appropriate then, in order that the written performance should not become stifling and oppressive.

I have positioned my own work here --from the preface on --as stemming very much from personal origins; it is a dialogical encounter between myself and the authors I have read and studied, and the opening for a dialogue with my own readers. What I had not realized when I began on this path was that this would inevitably give my writing (for me at least) a strongly performative character. I am not just attempting to *describe* things through writing; I am trying to *do* something. Philosophy, and philosophical writing, has had many forms and functions in its history --its variability, I take it, is one of its greatest strengths --but it will perhaps come as no surprise by this point if I acknowledge that I am personally most interested in philosophy as a kind of therapy. An exploration of the texts of other authors can clarify both the presence and the structure of one's own

anxieties, “temptations” Augustine would say (and perhaps his language is as good as any). But it can also elucidate the inner resources or latent potentials that can effectively combat these temptations. It can be a part of Nietzsche’s “new, stern discipline” that confronts “our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it” in order to “implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature,”<sup>149</sup> though I would suggest that this “new” habit need not be a spontaneous creation, but simply the recognition and development of potentials that may have been immanent all along. To banish the ghosts then I would like to speak briefly about what I take to be a successful effort at philosophical autobiography, one where the author on the last page seems to be more comfortable and less anxious than on the first, and where philosophical writing promotes rather than endangers *health*. For me, this is a way of opening the windows again after dwelling for so long on problems that I find particularly pressing, but also, it might serve as an effective summary --through contrast --of the concerns that I have elaborated throughout this text.

### **1) A Program for Successful Autobiography:**

Montaigne is the unwritten hero of the story I am telling, the one who got it “more or less right.” Having begun his essays in private introspection --much like Descartes’ meditator, alone in a high, windowed room overlooking the people --he quickly found “so many chimeras and imaginary monsters, one after another, without order or plan”<sup>150</sup> emerging from his self-analysis. Under inspection, the self proliferated into a nest of conflicting and contradictory perspectives. But in response, Montaigne does two things that demonstrate his intuitive genius for life. First, he takes the step so difficult for so many philosophers: he leaves his room. Rather than bracing himself for a challenge more arduous than he had at first expected, girding himself to do battle with the unconscious hydra he has discovered, Montaigne quite modestly and sensibly abandons spiritual or psychoanalytic heroism to others, and travels, talks --reads a little --and resumes political life. J. M.

Cohen points to this important fact in the introduction to his translation of the *Essais*: “Many autobiographers have retired into some private place from which they could look back on their past life, and make their actions conform in retrospect to the idea they had formed of themselves. Montaigne, on the other hand, emerged from his retirement to finish his portrait.”<sup>151</sup> Between the second and third editions of the *Essais*, Montaigne held a public office in his region, cultivated important new friendships, and travelled through Italy.<sup>1</sup> There is a marked decrease in the skeptically-tinged melancholia of the first books when he returns to writing once more, and his early obsession with the species of Stoic self-mastery that abjures the outside world in favour of private autonomy similarly fades from prominence.

Second, and in parallel, he rejects the introspective model of “the hunt.” Rousseau lamented in the *Reveries* that “the *Know Thyself* of the temple at Delphi was not such an easy precept to observe as I had thought in my *Confessions*” [4:63], and then steeled himself to try harder this time around. Montaigne, in contrast, tempers the severity of this Delphic precept through an appeal to the Oracle’s *other* great decree, *nothing in excess*: “there is no harm in having qualities and propensities so individual and so much a part of us that we have no means of perceiving and recognizing them.”<sup>152</sup> He may still ask “who am I?” on occasion, but he does not expect to find the answer in one place: the self is not a buried treasure awaiting discovery. Instead, he becomes a cartographer, charting a domain with no fixed borders, with uneven detail, but one which we (and he) could still comfortably label “Montaigne.” In “suiting [his] story to the hour” when he writes (because he may in the next hour be “another self”),<sup>153</sup> Montaigne gives no pride of place to any one kind of data:

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<sup>1</sup>“Travel seems to me to be an enriching experience. It keeps our souls constantly exercised by confronting them with things new and unknown; and (as I have often said) I know of no better school for forming our life than ceaselessly to set before it the variety found in so many other lives, concepts and customs, and to give it a taste of the perpetual diversity of the forms of human nature.” [3:9 “On Vanity,” p. 1101 in Screech]

emotional states, ideological judgment, and physiological detail are all present: “part of me is revealed --but only ambiguously --by the act of coughing: another by turning pale or by my palpitations... I hold that we must show wisdom in judging ourselves, and equally, good faith in witnessing to ourselves, high and low indifferently.”<sup>154</sup> Nothing is excluded. Themes emerge, characteristic modes of thought and feeling, but the exceptions and anomalies are not curtailed by the imposition of a dominating architectonic; Montaigne does not share Nietzsche’s interest in cultivating a single taste to moderate and manage his inner plurality, nor does he share Rousseau’s obsession with deciding whether any given experience accurately reflects his “true nature” rather than the momentary eruption of a random passion. The possibilities for being (for being-Montaigne) expand as he writes: the circle grows wider in the telling, rather than constricting to an ultimately vanishing point at the centre of an inward spiral. Starting from a desire for the security of self-knowledge not unlike that seen in Descartes, Montaigne traces a path that could hardly be more different.

Does the imagined audience affect his self-presentation, his self-understanding? Of course; it is hard to imagine that the charming urbanity of the character who narrates most of the *Essais* is the immediate expression of private reverie or meditation. “Montaigne” as he appears in the *Essais* is a character, but “based on a true story” as one says. His writing remains always a means of self-creation, and this is its first and principal goal, but Montaigne is also explicit that it is a communicate act, and even a kind of courtship: “if it chances before I die that my humours should please and suit some decent man, he might try to bring us together. I am meeting him more than half-way, since all that he could have gained from a long acquaintance and intimacy with me, he could get more reliably and minutely in three days from my account.” And so Montaigne sends his book out into the world as a kind of ambassador of goodwill, in order that it might acquire friends for its author. But his very openness and candour about this --an acknowledgment of his social being --means that there is less



subterfuge here than in Rousseau or Nietzsche (or Descartes, or Sartre...). He *wants* readers, he wants --openly --to communicate. He is talking *to* us, or so it seems to me, rather than asking us indirectly to "listen in." And if it is consequently --as I would suggest --a more *honest* autobiography than most, this is because the author has taken conscious responsibility not just for the content of his portrait --the man he paints --but also for the desires and needs that lead him to communicate. I have often finished an essay charmed, but never feeling tricked or exploited.

This is at least in part because Montaigne --in setting aside the pose of writing "for the self alone" (at least by the later essays) --has released himself from the distortions incumbent on those who must communicate circuitously, indirectly. "There are some peculiar natures that are retiring and self-absorbed. My essential disposition is to communicate and come forward: I am all on the outside, for everyone to see, born for society and friendship."<sup>155</sup> This is of course overstatement: Montaigne is no more "all on the outside" than anyone. But it expresses a desire for community which --unlike that found in Descartes, Rousseau, or Nietzsche --is not immediately withdrawn through the tragic insistence that --alas --such community is impossible for one so unique, persecuted, and misunderstood. And when Montaigne does at times shift into writing primarily for himself, it seems --against this background --legitimate, a natural moment of meditative reflection prompted by whatever he has written until then. There is a general drift in most of Montaigne's longer essays away from the external audience and toward what seems to be personal reflection, the imagined dialogue seemingly giving rise to further meditations once the author has withdrawn. But he is not hiding a secret address to the reader behind his moments of meditation, just as his address to the reader is not a disguised form of talking to himself. There is a fluid and rhythmic interplay between self and other in the *Essais*, and no sharp boundary between the two.

And this, *this* is Montaigne's genius, his characteristic capacity to make his skepticism productive rather than limiting. He refuses to pass judgment on the noumenal realm (including the

realm of other minds); he neither mourns its inaccessibility nor banishes it from existence. His “life as literature” is neither a distorted copy of his real identity, nor a shifting kaleidoscope that bootstraps itself into ghostly being, or, if it is a little of each, it is never fully either. At least by the latter essays, I hear neither the Cartesian obsession with truth-as-certainty --a desire for absolute security --nor the Nietzschean (and shall I say postmodern?) anxiety that “we are floating in endless space.” that without a centre to hold, mere chaos is unleashed on the world. Communication may never be perfect, transparent, and univocal, but Montaigne revels in this rather than fearing it or hiding behind it: there is always more to say, and no self-description or piece of conversation is ever complete in itself. One can always return --as Montaigne did in his endless additions to his text --to plumb new depths and explore old issues from a new perspective. He embodies the most freeing and fluid aspects of Nietzsche’s perspectivism, but his movement between perspectives is not hindered by his denial of the perspective of the *other*, or by a need to subject this infinite variety and variability to the dominance of a single taste. Since he does not feel endangered by the world, he is comfortable allowing himself to be many different Montaigne’s in response to the exigencies of each new situation, without needing to control this proliferation of identities.

Montaigne, as I have said, is the hero of my story. But I wish to emphasize, of my story alone; he responds to my needs, my anxieties, and points me in a direction that I would like to go. Through a different lens, a different set of questions, I am quite sure that one could as readily make a neurotic of Montaigne. Did he ever escape from his chronic melancholia? Is there not a tinge of nihilism in his skepticism? Does his dead friend La Boetie not lie behind both of these? Does my enthusiasm for Montaigne reflect anything more than the limitations of my own perspective? Others have seen him as tiresomely chatty, maddeningly unfocussed, hardly a real “philosopher” at all. But I find him wise, and though philosophy is of course defined at its core by a love of wisdom, that is not something one often says.

The “others” who have seen a different Montaigne might perhaps be closer to the truth in the end than I am. My version of Montaigne can only be so absurdly affirmative through an enormously selective use of the texts, and a generosity in interpretation unparalleled in my treatment of other authors. In fact, I have not followed the more typical pattern of including a fully-developed chapter on my favourite author because I doubt that this image of Montaigne could withstand close scrutiny, either my own or that of others, and I find it so *useful* to have him as an ideal.<sup>1</sup>

If it is important for me to allow different figures to represent extremes --either ideals of health or manifestations of illness --this is once again because I am interested in philosophy as a kind of therapy. There is a value in striving towards justice, balance, and comprehensiveness in one's reading --I would not deny it, and the point hardly needs to be defended. But as Nietzsche recognized and exemplified, there is also a value to be had in using the great names of history as tokens to represent specific patterns of thought and feeling. I have tried to do a bit of both here, but my heart was certainly in the later activity; I am interested in what these writers were like as fully-fleshed individuals, but I am more interested in what they can mean for me.

But one can only get so far in self-analysis, even with books available to serve as a mirror. After a while, one begins to see the same patterns everywhere, and fails to notice other things that may be quite important; locked up in the (stove-heated) room of private meditation, the hermeneutical dialogue of textual interpretation begins to harden into rote projection and formulaic fantasy. Somehow, one must manage to open a window once more, or risk haunting the same territory in perpetuity.

If my own text is done, it is not because I have said everything that I could say --I suppose no

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<sup>1</sup>With some degree of embarrassment at my own inconsistency, I suddenly recall chastising Walter Kaufmann one hundred pages ago for his hagiographical representation of Nietzsche. Perhaps, as Freud, Nietzsche, and Montaigne himself would all insist --we are incapable of speaking fairly about those whom we love. But I would hardly want to *change* that fact.

one ever has --but rather, because I have reached this borderline; I am not likely to learn anything new, anything challenging, through another hundred pages, but would simply be attempting to reassure myself through repetition of the soundness and health of my perspective. At such a point, the desire to keep writing becomes no more than a disguised desire not to allow a response, and the imagined reader inscribed in the text becomes no more than a means of warding off the real, outside reader, who just might *respond*. And this is the trap of autobiography, for at least some temperaments: once begun, the attempt by the self to tell its own life must remain incomplete -- "interminable" Freud would say --for fear that the autonomy purchased through autobiography will dissipate in the wake of a response that points to what has not been said, or has not been seen. Such speech "for the self alone," or for a fantasy reader in a far off time, inevitable becomes strident and shrill, uncertain of its own powers. For even if one has a voice as strong and assured as Nietzsche's, can one ever *really* talk oneself into an identity if no one is listening? To live alone, one *must* be an animal or a god, and to say that a "philosopher" is an exception to this otherwise pervasive rule is simply self-deception and a desperate fantasy.

The "solution" --and I speak programmatically, here at the end --is to learn to see the reader not as something that happens to a text after the fact, and to learn to see the "other" not as something that confronts a self that was already there. The fact that this position has a long and illustrious history in philosophy by now does not diminish its importance. I stated in the preface that writing inevitably implies a reader and is only completed in the act of reading itself, prior to which the text is a mere potential. An autobiography is no exception, and this leads to a result that my authors have gone to heroic lengths not to see. The "autos" of autobiography cannot simply represent itself in writing as if on a neutral medium, but must recognize that in the act of writing, the self immediately and inevitably makes the reader a co-constructor of the self that is told. The text --and its author -- are incomplete on their own, and can only be represented accurately in a writing that registers and

acknowledges this fact. But this incompleteness can be a virtue as well as a curse: the self can be negotiated in dialogue rather than private meditation, *enriched* rather than diminished or contaminated by the diversity of responses it receives on coming forward. An autobiography that opens onto the outside world can be construed as involving both the writer's own words *and* the reader's responses, its "self" expanding beyond the borders and limits of its author's private experience. We are social beings as well as private souls, and autobiography should reflect that fact, not simply in the life-history that it recalls --though that would be a start --but also in its performance. It should not seek to have the last word on the nature of its author, but should rather be seen as providing an opening for an encounter with others. The point is not --or is not only --a logical one, but more importantly, a matter of health. For as I hope to have shown, the image of the reader is always and inevitably a part of the autobiographical text: to avoid this or to deny it is both dangerous and a tragic loss of opportunity for self-expansion and change. But an autobiography --and a self --that opens onto the outside world lets the inside out and the outside in. It is a dynamism that forgoes the solitary dance of private self-mastery and erases the narrow boundaries around the self --once thought so solid --in order to embrace change, development, and growth.

A text is not complete until it has its reader. And so, as in the preface, I await your response.

## NOTES

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1. Nietzsche, *UM*, p. 59.
2. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, p. 48.
3. Nietzsche, *GM*, 3:16.
4. Nietzsche, *BGE*, 6.
5. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, p. 61.
6. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, p. viii.
7. Rousseau, "History of the Preceding Writing," *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*.
8. Montaigne, "On Books" [Book 2, Chapter 10], p. 161 in Cohen.
9. Szabados, "Autobiography and Philosophy: Variations of a theme of Wittgenstein," p. 71.
10. Rousseau, *Confessions*, 1:28.
11. Kristo, *Looking for God in Time and Memory*, p. vii-ix and throughout.
12. Monnica's dream, which foretold that Augustine would one day become a Catholic, is recounted in detail at 3:19-20.
13. Gusdorf, "The Structure and Limits of Autobiography," p. 39.
14. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, proposition 7.
15. O'Connell, *Saint Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of the Soul*, p. 28.
16. The quotation may be apocryphal, but it *should* have been said. I have taken it from Ryan's introduction to the *Confessions*, p. 27.
17. Starobinski, "The Style of Autobiography," p. 77, emphasis added.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. The phrase is the title of the first chapter of Staten's book *Nietzsche's Voice*.
23. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, p. 13.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
25. Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, p. 69.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

27. de Mijolla, *Autobiographical Quests*, p. 19.
28. Similar locutions can be found throughout the text, but I take the phrase “inner man,” with its stated opposition to the “outer man” of the senses, from 10:6 and 10:7.
29. Stock, *Ethics in Late Antiquity*, p. 9.
30. de Mijolla, *Autobiographical Quests*, p. 17.
31. Augustine, *On True Religion*, 88 & 89.
32. O’Connell, *The Odyssey of the Soul*, p. 189.
33. Augustine, *Retractions*, Chapter 32:2.
34. The reference is to Nietzsche’s parable of the madman and the death of God in the *Gay Science* #125, a description of the psychological cost of losing the eternal verities somewhat more poetic and compelling than Descartes’ own.
35. Rée, “Descartes’ Comedy,” p. 157.
36. Given the voluminous scholarship on Descartes, such work has of course been done. To scratch the surface, Stephen Menn’s *Descartes and Augustine* aims to explicate in precise detail the presence of Augustine’s thought in Descartes’ writing, while Gary Hatfield and Amélie Rorty have both explored --on a smaller scale --the parallels and differences between Jesuit and Cartesian styles of “meditation.”
37. Rorty, “The Structure of Descartes’ *Meditations*,” p. 19.
38. Cole, *Olympian Dreams*, p. 121. Cole provides an extensive and fascinating analysis of the relationship between the young Descartes and Isaac Beekman (esp. 114-128).
39. Vico, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, p. 113.
40. Cress, in the preface to his translation of the *Discourse on Method*, p. vii.
41. The dreams are recorded in Adrien Baillet’s biography *Vie de Monsieur Des Cartes* (1691), [pages 1:80-86, or AT X 33-282], but are perhaps more readily accessible through John Cole’s translation in his *The Olympian Dreams and Youthful Rebellion of René Descartes* [pages 33-40].
42. Roth, *Descartes’ Discourse on Method*, p. 44.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
44. Hatfield, “*The Senses and the Fleshless Eye: The Meditations as Cognitive Exercises*,” p. 55.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 47-8.
46. France, *Rhetoric and Truth in France*, p. 47-8.
47. Gassendi, at AT VII 276-77.
48. Lloyd, “The Self as Fiction: Philosophy and Autobiography,” p. 169.
49. *EH*, preface.
50. Romans 13:14, the scripture which prompts Augustine’s conversion under the fig tree.
51. Beaudry, *The Role of the Reader in: Rousseau’s Confessions*, p. 58-9.

- 52.de Mijolla, *Autobiographical Quests*, p. 78. It is far from being Rousseau's problem alone — Montaigne, Wordsworth, and Nietzsche will all wrestle out loud with the limitations of their inherited languages for the transmission of "a new series of experiences" [EH, 3:1:1].
- 53.Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, p. 170-71.
- 54.Hartle, *The Modern Self in Rousseau's Confessions*, p. 33, and p. 123.
- 55.Ibid., p. 31, and p. 122-3, emphasis added in each.
- 56.Szabados, *Reading Rousseau through the Eyes of Embarrassment*, p. 276-7.
- 57.de Mijolla, *Autobiographical Quests*, p. 90.
- 58.de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 280.
- 59.Starobinski, *The Style of Autobiography*, p. 81.
- 60.The translation is Christopher Kelly's, from *The Collected Writings of Rousseau: Volume 5*, p. 588-9, emphasis added.
- 61.I refer of course to Nagel's frequently-anthologized essay, "What is it like to be a Bat?" The answer to the rhetorical question in the title is that we cannot know; no comprehension of bat physiology will be equivalent to the lived, subjective character of bat-experience.
- 62.To Mme de Verdelin, 4 February, 1760. I take the letter from Starobinski, p. 142 of *Transparency and Obstruction*. His citation is to the *Correspondance générale*, DP, V, 42-43; L, VII, 32.
- 63.Starobinski, *The Style of Autobiography*, p. 78.
- 64.Beaudry, *The Role of the Reader*, p. 80.
- 65.Ibid., p. 27.
- 66.Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, Vol. IV, chapter xiii, p.233.
- 67.Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, p. 153.
- 68.Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 42.
- 69.Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, p. 174-5.
- 70.Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, p.129.
- 71.*BGE*, 16
- 72.*BGE*, 12.
- 73.LeJeune, "The Autobiographical Pact (bis)," p. 131.
- 74.*UM*, p. 91.
- 75.*BGE*, 6.
- 76.*UM*, p. 91.
- 77.Ibid. p. 76.
- 78.Hollingdale, "Introduction," to Nietzsche: *Ecce Homo*, p. 7.



79. The citation is from a discarded draft for section 3:3 of *Ecce Homo*, found in the second appendix to Kaufmann's translation [p. 340].
80. The concluding section of book four of the *Gay Science* [342], for instance, is reproduced as the first section of *Zarathustra*.
81. Kaufmann, [in "Editor's Introduction" to *Ecce Homo*, p. 205], my emphasis.
82. *Ibid.*
83. *GM*, preface, 8.
84. Sartre is in the background here, but I am more immediately indebted to Béla Szabados' "Reading Rousseau Through the Eyes of Embarrassment" for drawing attention to the significance of embarrassment as a technique in autobiographical discourse that may generate a sympathetic identification between reader and narrator, but which also distances the narrator from the protagonist of the story.
85. Fenves, reviewing "Nietzsche: Life as Literature," p. 167.
86. *GM*, 2:12, emphasis added.
87. *UM*, p. 91
88. Alston, "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification," p. 129.
89. *UM*, p. 61.
90. *UM*, p. 76.
91. *ibid.*
92. *BGE* 269.
93. *GS* 365.
94. Derrida, *Spurs*, p. 99.
95. *Z*, 4:18:1, and 4:13:20.
96. Gusdorf, "The Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," p. 38-9, and [after the ellipse], p. 44.
97. from the discarded concluding fragment to *Ecce Homo* entitled "Final Consideration" [p. 344 in Kaufmann].
98. Conway, "Nietzsche's Doppelgänger," p. 65.
99. *UM*, 2:2, italics mine.
100. Plato, *Symposium*, 208e-209a, and [after the ellipse] 209d.
101. Nietzsche relates himself to Zarathustra less directly in quite a number of other passages as well, though it is in this citation alone that he comes closest to positing an *identity* between the two [cf. pages 281, 289, 306, 308, 327, 328, and 333 in Kaufmann].
102. Williams, *Rousseau and Romantic Autobiography*, p. 3.
103. Nehamas, *Life as Literature*, p. 234.

- 104.Nietzsche is quoting from his earlier work here, interpolating the parenthetical reference to the *Revaluation*, and the expected year of its arrival “-1890!”
- 105.Specifically, to pages 144-51 in the chapter “How One Becomes What One Is Not.”
- 106.Shapiro, *Nietzschean Narratives*, p.150-1.
- 107.Ibid., p.151.
- 108.Ibid.
- 109.Ibid., p. 145.
- 110.Hollingdale, “Translator’s note,” to *Anti-Christ*, p. 27.
- 111.Ibid., p. 145-6.
- 112.AC, forward.
- 113.Z, 1:1.
- 114.Z, prologue, 6.
- 115.Z, 1:21.
- 116.Z, 1:21.
- 117.Nehamas, *Life as Literature*, p. 234.
- 118.TI, “Expeditions of an Untimely Man,” 26.
- 119.WTP, 810. See also BGE, 268, “To understand one another, it is not enough that one uses the same words; one also has to use the same words for the same species of inner experiences; in the end one has to have one’s experience in common.”
- 120.Mileur, “Revisionism, Irony, and the Mask,” p. 211.
- 121.Nehamas, *Life as Literature*, p. 232.
- 122.Derrida, *Otobiographies*, p. 11. There are numerous other “riddles” as well as these two, which I present as paradigms rather than as the definitive puzzles in the text.
- 123.BGE, 290.
- 124.I take the citation from Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 88.
- 125.Kaufmann, p. 202-3.
- 126.EH, 3:1.
- 127.Staten, *Nietzsche’s Voice*, p. 184.
- 128.GM, 2:12.
- 129.HATH, preface, 6.
- 130.TI, “Maxims and Arrows,” 26.
- 131.Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 420.

132. Derrida, *Spurs*, p. 99.
133. From Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 265, [originally in *Novels and Novelists*, ed. J. Middleton Murry, London, 1930, p. 304].
134. The line comes from a discarded draft for 3:10 in *Ecce Homo* [Kaufmann, p. 343].
135. *BGE*, 169.
136. *Daybreak*, preface, 5, first italics added.
137. *BGE*, 289.
138. Camus, *The Fall*, p. 119-120.
139. The “psychology of the redeemer” is presented most forcefully in *Anti-Christ* 29.
140. *AOM*, preface, 1.
141. Chapters six and eight in Staten’s *Nietzsche’s Voice* provide a revealing analysis of how the inordinate fear of pity and the (related) deprecation of women fits into Nietzsche’s overall conceptual / psychological economy.
142. The Dutch artist Maurits Escher (1898-1972) is principally famous for his “impossible” sketches, such as *Drawing Hands* and *Relativity*. The former is a sketch of a hand which is sketching the hand which is sketching it, while the latter presents a series of connected, continually ascending staircases which are impossible to reconcile since they ascend at perpendicular angles relative to each other.
143. I have simplified matters here; Staten’s text addresses the whole of the Nietzschean corpus, not just *Ecce Homo* (he is in fact somewhat more attentive to the early writings).
144. Altieri, “*Ecce Homo*: Narcissism, Power, Pathos...,” p. 403.
145. *Ibid.*, p. 404.
146. Derrida, *Autobiographies*, p. 7.
147. Montaigne, 1:9, “On Liars,” p. 29 in Cohen.
148. Montaigne, 2:6, “On Practice,” p. 424-5 in Screech.
149. *UM*, p. 76.
150. Montaigne, 1:8, “On Idleness,” p. 27 in Cohen.
151. Cohen, introduction to the *Essais*, p. 14.
152. Montaigne, 2:17, “On Presumption,” p. 191 in Cohen.
153. Montaigne, 3:2, “On Repentance,” p. 235 in Cohen.
154. Montaigne, 2:6, “On Practice,” p. 426 in Screech.
155. Montaigne, 3:3, “On Three Kinds of Relationships,” p. 256 in Cohen.

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