

# European Connections

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Ruth Whelan (eds)

Narrating the Self in  
Early Modern Europe

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## Introduction

### Seeing through a glass darkly

The mirror is a metaphor of self-writing favoured both by those who write and those who read self-narratives. ‘Moy qui me voy’, Montaigne’s pithy phrase,<sup>1</sup> encapsulates in its reflexivity that primary, instinctive act of self-recognition, which occurs when a person sees herself or himself through a glass, whether real or metaphorical, and identifies more or less with the reflected image – necessarily so, because the alternative is madness. Thus, seeing through a glass becomes a metaphor of self-awareness, self-consciousness and self-reflection caught in the very act, the most primitive act, of self-portraiture.<sup>2</sup> To the authors of the *Logique de Port-Royal* (1662), seeing through a glass also suggested a notion of correspondence between image and object: ‘une image qui paroît dans un miroir est un signe naturel de celui qu’elle représente’.<sup>3</sup> To reflexivity are added here notions of the transparency and referentiality of the self-reflection in the mirror. All of these ideas are present centuries later in Orlo Williams’ remark in 1920 that ‘the autobiographer has to make his own looking-glass. [...] It is the intensity of the absorption that produces the reflection in which a strange but fascinating *Doppelgänger* is thrown up against the arras of the years’.<sup>4</sup> Here, the

- 1 Voir: “*Moy qui me voy*”: *the writers and the Self from Montaigne to Leiris*, ed. George Craig and Margaret Mc Gowan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).
- 2 Louis Marin, *L’écriture de soi. Ignace de Loyola, Montaigne, Stendhal, Roland Barthes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), p.129.
- 3 Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *La logique ou l’art de penser*, ed. Louis Marin (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), p.82 ; the quotation occurs in a section added to the 1683 edition.
- 4 Orlo Williams, ‘Some feminine biographies’, *The Edinburgh Review*, 231 (1920), quoted by Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses. Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), p.124.

mirror is the autobiographical text – ‘miroirs d’encre’ in Michel Beaujour’s phrase<sup>5</sup> – which reflects the self as s/he is and was.

Many of the authors writing their own or another life, who are studied in this volume, insist on the referentiality of their narratives and, concomitantly, on their own truthfulness and sincerity. The aristocratic Jean François Paul de Gondi, cardinal de Retz (1613–1679), opens his *Mémoires* by assuring the narratee that: ‘Je vas [...] vous instruire nuement et sans détour des plus petites particularités [de ma vie]’, undertaking ‘à ne rien diminuer et à ne grossir en rien la vérité’.<sup>6</sup> Élie Neau (1662–1722), Protestant sailor turned galley slave by misfortune, makes a similar claim, observing to his correspondent: ‘Comme je parle avec candeur, vous croyez bien que je vous dis la vérité’.<sup>7</sup> The transparency of self to self in the mirror becomes in the text an autobiographical pact between self and narratee and, by implication, self and reader.<sup>8</sup> What is narrated or written is true because the speaking or writing self is truthful, candid, sincere, hiding nothing, offering to readers an authentic ‘miroir d’encre’. Text, life, self are consubstantial, it is claimed. By looking in the text readers will see an unadulterated reflection of the writing self. Unadulterated because life-writers also claim to write unadorned, ‘nuement’, according to Retz, ‘naïvement’, according to others, representing a self ‘depaint au naturel dans un parlant tableau’, according to François Le Poulchre (1546–1597).<sup>9</sup> The mirror is a metaphor of both content and style, life seen and written, lived and told.

Seeing the self through a glass is also a pervasive metaphor of the presumed unity of subject and object, writing I and written I, making the text a *Döppelgänger*, or image-double of a life. One of the observations of William Dilthey (1833–1911), the German historian and philosopher who played a key role in constituting auto/biography as part of the ‘human sciences’, is pertinent here. In his view, ‘autobiography is

5 Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d’encre* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

6 Jean-François-Paul de Gondi, cardinal de Retz, *Mémoires*, ed. Michel Pernot (Paris: Gallimard, ‘Folio classique’, 2003), p.55.

7 Quoted by Ruth Whelan, *infra*, p.157.

8 Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1996. 2nd edn.); Emmanuèle Lesne, *La poétique des mémoires (1650–1685)* (Paris: Champion, 1996), p.231–4.

9 Henri de Campion, *Mémoires* ed. Marc Fumaroli (Paris: Mercure de France, 1990. 2nd edn.), p.45; François Le Poulchre, quoted by Marie-Clarté Lagrée, *infra* p.44.

merely the literary expression of a man's reflection on his life' (we return to the gender implications of this statement below).<sup>10</sup> Life-writing as mirror or reflection expresses ontological assumptions, most notably that there is a self or life to be perceived, told, written down, and that the self and life are identical and sufficiently coherent and unified to lend themselves to perception, narration and transcription. Self-writing, in this account, is a 'second-order expression of self-reflection', to quote Laura Marcus, undertaken by a 'unified trans-historical subject'.<sup>11</sup> This is one of the explanations given by Marcus for the explosion in life-writing as both a medium of self-expression and an object of study in our own time. It is, in part, a reaction to the anti-humanism of the 1970s and thereafter, with its deconstruction of traditional concepts of a unitary self and a coherent individual consciousness, not to mention its subversion of the coherence, unity or determinate meanings of literary texts. It is also one of the reasons why autobiography was for so long privileged as the purest, and sometimes the only authentic form of life-writing, to the exclusion of memoirs and other 'outer-directed' forms. Autobiography, it was argued, mirrored the self, which is why in the latter half of the twentieth century it became for some critics 'the site upon which subjectivity [would] be saved, and saved for literature'.<sup>12</sup>

While the essays in this volume are all concerned with the central question of auto/biography, namely the existence, locus, identity and writing of the self,<sup>13</sup> their authors avoid both grand ontological claims about subjectivity and exclusive generic distinctions that would limit our enquiry to a narrow selection of canonical texts (Augustine, Rousseau, Nietzsche, etc.). Implicitly, we share Dilthey's belief that every life is lived autobiographically – the 'moy qui me me voy' is also a 'moi qui me parle' – whether or not a formal document emerges from that self-reflexivity and self-speaking or self-narrating.<sup>14</sup> In fact, as Georges

10 William Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, ed. and tr. H. P. Rickman (Cambridge: University Press, 1976), p.215, quoted by Marcus, p.137; in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: University Press, 1980), pp.24–5, Olney asserts that autobiography mirrors the life.

11 Marcus, pp.138, 184.

12 *Ibid.*, pp.135, 182–3.

13 Jonathan Loesberg, 'Autobiography as Genre, Act of Consciousness, Text', *Prose Studies*, 4 (1981), p.171, quoted by Marcus, p.229.

14 Marcus, p.142.

Gusdorf remarks, *graphein* (writing) comes rather late in the *bios* (life) of the *autos* (self).<sup>15</sup> And when or if it does, it embraces a radical heterogeneity of forms, from autobiography to confessions, memoirs, letters, diaries, or fragmentary recollections, for which the terms ‘ego-documents’, or ‘life-writing’ have been coined. For some contributors, even this broader understanding of self-writing is too narrow. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, they follow Gusdorf in asserting that ‘*écrire, c’est toujours écrire moi*,’<sup>16</sup> which is to argue that knowledge and writing are always in some way autobiographical. Writers of history and biography find their way into the pages of this book as self-writers because in those apparently more objective spaces an observer, knower, writer, is self-reflexively inscribing and inscribed. Nonetheless, this wider-ranging approach to autobiography and life-writing merely displaces, without resolving, the central question, simply framed by Blaise Pascal (1623–1662): ‘*Qu’est-ce que le moi?*’<sup>17</sup>

Some contributors accept the conservative understanding of the auto/biographical act, outlined above, and study life-writing as referential texts, which proffer an image-double of the narrating self. In these accounts, the self becomes through writing a textual presence, which *ex hypothesi* is identical to the writing self, presumed to pre-exist textual expression. Where these assumptions are accepted, contributors adopt positivist approaches to life narratives, seeking to construct from the text an understanding of its author’s life or social and political context. Thus, the *Mémoires* of François de Bassompierre (1579–1646) intrigue the historian intent on establishing what part Bassompierre played, or was seen to play, in the plot against Richelieu, known as the ‘*Journée des Dupes*’, which lead to the former’s imprisonment in the Bastille from 1631 to 1643. Life-narratives by Huguenot refugees offer opportunities for detecting the untold stories, central to the purpose of those memoirs, but overlooked by conventional interpretations of ‘the Huguenot self’ and self-writing. The *Memoirs* of an Irish Loyalist, Ambrose Hardinge Giffard (1771–1827), afford insights into the way

15 See Georges Gusdorf, *Auto-bio-graphie. Lignes de vie 2* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1991), p.10.

16 *Ibid.*, p.123, italics in the original.

17 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Philippe Sellier (Paris: Bordas, ‘Classiques Garnier’, 1991), pensée 567, p.407.

those of mixed Irish and English descent negotiated issues of ethnicity in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Ireland. These approaches configure life-writings quite precisely as *ego-documents*, understood as historical evidence of a self, or a particular self-understanding, at a given moment in time, which they are – up to a point. From there it is an easy step to making these egodocuments part of a ‘pre-history’ of autobiography,<sup>18</sup> implying that life-writing is teleological, on the move towards the ‘modern self’,<sup>19</sup> which it is – up to a point.

The life-writings studied in this volume point up yet again one of the ways auto/biographical discourses evolved, namely from an essentially religious into an increasingly secular understanding of reflexivity, as Georges Gusdorf has argued.<sup>20</sup> Early modern people conceptualised their existence as a *theatrum mundi*, believing that all the world really was a stage, on which humans as actors played social roles that they laid down at their death, all the while held in the scrutinising gaze of God.<sup>21</sup> Potentially, that cultural commonplace turned life-writing into a confessional act undertaken by the self in the unseen but presumed real presence of God. Thus, in the Renaissance and even more in the neo-classical age, egodocuments that were conceived outside of an explicitly spiritual matrix laboured under a taboo, summed up in Pascal’s frequently quoted reference to Montaigne’s *Essais* as ‘le sot projet qu’il a de se peindre!’<sup>22</sup> Narrating or portraying the self was *egolalie*, that is, a discourse centred on a self turned inwards, side-stepping the theological imperatives of charity, humility, and hope in God. ‘La coutume a fait le parler de soy vicieux’ as Montaigne himself observed, ‘et le prohibe obstineement en hayne de la vantance qui semble tousjours estre attachée

18 Marcus, pp.2, 154.

19 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989. 1st edn.); Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self. Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004); both authors, however, historicise the notion of the self.

20 Georges Gusdorf, ‘De l’autobiographie initiatique à l’autobiographie genre littéraire’, *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France*, 75 (1975), pp.957–94.

21 Frédéric Charbonneau, *Les silences de l’histoire. Les mémoires français du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2000), pp.189–92.

22 Pascal, *pensée* 644, p.436.

aux propres tesoignages'.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the influence of the different Christian traditions on auto/biographical discourses was ambivalent. The emphasis on introspection – reinforced in Roman Catholicism by the post-Tridentine obligation of private, auricular confession, and in the Reformed tradition by liturgical communal acts of confession – created social conditions that favoured the kind of self-attentiveness illustrated in some of the texts studied here. In their different ways, Beaumarchais and Rousseau exemplify a trend to write the self in a manner that may be reminiscent of religious introspection, but which is free of the confining commonplaces of Christianity. As the eighteenth century gained momentum, writers of egodocuments – again like Rousseau or Roland, whom he influenced – vaunt their egocentricity, at times indulging in fervent moral anatomies of the sinner or, quite simply, the person. In a word, the understanding of the human condition present in the writing of de Thou or Bassompierre, which is defined by the pursuit of duty under the intersecting gazes of God and King, has little in common with the obsession with uniqueness or singularity – whether persecuted, victimised, triumphant or eccentric – on show in Murat, Rousseau, Beaumarchais or Saint-Simon.

Although the essays in this volume confirm that self-consciousness and self-narration were evolving – however slowly, paradoxically and hesitantly – in the early modern period, they also challenge the 'standard history' of autobiography, which constructs it as referential prior to our enlightened present.<sup>24</sup> Referentiality, as we have seen, is certainly one of the claims made by life-writers, but that claim is less artless than it looks.<sup>25</sup> Let us return momentarily to the looking glass. The self perceived in the mirror, with whom we instinctively and necessarily identify, is in fact an image, which, as it were, objectifies the self. Obviously, then, the mirror image is and is not the self.<sup>26</sup> The doubling of the self in the mirror becomes more complex when the self-writer

23 Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. P. Villey (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002. 3 vols. 4th edn.), II, 6, p.378.

24 Marcus, p.195.

25 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning. From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.4.

26 Marin, *Écriture de soi*, pp.129–31, and 'Le pouvoir et ses représentations', *Politiques de la représentation*, ed. Alain Cantillon *et alii* (Paris: Kimé, 'Collège international de philosophie', 2005), pp.71–3.



makes her or his own looking glass, that is, makes a text of the self. What self-writers achieve, indeed the only thing they can achieve, is a representation of a self – an objectification – in the symbolic realm of writing.<sup>27</sup> Narrating the self involves, in Mary Jacobus’s phrase, a ‘doubled and self-reflexive consciousness, that of “writer reading”, or rather, “writer reading himself”’,<sup>28</sup> and, we might add, herself. The presence of the self to the self in the looking glass text is further perplexed by the temporal deferral involved in the writer reading the past of the self into the present of the text, which itself becomes the past once it is thought or written. Thus, rather than an image-double, life-writing produces doubled images, and imports, as Laura Marcus points out, ‘alterity into the self by the act of objectification which engenders it’.<sup>29</sup> In other words, when early modern writers promote their life-writing as transparent, unadulterated renderings of their self, they are promoting images, self-constructs, signs, which are not equivalent to the self, but which resemble that self, nonetheless.

Life-writing, then, is a rhetorical act. Frédéric Briot refers to the belligerence of memoir writing in early modern France,<sup>30</sup> and it is difficult not to be struck by the judicial dimension to many of the texts studied here, which turns them into pleas for the defence. While there are variations on this theme, all are united by an authorial stance that contests other interpretations of events, or the scripts their lives have become in other hands. Jacques-Auguste de Thou (1553–1617) inscribes the irenic political pragmatism of the so-called *politique* party into the history he wrote as France emerged from almost forty years of civil war, offering as guarantor of its truthfulness a representation in the text of the historian’s *ego*. Those who had fallen foul of the centralising tendencies of Louis XIV’s reign, be they Calvinist or Jansenist, contested the heresy attributed to them by projecting an image of themselves as persecuted saints, after the likeness of Christ. They thought of their egodocuments as just that, testimonies, evidence of their selves, textual fragments that would feed into an alternative history, a counter-history of their time.

27 Mary Jacobus, *Romanticism, writing and sexual difference. Essays on ‘The Prelude’* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp.31–2.

28 *Ibid.*, p.4.

29 Marcus, p.203.

30 Frédéric Briot, *Usage du monde, usage de soi. Enquête sur les mémorialistes d’Ancien Régime* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), p.84.

Yet, these and other ‘documents’, written by religious people about their lives, are ‘emplotted’, to use Hayden White’s term, in ways that are reminiscent of literature.<sup>31</sup> In her semi-fictional memoirs, Henriette-Julie de Castelnau de Murat (1670–1716), uses self-narration to write the cause of women, and denounce the hypocrisy and corruption of patriarchal institutions in her own time. Both Beaumarchais, in the *Mémoires contre Gozman*, and Voltaire, in the *Mémoires pour servir à la vie de M. de Voltaire*, are more preoccupied with their own individual causes. Both use their skills as polemicists to make their enemies look ridiculous, thereby discrediting them and anything done by them to the writing, embattled self. As Retz turns Mazarin into an object of ridicule, and Angélique Arnauld makes the cruelty of a Jesuit confessor emerge from his own mouth, so Voltaire turns Frederick of Prussia from hero to anti-hero with the strokes of his pen. Testimony, indignation, *reductio ad absurdum*, satire, caricature, irony, such are the rhetorical techniques of life-writing as judicial rhetoric and – in its more pointed forms – retributive justice.

It is hardly surprising that to Pascal’s question, ‘Qu’est-ce que le moi?’ Louis Van Delft replied in his study of neo-classical anthropology, that it is a form, a shape.<sup>32</sup> Increasingly the self becomes a cultural artefact in this period, subject to processes of self-fashioning and self-portrayal that blurred the distinction between literature and life. In France, the *moralistes* turned pitiless eyes on the self, anatomising and formulating it in maxims, character portraits, letters and memoirs, whether real or fictitious. In a sense, they call the self into being, making not a *Doppelgänger*, but a doubled image, which they fix, conferring on it a face – or a mask, perhaps – although they present themselves as unmasking it. *Prosopopeia*, personification, therefore, is the trope of

31 Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp.5–11; 93–7; Jacques Le Brun, ‘Conversion et continuité intérieure dans les biographies spirituelles françaises du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle’, *La conversion au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Actes du XII<sup>e</sup> colloque du Centre méridional de rencontres sur le XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. Louise Godard de Donville (Marseille: Université de Provence, 1983), pp.317–30.

32 Louis Van Delft, *Littérature et anthropologie. Nature humaine et caractère à l’âge classique* (Paris: P.U.F., ‘Perspectives littéraires’, 1993), p.5.

self-writing, as Paul de Man claimed,<sup>33</sup> because ‘the self’ is a product of the text and of discursive practices more generally. This also means that the self is a process of and in writing, which Montaigne pointed out in the essay he wrote on repentance – significantly, since repentance is the paradigmatic discourse of personal transformation over time as a result of reflection. ‘Je ne peints pas l’estre, je peints le passage: non un passage d’aage en autre, ou, comme dict le peuple, de sept ans en sept ans, mais de jour en jour, de minute en minute. Il faut accommoder mon histoire à l’heure’ (III, 2, p.805). A number of critical essays in this volume capture the self in a process of discursive construction in and by the auto/biographical text from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, from Charles Paschal (1547–1625), who cryptically projected the life he desired for himself into the life of his biographical subject, to Marie-Jeanne Roland (Manon Phlipon) (1754–1793), who constructed her own pilgrim’s progress in terms appropriated from ‘le divin Jean-Jacques’. None more clearly, however, than the analysis of the life-writings by and about Élie Neau, which reveal the way he came to see, embody and present himself as a martyr by a process of mimetic communication with other figures, experiences and voices, many of which he borrowed from the Bible. Thus, La Rochefoucauld’s killer comment about Retz, that ‘il aime à raconter, [...] et souvent son imagination lui fournit plus que sa mémoire’,<sup>34</sup> seems to a post-modern sensibility more judicious than vicious, pointing, as it does, to the futility of trying to distinguish the fictive from the referential in life-writing – then as now.

We are left, therefore, with the problematic mirror of self-writing, which holds out a promise of self-reflection as encounter with a real that constantly eludes us. For, the looking glass offers an image of self as other that turns out to be a mere surface reflection, a rhetorical artefact of the contemplating or writing I. ‘Know thyself’ said the Delphic Oracle. Prompting Apollo to remark to the human subject: ‘Tu es le scrutateur sans connoissance’, in the *prosopopeia* with which Montaigne concludes his essay on vanity (III, 9, p.1001). ‘Il n’est description pareille en difficulté à la description de soy-mesme’, says the essayist of his own project, referring to how difficult it is ‘de penetrer les profondeurs

33 Paul de Man, ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp.67–81.

34 Quoted by Bruno Tribout, *infra* p.101.

opaques de ses replis internes [i.e., de nostre esprit] (II, 6, p.378). The opaqueness of the human subject, what we may call – using Paul Ricœur’s phrase to name the *aporia* of time – the inscrutability of the self,<sup>35</sup> is played out again and again by the authors studied in this volume, who see themselves in a glass – but darkly. François Le Poulchre might affirm that ‘si chacun eust escrit de sa vie les faits chacun eust donné de soy la cognoissance’,<sup>36</sup> but his self eludes his scrutiny and transcription, disintegrating into a Russian doll, as it were, of rhetorical refractions. Other authors claim to write candidly, transparently, nakedly, but leave secrets undisclosed, past behaviour hidden, other actions enhanced, which suggests that the more revealing self-narrative may be the one not told, the one that cannot be written. Beaumarchais juggles multiple images of his self, whether theatrical or biographical, creating textual representations that are not so much a mirror as a kaleidoscope, whose successive patterns speak less through what they reveal than through what they mask of their author. Like Figaro, he fails to establish ‘quel est ce Moi dont je m’occupe’,<sup>37</sup> which points up the gap between self and self-construct, self and mirror, self and the form that cannot contain it, that perhaps cannot even grasp it. The self may after all be a question, like the one put by Pascal: ‘Où est donc ce moi, s’il n’est ni dans le corps, ni dans l’âme?’<sup>38</sup>

The question is pertinent and can be answered in different ways. One possible way to reply, even at the risk of rendering our collective efforts vain and illusory, is that ‘le moi’ or ‘the self’, as such, does not exist in this period, which is not the same as saying that it is an empty form or a formless entity. From this point of view the self is, quite simply, inscrutable, mysterious, a tautology. This would mean that the fissures, silences, doublings, fragmentations, and incompleteness of the self-writings studied here would point to a consciousness that needs a space in which to construct itself as subject around an emptiness that can never be fulfilled. The process of self-scrutiny could create a vacuum that brings into being a welcoming space of ‘auto-hospitality’, to use

35 Paul Ricœur, ‘L’aporie de l’inscrutabilité du temps et les limites du récit’, *Temps et récit III, Le temps raconté* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), pp.467–89.

36 Quoted by Marie-Clarté Lagrée, *infra* p.41.

37 Quoted by Richard Francis, *infra*, p.253.

38 Pascal, *pensée* 567, p.407.

Alain Montandon's phrase, where the *autos* can take shape.<sup>39</sup> The self, then, become a site of exploration, in which narrativity gives birth to subjectivity, recreating in narrative an experience reminiscent of Cartesian solipsism. Yet, to this we may reply that to argue that human consciousness speaks and writes itself into being is to imply that self-becoming requires the mediation of another gaze, another ear. In fact, the inscrutability of the self leads to a dead-end without the mediation of that other gaze. Humans find the way to their self via the other, who acts, so to speak, as an emotional and mental obstetrician to that process of self-becoming. While many of the authors in this volume acknowledge that mediation, some give primacy to the self facing its void and inviting itself into the 'auto-hospitality' of its own vacuum, where it finds its own truth.

The editors feel compelled to appeal the notion of the auto-hospitality of the self on grounds of gender, finding it difficult to agree to the evacuation of the subject who produces life-writing, when women and minorities have yet to gain full recognition of their subjectivity. They find grounds in this volume for arguing that the pervasive image of the mirror as metaphor of life-writing, in which the individual contemplates his own self as autonomous subject, says as much about traditional constructions of masculinities as it does about auto/biography. For the specularity, or mirroring, that is part of all self-consciousness and understanding cannot be solitary or autonomous, empty or vacant, unless by repression, denial or rejection of our first mirror, the woman's body from whom we come and in whom we see our self reflected.<sup>40</sup> We believe, then, that the self is relational, not just in the hospitality of its becoming, but also at its origin. This is not to raise the spectre of a trans-historical, unified or coherent self, but rather to suggest that our instinctive self-recognition is rooted and maintained in relationship with others to whom we constantly narrate our changing self-understanding. It

39 Alain Montandon, 'De soi à soi: les metamorphoses du temps', *De soi à soi: l'écriture comme autohospitalité*, publiées par le Centre de recherches sur les littératures modernes et contemporaines (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise Pascal, 'Littératures', 2004), pp.7–27.

40 Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissidence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p.255: 'Wholly reflected by the looking glass of the female body, the thinking subject no longer sees his mirror; nor does he see that his thought, all thought, rests on a fiction, this illusion of himself as a totality', quoted by Marcus, p.219.

is this self – the relational self – that we find mirrored in the life-writings studied in this volume. Frédéric Briot’s comment about writers of memoirs in early modern France may be generalised to all egodocuments.

Il [le mémorialiste] arrive dans un monde déjà bruissant de mots, de récits, de discours, comme le fait le nourrisson. [...] Ce qu’un mémorialiste vient donc rompre dès les premiers mots ce n’est pas un silence, mais un vaste bruit de fond (p.22).

Self-writing is ultimately a dialogic art, implicitly and sometimes explicitly inscribing snippets of that vast background noise in the text, talking back, talking to, talking with auto/biographical subject, narratee, correspondent, other writers, other texts, other times and readers, seeking specular moments of understanding, textually re-creating an ideal specular relationship that perhaps never was, but which we seek to translate into language, represent symbolically, integrate, sublimate, or mourn forever.<sup>41</sup>

41 Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancholie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp.37–41; 70–2; Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, ‘L’homme immobile’, *Perdre de vue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp.13–21.