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REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SELF FROM PETRARCH TO DESCARTES

Peter Burke

Cogito ergo sum: I think, therefore I am. Philosophers have often pointed out that this argument of Descartes, in his *Discourse on Method* (1637), is a circular one, since the 'I' of 'I think' assumes exactly what the writer is trying to prove. From the point of view of a cultural historian, however, this passage remains important as a celebrated affirmation of the importance and the unity of the self.

It is often claimed that this modern idea of the self goes back to the Renaissance, in the sense of the period of European cultural history which stretches from Petrarch to Descartes, from the early fourteenth century (at least in the case of Italy) to the early seventeenth. If this chapter were being written in the age of Jacob Burckhardt, its main thesis would be simple and clear. When he published his essay on *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* in 1860, the great Swiss cultural historian was confident that a central development in Italian culture in that period was what he called 'individualism' or 'the discovery of man'.

Burckhardt's contrast between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was a dramatic one. In the Middle Ages, according to him, people were aware of themselves only as members of a group; in the Renaissance, on the other hand, 'man became a spiritual individual and recognized himself as such'. The rise of self-awareness or subjectivity was reflected by the rise of autobiographies and portraits. In its concern with the individual self, according to Burckhardt, Italy was the first modern culture. Italy was a model for the rest of Europe as Europe would later be for the rest of the world.

However, all these statements are problematic, as historians have become aware in the last thirty years or so. Problematic from at least three points of view: geographical, sociological and chronological. In the first place, we cannot assume the uniqueness of the Western self without examining Japanese autobiographies, Chinese portraits and so on. I shall return to this problem at the end of this chapter. In the second place,

there is the sociological problem: whose self? Burckhardt's examples came from a tiny minority of Italians, generally upper-class males.

In the third place, Burckhardt's contrast between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages was too sharp. On one side, he underestimated the importance of the preoccupation with the individual self in the Middle Ages, especially from the twelfth century onwards. On the other side, he exaggerated this preoccupation during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the Italy of this time there is no lack of evidence of identification with family, guild, faction or city. In different contexts, people saw themselves or presented themselves as Florentines (say), as Italians, as Christians, as males, as soldiers and so on. Identities were not single but multiple.

It is also necessary to raise the question whether changes in the sense of individual identity were connected with the cultural movement we call the Renaissance, or whether they simply happened at the same time. In certain cases, as we shall see, classical examples were taken as models, but some writers of personal documents were probably unaware that the Renaissance was taking place.

CONCEPTS OF THE SELF

In any case, the very concept of 'the self' is not as simple as it looks. Burckhardt was particularly concerned with self-consciousness and its expression in literature (biographies and autobiographies) and art (portraits and self-portraits). He assumed, as many people have done before and since, that these expressions of the self were transparent. However, this assumption has been undermined by many twentieth-century literary, historical and sociological studies. Their authors view the outward expressions of the self as so many facades and stress the strategies and conventions of 'self-presentation', 'self-stylization' and 'impression management'. They are interested not only in the person but also in the 'persona', the mask which the individual wears in public, the role which he or she is playing.

More recently, these studies, of which Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is the most famous, have been undermined in their turn. The idea of self-presentation implies a fixed self operating behind the facade. By contrast, a cluster of recent books emphasize 'self-fashioning' (as Stephen Greenblatt puts it in a study of Renaissance England), or the 'reconstruction' or even the 'invention' of the self, which is now assumed, in the wake of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, to be a linguistic, cultural or social construct.

The ideas of self-consciousness, self-expression, self-presentation and self-fashioning do not exhaust the conceptual problems awaiting a historian of the Renaissance self, or better, of the variety of 'Renaissance

selves'. Self-knowledge, self-confidence, self-cultivation, self-examination and self-reliance also deserve to be considered. So does self-respect, an idea which was usually formulated in this period in terms of 'honour'.

So too does self-control. According to the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, emotional instability was characteristic of Europeans in the late Middle Ages, a 'perpetual oscillation between despair and distracted joy, between cruelty and pious tenderness'. Building on Huizinga's foundation, the German sociologist Norbert Elias argued that the consolidation of the centralized state in the early modern period led to a consolidation of the self. Political stability led to psychological stability. Elias illustrated the trend to self-control in an unforgettable way with examples of increasingly strict table manners taken from 'conduct books', a popular literary genre in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and one to which Erasmus and other Renaissance humanists contributed.

If we are not to lose ourselves in this forest of concepts, we need to turn for orientation to the language used during the period itself. Renaissance humanists were much concerned with self-knowledge. 'Know thyself', they reiterated in different languages, *gnothi seauton, nosce teipsum, erkenne Dich selbst* and so on. As Sir John Davies put it in his poem *Nosce teipsum* (1599), 'My self am centre of my circling thought / Only myself I study, learn and know.'

Equally important was the presentation of self to others. 'Giving a good impression of oneself' (*dar buona impression di sé*) was a central theme of one of the most famous books in Renaissance Italy, Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528). Around the year 1600, a number of European writers, including Francis Bacon, discussed the twin arts of simulation and dissimulation. There was also considerable interest in what was occasionally called 'psychology', especially in character-types and psychological disorders, notably melancholy (regularly discussed from Marsilio Ficino in the later fifteenth century to Robert Burton in the early seventeenth).

The uniqueness of the individual was also a concern at this time. According to Castiglione, 'Master Unique' (*Messer Unico*) was the nickname of a poet at the court of Urbino. John Donne claimed that in his day 'every man' 'thinks he has got to be a Phoenix', in the sense that there 'can be / None of that kind of which he is, but he', while social roles such as 'Prince, subject, father, son' had been forgotten. The claim is remarkably similar to Burckhardt's later remark that in the Middle Ages 'man' was only conscious of himself as a member of some general category, while in the Renaissance a sense of the individual developed.

'Sincerity' was another Renaissance concept, a word which came into regular use in English in the late sixteenth century, as the American critic Lionel Trilling pointed out. Shakespeare used the terms 'sincerity', 'sincere' and 'sincerely' thirteen times in his printed works (Sidney and Jonson used the terms twice each, while Milton, by contrast, used them

forty-eight times in his prose works alone). The advice Polonius gives Laertes in *Hamlet* 'to thine own self be true' may have been a commonplace but it was a relatively new commonplace. What is more, the term 'sincere' was becoming a fashionable one in other languages during this period, notably Italian and French (Montaigne was one of the first recorded users). Like the literature on simulation and dissimulation, the rise of the new term suggests that people were becoming more aware of the difference between an inner and an outer self, a difference which was given its classic formulation by Descartes at the end of the period in his famous contrast between mind and body, unkindly described in our own day as the doctrine of 'the ghost in the machine'.

As the examples cited above suggest, the sources for the study of Renaissance selves are manifold. Besides essays such as Montaigne's, plays like Shakespeare's, and dialogues such as Castiglione's, there are biographies, autobiographies, diaries, travel journals, letters. This literary evidence may be supplemented by painted and sculpted portraits and self-portraits. In this chapter I shall examine a few of these sources of information about self-consciousness, looking especially at changes over the long term. The reader should try to bear in mind the fact that the same texts and artefacts have been viewed by different scholars as examples of self-expression, self-presentation or self-invention.

BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Biographies were not unknown in the Middle Ages. Lives of the saints were common, and lives of laymen were written from time to time. In the ninth century, a biography of the emperor Charlemagne was written by his chaplain Einhard. In the thirteenth century, the French nobleman Joinville wrote a biography of Louis IX of France. In the fifteenth century an anonymous follower of Bayard wrote the biography of his master, the knight 'without fear and without reproach'.

However, the interest in biography had been much stronger in ancient Greece and Rome, especially in late antiquity. Plutarch wrote his parallel lives of famous Greeks and Romans at the beginning of the second century. Suetonius wrote his biographies of Roman emperors at about the same time, while Diogenes Laertius wrote his lives of philosophers in the third century.

These lives attracted much interest during the Renaissance and they inspired modern imitations, first in Italy and later elsewhere. Petrarch wrote the lives of a number of illustrious men on the model of Jerome's *De viris illustribus.* His friend Boccaccio wrote lives of Dante and Petrarch on the model of the life of Virgil by the Roman critic Donatus. In the fifteenth century a Florentine bookseller, Vespasiano da Bisticci, wrote the lives of the famous men of his day (many of them his clients). In the sixteenth

century, two famous collections of biographies were published: Paolo Giovio's lives of princes and generals and Giorgio Vasari's lives of Italian artists. It became increasingly common to provide famous books with an introductory biography of the author, as if his life was the key to the work.

Women too were the subjects of biographies. Boccaccio wrote the lives of more than a hundred illustrious women, from Eve to Queen Joanna of Naples, via Semiramis, Juno, Venus, Helen, Artemisia, Portia and Lucretia. Jacopo Filippo Foresti, an Augustinian hermit from Bergamo, published a collection of lives, *On Certain Famous Women* (1497), including the Renaissance scholars Isotta Nogarola and Cassandra Fedele. Vespasiano included the life of Alessandra de' Bardi in his collection, comparing her to the ancient Roman matron Portia for her piety and courage.

Outside Italy, few biographies were written before the sixteenth century, but then the trickle turned into a flood. For example, a biography of Dürer was published in 1532, the first Northern European biography of an artist. A biography of Erasmus was published in 1540, only four years after his death. The French humanist Theodore Beza published a biography of his master Jean Calvin in 1564. In England, one thinks of William Roper and Nicholas Harpsfield on Thomas More, of George Cavendish on Cardinal Wolsey (all written in the 1550s), and of Fulke Greville on his friend Philip Sidney. The popularity of the French and English translations of Plutarch's *Lives* is another sign of the interest in intimate biographical details. Plutarch was one of Montaigne's favourite authors precisely because his biographies dealt with private as well as public affairs, with the inner as well as the outer life of his subjects.

The autobiography or what some historians call the 'ego-document' (a broader category including diaries, journals, memoirs and letters) is potentially at least even more revealing of the self. Before 1500, auto-biographies and memoirs were relatively rare, despite a few famous examples such as Petrarch, the humanist pope Pius II, the pious Englishwoman Margery Kempe, and the French diplomat Philippe de Commynes.

It is obviously dangerous to argue from the rarity of ego-documents before 1500 that self-consciousness was undeveloped, since modern Western links between writing and self-examination are not universal. The kinds of text produced in a given culture are related not only to its central values but also to local assumptions about the uses of literacy (and we must not forget that only a minority of the population of Renaissance Europe was able to write).

When ego-documents exist, on the other hand, they are valuable testimonies to the kind of self-image current in a particular milieu, as two examples may suggest. Petrarch's autobiography, the *Secretum*, takes the form of a dialogue between 'Franciscus' and 'Augustinus' and so bears

witness to its author's sense of a divided or fragmented self. Again, in Florence the tradition of memoranda (*ricordanze*) went back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These texts were not quite account-books, not quite diaries, not quite local chronicles, not quite family histories, but something of each of these. They illustrate a form of self-consciousness in which the boundaries between the individual, the family and the city were less sharp than they became centuries later.

After 1500, ego-documents became more common and more personal. In Italy one finds not only such famous examples as the autobiographies of the Florentine sculptor Benvenuto Cellini and the Milanese physician Girolamo Cardano, but also a host of minor figures including the apothecary Luca Landucci, the tailor Sebastiano Arditi and the carpenter Giambattista Casale.

Outside Italy, sixteenth-century examples of autobiography include the emperor Maximilian (who employed ghost-writers), St Teresa, St Ignatius, the French soldier Blaise de Monluc, the Swiss family Platter (which produced three texts in three successive generations), the German burgomaster Bartholomew Sastrow, and the English musician Thomas Whitehorne.

Why should the autobiographical habit have developed at this time? It might be argued that the city, which offers alternative ways of life, encourages a sense of individual choice. The sixteenth century was an age of urbanization. It was also an age of travel, and travel encourages self-consciousness by cutting off the individual from his or her community. A famous account of a visit to Brazil begins as follows: 'I Hans Staden of Homberg in Hesse proposed, if God willed, to see the Indies, and with this intention I travelled from Bremen to Holland.'

The sixteenth century was also the first century in which print became part of everyday life. It was the age not only of the rise of the autobiography or journal but also of fictional narratives in the first-person story, such as the picaresque novel in Spain or the sonnet-sequences of Sidney, Shakespeare and others. These examples suggest the importance of the diffusion of printed models for the creation of a new or sharper sense of self, as well as for the breakdown of inhibitions about writing down the story of one's life.

Why were specific texts produced? In the case of autobiography, the explanation is usually given in the first paragraph or so of the text (it is one of the conventions of the genre). They offer an interesting body of answers, which are worth taking seriously even if we do not take them literally. They range from the 'modesty formula', claiming that the text was produced at the request of someone else (often a son, as in the case of Thomas Platter and Sir James Melville, sometimes disciples, as in the case of Ignatius Loyola), to Cellini's immodest assertion that 'Every man who has done something worthwhile' – such as himself – 'should write an

account of his life with his own hand'. In the case of biography, fame was again the spur or one of the spurs. Another purpose was to offer exemplars to the reader, or in the language of modern psychologists, 'role models' or 'ego ideals'. The lives of the saints, for instance. Again, Antonio de Guevara's *Dial of Princes* (*Reloj de Principes*) was a biography of Marcus Aurelius written in order for princes such as Charles V to regulate their conduct as if by a clock.

A variety of models and styles was available. There was the impersonal style, for instance, exemplified by the 'commentaries' of Pius II or Monluc or the English soldier Francis Vere (in the manner of Julius Caesar). A different form of impersonality can be found in the majority of *ricordanze*, listing births, marriages and deaths, noting prices, the weather, news which arrived in the city and so on. There was also a more personal, confessional style in the manner of St Augustine, whose example was followed by Petrarch, among others, and also by St Teresa, who began by remarking that 'If I had not been so wicked, the possession of devout, god-fearing parents together with the favour of God's grace, would have been enough to make me good.' A secular form of the confessional model can be found in the diary of a young Florentine patrician Girolamo da Sommaia, narrating his sexual exploits to himself, recording them for safety's sake in the Greek alphabet, and describing his 'sweetness with Francisca' (*dolcetudine con Francisca*), 'sweetness of Isabella without paying' (*Dolcetudine di Isabella senza soldo*) and so forth.

Today it may seem odd or even contradictory that the biography or autobiography of the unique individual should follow a pattern, but for readers and writers of the Renaissance, who were taught to model themselves on the exemplary figures of antiquity, there was no paradox. Following a model had the advantage of imposing order on apparent chaos, turning random events into a story with a plot, with a beginning, middle and end. All the same, something which we would regard as valuable – how much, we shall never know – must have been sacrificed in the process of fitting new lives into old categories.

A similar tension between stereotype and spontaneity or authenticity can be found in another form of self-presentation, the letter. The private letter is perhaps the personal document *par excellence*, expressing the thoughts and emotions of the moment at the moment, rather than recollecting them in tranquillity in autobiographies and journals. Leading figures of the Renaissance such as Petrarch and Erasmus put a good deal of themselves into their letters; indeed, both men used letters as a tool of self-presentation or self-fashioning. All the same, letters followed literary conventions. Indeed, Cicero's letters were studied in some Renaissance schools as a good example of the way to write prose. A number of treatises on letter-writing were printed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In Italy there was a fashion for printing the letters of famous people such

as the writer Pietro Aretino, the critic Pietro Bembo, the actress Isabella Andreini. There were also anthologies of letters (including one of letters by women).

The Italian treatises and anthologies were one channel by which the style and values of the Italian Renaissance reached other parts of Europe. Montaigne claimed to own a hundred books of letters, and it is likely that these collections helped him and other readers to express, present and fashion their selves. Montaigne remains one of the most memorable examples of Renaissance self-awareness. For his time, he placed unusual stress on the need for privacy, for what he called 'a room behind the shop which is completely our own', *une arrière boutique toute nostre.* He was sceptical of the claims of other people to know an individual, pure guess-work according to him, but he was not sceptical about self-knowledge. His *Essays* offer a more vivid portrait of an individual than most auto-biographies of his time – or indeed since. Defending his enterprise – and it is revealing of the values of his day that he felt the need to defend his enterprise – Montaigne made a comparison between autobiography and self-portraiture, taking the example of René of Anjou. 'Why is it not legitimate for every man to portray himself with his pen, as it was for him to do it with a crayon?'

PORTRAIT AND SELF-PORTRAIT

Material culture was, and is, an important vehicle for expressing views of the self. Palaces and country houses expressed the self-images of their owners, all the more effectively when they were decorated with the owner's coat of arms, badge, device, name or initials, as in the case of the famous 'EH' (Elizabeth of Hardwick), on the parapet of Hardwick House in Derbyshire. Painted and sculpted portraits, which became increasingly numerous in the course of the Renaissance, can also be read as expressions of the sitter's self-image (or at least of the artist's image of the sitter's self-image). The multiplication of portraits and self-portraits after 1500, in parallel with biographies and autobiographies, seems to support Burckhardt's suggestion that there was an increase in self-awareness in the course of the Renaissance. Like texts, images sometimes followed exemplary models with which later artists identified themselves. One Italian artist, Bandinelli, portrayed himself with features resembling those of Michelangelo. Another, Jacopo Bassano, represented himself as Titian.

As in the case of texts, recently recovered ancient artefacts such as the busts and coins of Roman emperors encouraged the growth of interest in physical appearance as an expression of the inner self. The concern with fame was reflected in portraits and biographies alike. In the fourteenth century, Petrarch was consulted about the decoration of a room in Padua with portraits of 'illustrious men', presumably because of his book on the

subject. In the sixteenth century, the biographer Paolo Giovio collected four hundred-odd historical portraits of 'famous men' (including at least seventeen women) for the museum in his villa near Como. Collections of biographies were sometimes illustrated with portraits. It was also at this time that the works of famous writers came to be furnished not only with biographies of the author but also with engraved portraits, usually as frontispieces.

It should be added that the cult of the outstanding individual did not appeal to everyone. Some upper-class Venetians, for instance, were suspicious of this form of individualism and cultivated an alternative, communal tradition. In 1421, the patrician Francesco Barbaro complained to the humanist Guarino of Verona that it was impossible to erect a monument in Venice to a naval hero. The mercenary leader Bartolommeo Colleoni paid for his own equestrian monument, which survives to this day, but the Venetian government found an excuse not to erect it on Piazza San Marco, where he wanted it, and had it placed in a less conspicuous square.

It is time to turn to the self-portrait. Although earlier examples can be found (like that of René of Anjou, quoted by Montaigne), the rise of the self-portrait was a sixteenth-century trend, related not only to self-awareness but also to the rise in the status of the artist. In Italy, one thinks of the old Titian, for instance, or of the young Parmigianino regarding himself in a convex mirror. In Germany, the early sixteenth century has been described by Joseph Koerner as 'the moment of self-portraiture', the examples including Hans Holbein, Lukas Cranach and Albrecht Dürer, who also kept a journal. The habit of signing paintings also became more common at this time.

The growing concern with the uniqueness of the individual, already mentioned, is revealed by increasing demands for verisimilitude, for a 'likeness', to be found in commissions for funeral effigies. There was a shift from contracts which stipulated only 'a man armed' or 'a fair gentle-woman' to demands for a likeness. In the case of printed series of portraits, a genre which became popular around the middle of the sixteenth century, a claim to realism or historical accuracy was sometimes explicit in the title, as in the case of Pantaleon's *Wahrhaffte Bildnisse* (1562) or Pacheco's *Verdaderos retratos* (1599). Paradoxically enough, the most reliable evidence for this concern with veracity consists of absences. In a collection of images of scholars edited by Theodore Beza in 1580 the compilers left a blank for the German humanist Reuchlin, for instance, because they were unable to discover a likeness.

Portraits became increasingly individualized, and displayed more and more of the sitter, literally and metaphorically, as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries progressed. It is likely that the rise of portraits of famous people both reflected and encouraged the rise of an interest in

their personalities. A sixteenth-century satire on the cult of Petrarch describes one of his admirers not only as visiting the places where Petrarch and Laura had lived, but also as trying to obtain portraits of them both.

However, if we examine the uses of the portrait in the Renaissance, or at any rate their location (which is easier to document), it is to discover that most of these objects were originally hung in groups, including members of a particular family or holders of particular offices (bishops, doges and so on). Sitters were surrounded if not weighed down by such accessories as robes, crowns, sceptres, swords, columns, curtains and so on, accessories which represented particular social roles. These practices suggest that the identities supported by the paintings were collective or institutional rather than individual. In short, there is an apparent contradiction between two types of explanation of the significance of the portrait, two perspectives. If we take a broad, comparative view, a view from a distance, we can hardly fail to notice the parallel rise in the numbers of portraits in biographies in Italy and certain other European countries after 1500. On the other hand, in 'close-up' the picture looks rather different, since the uses of the portrait were more often institutional than individualistic.

There is a similar contradiction between the care taken by some artists and scholars to record or discover the features of certain individuals, and the lack of interest shown by others. A late fifteenth-century chronicle published in Nuremberg used the same woodcut to portray Homer, the prophet Isaiah, Hippocrates, Terence, the medieval lawyer Accursius and the Renaissance philosopher Filelfo. Again, more than fifty years later, the anonymous illustrations to a collection of biographies produced by the Swiss humanist Heinrich Pantaleon several times reproduced the same image to serve as the portrait of different individuals. It may not be too much of a surprise to find the rulers 'Tuisco' and 'Eric' given the same features, since they came from remote periods. However, Einhard, the biographer of Charlemagne, was conflated with the sixteenth-century humanist Johann Reuchlin. Still more of a scandal, in the sense of a stumbling-block to our understanding of the Renaissance, is the use of the same woodcut to represent two sixteenth-century figures, the humanist Gemma Frisius and the painter Albrecht Dürer – Dürer of all people, a man whose many self-portraits suggest his obsessive concern with his appearance, not to mention a relatively widespread knowledge of his face.

CONCLUSION

Three general points may be worth emphasizing at the end of this brief survey.

The first concerns the variety of Renaissance selves or conceptions of the self. A remarkably wide range of people portrayed themselves in

autobiographies, journals and diaries (to say nothing of letters): northerners and southerners, men and women, nobles and commoners. In Spain, the autobiographies of soldiers were almost common enough to form a sub-genre of their own, the most famous example being Alonso de Contreras. The majority of the surviving texts come from members of social elites, but apothecaries, tailors, carpenters and even peasants are also represented. Most documents are the work of males – but exceptions include Margery Kempe, St Teresa, Charlotte Arbaleste (wife of the Calvinist noble Philippe de Mornay), and Marie de Gournay (a disciple of Montaigne), while the Flemish painter Catherine van Hemessen portrayed herself in 1548. A possible task for future research in comparative history and literature would be to determine whether men and women, Catholics and Protestants, soldiers and civilians, patricians and plebeians developed their own styles of self-representation.

The second point concerns the possible explanation for the rise of concern with the self between Petrarch and Descartes, or at least its expression in texts and other artefacts. Reference has already been made to the rise of travel and of towns, but something must also be said about religion. Students of British autobiography, which took off' at the end of the sixteenth century, have sometimes evoked the spirits of Protestantism and Puritanism, linking the texts to everyday habits of examination of conscience. The example of Elizabethan Puritan diaries such as those of Richard Rogers and Samuel Ward, written 'to know my own heart better', as Rogers put it, and to record examples of pride, cowardice and other sins and weaknesses, would seem to support this conclusion. However, it is weakened if not completely undermined by the many Catholic examples of the genre, far more than could be cited in this chapter. Introspection and self-examination were not Protestant monopolies at this period, as the examples of Saints Teresa and Ignatius (among others) show. These practices were part of the preparation for confession.

In accounting for change in this period, my own emphasis would fall on the increasing availability of ancient models, including Christian antiquity (above all, the *Confessions* of St Augustine) as well as pagan (the *Commentaries* of Caesar and so on). The rise of the autobiographical habit was not an inexplicable change in 'spirit' but a chain reaction, in which certain texts awoke or restructured perceptions of the self, while these perceptions in turn created a demand for texts of this kind. More elusive is the explanation for what appears to be a changing sense of self between Petrarch and Descartes, both more unified than before and more sharply distinguished from the outside world of family and community. The parallel between these developments and the rise of the centralized nation-state is an intriguing one.

The third point concerns the relation between the new sense of the self and what is often described as Western individualism. It is often assumed,

at least in the West, that autobiographies and diaries are a uniquely occidental genre, or were until their imitation by Indians, Japanese and others in recent centuries. This assumption is false. In Japan, for example, a number of personal diaries were produced by noble ladies from the eleventh century onwards, the most famous examples being Murasaki and Shonagon. In India, the Mughal emperor Babur wrote his memoirs early in the sixteenth century. In China, a cluster of autobiographical texts, as well as a few portraits, was produced by scholar-officials and by monks at the time of the fall of the Ming dynasty in the middle of the seventeenth century. As in the case of Christianity, certain forms of Buddhism appear to have been conducive to self-examination.

In short, we need to free ourselves from the Western, Burckhardtian assumption that self-consciousness arose in a particular place, such as Italy, at a particular time, perhaps the fourteenth century. It is better to think in terms of a variety of categories of the person or conceptions of the self (more or less unified, bounded and so on) in different cultures, categories and conceptions which underlie a variety of styles of self-presentation or self-fashioning.