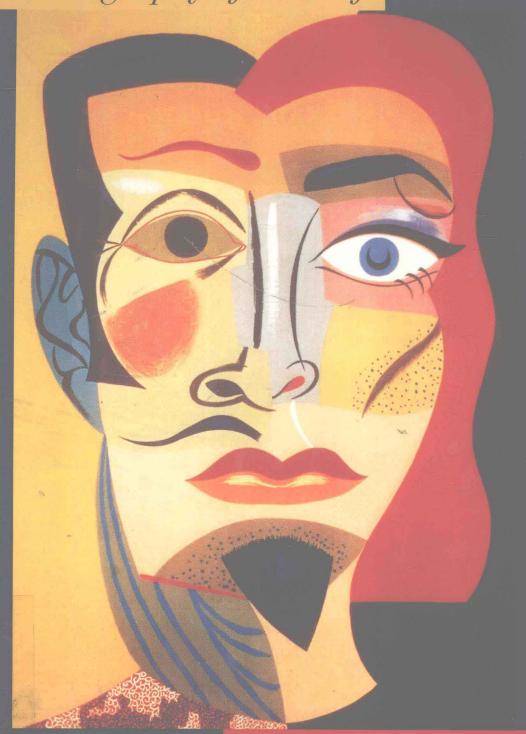
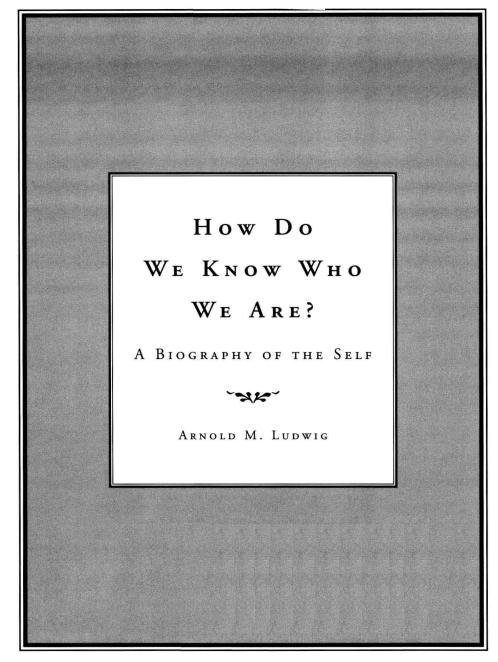
How Do We Know Who We Are? A Biography of the Self



Arnold M. Ludwig



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For Ryan, Emily, Ellis, and Madeline
—With love, "Papaw"



CONTENTS

XK

Acknowledgments vii

Prologue 5

- 1 THE "REAL" MARILYN 13
- 2 PEER GYNT'S ODYSSEY 37
 - 3 MASQUERADE 63
- 4 Existing on Different Planes 85
 - 5 LIVING BACKWARDS 101
 - 6 THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE 123
 - 7 PSYCHOANALYZING FREUD 145
- 8 How Did Hitler Live with Himself? 171
 - 9 WHAT MADNESS REVEALS 203
 - 10 OTHER VERSIONS OF THE SELF 233
 - 11 BIOGRAPHICAL FREEDOM 251

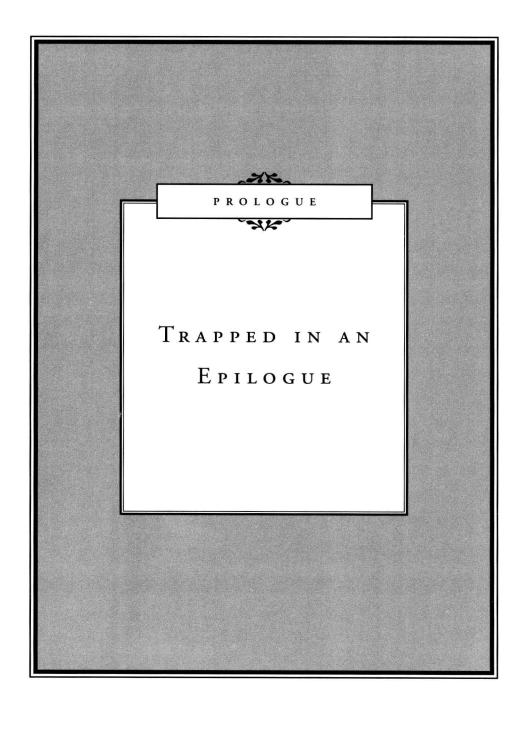
Notes 265

Index 287



THIS BOOK HAS BEEN SHAPED by many influences. I owe a special debt of thanks to all the distinguished biographers, historians, and writers who generously agreed to be interviewed for this project and to share their time and views with me. These individuals, in alphabetical order, are Christopher Benfey, Victor Bockris, Alan Bullock, Humphrey Burton, James Collier, Louise DeSalvo, Scott Donaldson, Leon Edel, Charles Bracelen Flood, Peter Gay, Brendan Gill, William Manchester, David McCullough, Diane Middlebrook, Joan Peyser, Arnold Rampersad, Roxana Robinson, Donald Spoto, Wallace Stegner, Gloria Steinem, and Linda Wagner-Martin. Sir Alan Bullock and Charles Bracelen Flood also were kind enough to review a chapter of the book in which they had significant input.

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STANDING BEFORE A MIRROR, Friedrich Nietzsche apocryphally asked the deranged image staring back at him—"Who are you?"—and then repeated over and over again, "I am who I am." This may be the answer to the central question of human existence. Then, again, it may not.

Why write another book on the self? No matter what assumptions you make, you're likely to arrive at the same tautological conclusion as Nietzsche. You can't be other than what you are, unless of course, you believe that you can reinvent yourself or that your self is an illusion.

The reason I decided to write this book is that I had no choice. I had been composing it most of my life, only I didn't know it. In my clinical work, I found myself intrigued by my patients who were struggling to give voice to their "true" selves. As a scientist, I was drawn toward investigating the contortions of the self when people became psychotic or developed multiple personality or displayed overpowering cravings for drugs or were exposed to such powerful mind-altering techniques as hypnosis, sensory deprivation, or hallucinogens. And in my own personal life, I've always collected anecdotes about people from biographies, newspapers, magazines, films, and personal encounters, any tidbits that could shed light on who they were and what made them tick. All this, I tell myself, established my credentials as a *bona fide* expert on the self, perhaps not on the same plane as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Descartes, and other famous philosophers who wrote brilliant treatises on this topic, but somewhere among the lesser lights who sometimes had trouble figuring out what these immortals had to say.

Why my lifelong interest in the self? I'm not sure, but I suspect it had something to do with the manner of my conception. I never should have been born in the first place since I am the result of pseudocyesis, the medical term for a false pregnancy, which somehow always made me feel that my life was a disease or that my existence was unreal. According to my father, my parents were practicing a crude form of birth control when my mother miraculously became "pregnant," complete with a swollen belly, enlargement of her breasts, and the absence of menses. After four months, when my father finally accepted the pregnancy as a *fait accompli*, he abandoned all forms of birth control, and it was then that I was conceived and born nine months later, after my mother's thirteen-month pregnancy.

The reason I'm writing this book now is that I can do so with a certain detachment. You see, by my calculations, after having lived a reasonably full life despite the manner of my conception, I should be dead now. At least, as a staunch believer in the genetic determinants of longevity, I lived a good part of my adult life expecting to die young. My father died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-two, and my mother died of cancer at the age of fifty-nine, so I had assumed that I never would live beyond the age of sixty. I lived my life accordingly, taking a final measure of myself during these past few years. Only here I am in my early sixties, healthy as far as I know, waiting for the telltale pang in my chest or the vague discomfort in my abdomen that I anticipated years ago. Though I continue to compose new chapters for my life story, they keep turning out as postscripts.

Perhaps if I could believe in an afterlife, I wouldn't be so preoccupied now with who I am and what life is all about. How comforting it would be to look forward to joining all my loved ones in heaven, as so many people look forward to joining theirs, except that I can't imagine what we'd talk about or do during our endless, incorporeal gatherings. The prospect of being with an omniscient God for eternity is no more attractive, since I always have been a bit of a loner and had trouble relating to people in authority. As for the pleasure I take in the extension of myself through my children and grandchildren, it's tempered by the knowledge that my genetic material will become progressively diluted, so that in five generations I'll only be one-thirty-second of myself, and in ten generations I may as well not have existed. Besides, I don't like the idea of sharing my progeny with so many strangers and having no say about who they are. So here I am,

trapped in the epilogue between a completed life story that should not have happened and an afterlife I can't believe exists, and trying to make sense of both.

I have another confession to make. While this book is mine, it was a struggle to keep it so. Let me explain. Struck by how much we live our lives in biographical format, progressing from birth to childhood to adolescence to adulthood and to old age, I was inspired after my first couple of drafts to test out certain ideas on a skilled biographer or two and see if I could learn something more from them. After all, who should know better about the self than someone whose profession it is to reconstruct people from assorted information about them and, through the magic of the biographical process, give them the breath of life?

Who else to interview than the dean of modern biographers, Leon Edel, the author of the five-volume work on Henry James that required more than twenty years to complete and was the modern equivalent of James Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson? But was he still alive? If so, he would be over ninety and probably suffering from the ravages of old age. After some detective work, I secured a phone number in Hawaii, called, and on the second ring, Edel himself answered, in a clear, firm voice that belied his age. My interview with him went so well that I decided to contact other biographers.

Leon Edel's name turned out to be a skeleton key for unlocking the door to many of the other biographers. One distinguished biographer after another agreed to be interviewed: William Manchester, Brendan Gill, David McCullough, Alan Bullock, Diane Middlebrook, Scott Donaldson, James Collier, Christopher Benfey, and Victor Bockris. The more I queried these individuals about their famous subjects and themselves, the more obsessed I became with my pursuit. The project took on a life of its own as I found myself tracking down other writers of well-known biographies: Gloria Steinem, Wallace Stegner, Peter Gay, Arnold Rampersad, Roxana Robinson, Joan Peyser, Linda Wagner-Martin, Humphrey Burton, Louise DeSalvo, Charles Bracelen Flood, and Donald Spoto. My collection of biographers soon swelled to twenty-one.1 Only two writers turned me down, and one studiously ignored my written requests. My success rate was phenomenal, not because of my powers of persuasion but, I believe, because of the appeal of the topic itself. I began compiling a list of even more biographers to contact. But then I had a sobering insight—I had become hooked on this investigative process and had lost sight of its original purpose.

With this realization, I wrested myself away from the addictive pursuit, but I still wasn't able to break away entirely from the spell these biographers cast over me. When I undertook the next draft of my book, I found myself becoming an emcee for all the famous celebrities who were the subjects of their biographies—Marilyn Monroe, Winston Churchill, Laurence Olivier, Georgia O'Keeffe, Anne Sexton, Ernest Hemingway, Sigmund Freud, John F. Kennedy, Alfred Hitchcock, Leonard Bernstein, Adolf Hitler, Sylvia Plath, Langston Hughes, Arthur Ashe, John Cheever, Douglas MacArthur, Virginia Woolf, Theodore Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, Harry S. Truman, Andy Warhol, and many others. I also served as a solicitous talk-show host for my collection of biographers, although I often disagreed with their views. This made interesting reading, but it wasn't the book I had planned to write.

It took two more drafts before I could reassert authorial control over my own manuscript. I decided to use excerpts from my interviews with these biographers to illustrate various points and, on occasion, as a basis for formulating and developing my own views. Although I believe I have succeeded reasonably well in matching these excerpts to the issues under discussion, I hope that I'll be forgiven when the fit is less than perfect. In these instances, I left the excerpts in because of their inherent interest.

Now a word about the contents of this book. The terrain of the self is vast, with parts known, parts impenetrable, and parts unexplored. As the first order of business, I examine what we know about the self and what we don't, and point out paradoxes about its properties—for instance, how a self can reflect upon itself, or deceive itself, or actualize itself, or be false. Adopting a narrative framework, which seems well-suited to a conceptualization of the self, I then discuss what it means to know ourselves or others, and whether it's possible for us to know anyone at all. Other issues I deal with are whether psychological truth is really true, whether sanity offers a better perspective of reality than madness, whether all personal identity is plagiarized, how people cope with the potential meaninglessness of their existence and the inevitability of their nonexistence, and whether personal authenticity is possible. I then address the crucial issue of whether we have the power to control our own lives, or whether all of our thoughts and actions are rooted in necessity.

Just as the task of a biographer is to fashion a man or woman out of his or her diaries, documents, dreams, memories, works, and assorted other materials, our task will be to form a coherent picture of the self from its many properties, paradoxes, and contradictions. Though interrelated, the chapters in the book can stand alone as essays, and don't necessarily have to be read in order. However, each of them fills in missing parts of a mosaic, and all are necessary to make the design clear. Viewed in its entirety, this mosaic reveals a new theory about the self, which has implications for who we are and what our existence is about.

