



Writing the Self: Diaries, Memoirs, and the History of the Self

Peter Heehs

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The self has a history. In the West, the idea of the soul entered Christianity with the Church Fathers, notably Augustine. During the Renaissance the idea of the individual attained preeminence, as in the works of Montaigne. In the seventeenth century, philosophers such as Descartes formulated notions of selfhood that did not require a divine foundation; in the next century, Hume grew skeptical of the self's very existence. Ideas of the self have changed markedly since the Romantic period and most scholars today regard it as at best a mental construct.

First-person genres such as diaries and memoirs have provided an outlet for self-expression. Protestant diaries replaced the Catholic confessional, but secular diaries such as Pepys's may reveal yet more about the self. After Richardson, novels competed with diaries and memoirs as vehicles of self-expression, though memoirs survived and continue to thrive, while the diary has found a new incarnation in the personal blog. Writing the Self narrates the intertwined histories of the self and of self-expression through first-person literature.

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