| To Begin

Take a nightmare situation evoked by Jean-Paul Sartre to image his childhood sense that he was a fraud, lacking all authenticity. He has sneaked onto a train from Paris to Dijon and fallen asleep, and when the conductor comes to ask for his ticket, he has to admit he doesn't have one. Nor the money to pay for one. Yet he makes the grandiose claim that he needs to be in Dijon for important and secret reasons, "reasons that concerned France and perhaps all mankind."[1] This scenario—in which the conductor remained mute, unconvinced, and the boy talked on and on—could never reach an ending. The higher calling—the salvation of mankind—remained an apology for his ticketless train trip, but not one he could really explain. Somehow the train ride had to continue, but without any certain point of arrival—or justification.

Such, we might say, is life, or at least our sense of personal identity within the world, at once unjustified and, to us, crucially important. That is more or less the question I want to work toward in this book. It was not quite my starting point; it took me some time to understand that "identity" was the concept I was after. In essence, the book had its

inception in a course I taught under the title "Character, Person, Identity." I was interested in the fact that "character," so central to our experience of reading novels (or biographies, or watching plays, or voting for elected officials) was very hard to talk about. "Character" has never been given the kind of systematic analysis that other elements of storytelling have received, such as plot or point of view or reader response: it isn't susceptible to formal analysis in the same way. There have been fine books on character, notably Alex Woloch's *The One vs. the Many*, which demonstrates the structural importance of minor characters for the emergence of the protagonist. But the concept (as Woloch and other commentators are aware) stretches beyond any formal definition to encompass much of what we want to include when we speak about "persons," the second term in my trilogy, as entire human beings.

It's fairly easy to talk about "person" in a minimalist way—as a grammatical person in, for instance, the pronouns *I* or *you* or *she*—and in that manner begin to understand at least the structured role of persons as participants in a conversation. The analysis of the ways in which language understands persons can be rigorous, and helpful—but it does not resolve all the issues we want to talk about with "character." I couldn't find any minimal position in regard to person in our fuller understanding of personhood, individuality. As with "character," so with "person" in this larger sense: I couldn't find the terms for an analytic discussion. Character slops over into all our discussions of ethics and morality. Where we now talk of writing a recommendation for someone, for instance, our forebears used to speak of "giving someone a character": doing what was still earlier called his or her "moral portrait." That was in ages that perhaps believed in character as a more definitive and complete conception than we do now. Sigmund Freud and others have seemingly shattered the unitary notion of character—though reading the great nineteenth-century novelists one perceives that they never subscribed to the closed, complete, self-contained, harmonious notion of character or person that we at times ascribe to the Victorians, and which was ostensibly their goal in education and child rearing.

"Character" in fact turned out to be beyond my powers of systematic analysis. Not that one has to bring systematic analysis to the concept, which remains useful precisely because of its semantic range, which starts from writing, inscription; the first meaning recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* has to do with engravings on coins: "a distinctive mark impressed, engraved, or otherwise formed; a brand, stamp." Already this "original" meaning has a figural extension: "by characters graven on thy brows. . . ," the *OED* gives us, in a quotation from Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (1586). And what is engraved on your brows should ethically correspond to what is in your heart. By the eleventh definition, we have "the sum of the moral and mental qualities which distinguish an individual or a race, viewed as a homogeneous whole; the individuality impressed by nature and habit on a man or nation; mental or moral constitution." That gets it all in, the better and the worse ways in which character has been conceived. By the time we reach definition seventeen, the concept has moved into literature: "a personality invested with distinctive attributes and qualities, by a novelist or dramatist; also, the personality or 'part' assumed by an actor on the stage"—with a reference here to Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). All our aesthetics and our ethics converge in "character," in what Aristotle referred to as *ethos*—as opposed to *mythos*, story or plot.

So character was too broad and slippery, whereas person was either too narrow, with too much of a grammatical presupposition, or else as replete and elusive as character. What about "identity"? It dawned on me that questions of character in the modern novel—say, from the time of *Tom Jones* on—very often posed themselves as problems of identity. Tom Jones is a foundling who will eventually be revealed as the natural son of Squire Allworthy's sister. That kind of identity is common in the eighteenth-century novel: a disposition to act nobly eventually is underwritten and "explained" by gentlemanly parentage. The nineteenth-century novel also is full of foundlings, orphans doomed to live with abusive stepparents. But it is less common for them to stand revealed at the end as nobly born. They are much more apt to have to forge their

own identities. Who you are—in the sense of what you can legitimately call yourself, and what others call you—seems to have become a problem with entry into the modern age in a way that it wasn't before. There are exemplary cases in Charles Dickens—Pip of *Great Expectations* may be the most striking, since he begins his story by naming himself Pip, and recording this act in the graveyard where headstones mark his dead parents—and in Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and in many others. Orphan status gives one the opportunity for self-definition, including the selection of an ideal parent—or someone taken to be such—that will be so important not only to Pip but to Honoré de Balzac's ambitious young men Eugène de Rastignac and Lucien Chardon de Rubempré, for instance.

Then it came to me that identity is in fact a large problem that stamps not only novels but all sorts of social issues in the nineteenth century, and up to our own time. There would seem to be both public and private issues of identity. In the public sphere, in talk about crime, health, prostitution, urbanism, the identities of those who make up the social body become a problem in a new way. This must in broad outline have to do with the growth of cities, along with the institutionalization and increasing bureaucratization of the modern nation-state. Most European capital cities experienced (in the course of the nineteenth century) a large influx of population from the countryside, with an increasingly anxious concern from the upper and middle classes that they were cohabiting with a crime- and disease-ridden underclass that needed to be kept under control. The rise of the protomodern police force in big cities brought questions of how to identify the criminal, especially the habitual criminal—the "recidivist"—who became the object of much attention in a society that would increasingly be persuaded that criminality was a chronic and even a hereditary condition. Finding out who you are—what your identifying marks and characteristics are—became the business of the state, first for the criminal population and then for the population as a whole. And much of the imaginative literature of the time, from popular melodrama to the novel of high or low ambitions, shows a nearly obsessive concern with disguise,

imposture, and the discovery of true identities. Though it should be added that these identities, once discovered, often turn out to be far less defined, far more fluid, problematic, and protean than one at first expected.

And that points us toward the private or inner sense of identity that is at the very center of modern thought and imagination from the dawn of the modern world on—starting with the Renaissance, one might say, though one could push the date back to remarkable innovations from the twelfth century but gaining a new momentum and a new accent in the Enlightenment. Jean-Jacques Rousseau strikes the truly new note in his *Confessions*, and all the literature we attach to the Romantic age and thereafter reworks Rousseau's preoccupation with saying who he is—rather, recounting who he is, since the identity of the self can only be captured in a narrative, in multiple genres and dimensions, from William Wordsworth's inner epic of "the growth of the poet's mind" in the *Prelude* to Marcel Proust's three thousand pages on the finding of his writerly vocation. In fact, art—especially narrative art—becomes largely devoted to the understanding of personal identity in a world where that identity seems ever more important while at the same time ever more threatened by the anonymity of the modern, by the sheer numbers of others among whom one lives. The nostalgia for an earlier time, of life rooted in a native soil, in a small place where each is known to each and all form a kind of organic whole, resonates in novelists such as Balzac and Dickens who are fully aware that they, like their protagonists, are condemned to—and animated by—struggle to survive and to impose themselves in the urban crowd. In an increasingly secular world, these protagonists have only themselves to rely on. They cannot find definition in traditional roles and models. As André Malraux would write in retrospect on the heroes of this time, their ultimate ambition seems to be the deification of the individual personality. But, of course, nothing could be more problematic than that.

In thinking about the enigmas of modern identity, I have often turned to the law, to cases and doctrines developed in the law and its application that seemed to speak to public issues of identification and

authentication. It is when the trajectory of an individual identity intersects with the requirements of the law that we often discover the bedrock problems of society. The case of the impostor, for instance, jangles all the legal nerves. More generally, rules of discovery and evidence crucially dramatize the search to know who persons are. Because of the Bill of Rights in particular, American law has produced a long tradition of commentary on crucial issues in the relation of the individual to the state. So it is that American law offers a rich field of study if you want to understand such key issues as privacy in relation to identity. As well as to the law, I found myself having recourse, over and over, to three writers who simply seemed inevitable points of reference on the questions posed: Rousseau, Proust, and Freud. Others writing on this vast and unmanageable subject of identity would no doubt pick other guides, but for me these three are indispensable. Rousseau seems to me the first to make his identity the subject of study in an identifiably modern way, and his obsessive display of his neuroses sounds peculiarly modern. Proust orchestrates the finding of personal identity from childhood forward (Rousseau and the Romantics had discovered childhood) in a particularly full and convincing way: for all its claustrophobic attention to the sensations and thoughts of a single person, Proust's novel encompasses a remarkable range of human experience. Freud, finally, offers one possible systematic thinking through of the questions of identity raised by Rousseau and his successors—among whom he very much places himself. I don't mean to give Freud's thought any particular privilege—for instance, as an "explanation" of Rousseau, Proust, and others—but to see it as a different form of reflection on the same constellation of issues. It's not psychoanalysis as a system—or as a systematic attempt to explain who we are—that interests me so much as Freud's more speculative encounters with identity, especially his own.

What I offer here is in fact far from systematic, and by no means an attempt at exhaustive treatment of identity, but instead a set of explorations into different aspects of the problem. I don't, for instance, treat the question of "identity politics"—using identity as an ethnic or

other group marker—which would have led my book in an entirely different direction. On the whole, the chapters tend to alternate between the public and the private dimensions of identity, moving from the external world to the internal, all the while recognizing how closely connected they are. Enigmas of identity remain, to my thinking, just that. The cases and the questions and the writers I look at don't bring us to any firm conclusions other than the fact that identity seems to us a crucial knot of our thinking—a concept as necessary as it is difficult to analyze. What I hope a reader may take away from the book is not systematic, either, but some enhanced understanding of the ways in which the drama of identity unfolds for us moderns—why and how we stand in relation to the problems of saying the self first so insistently proclaimed by Rousseau. Beginning with a very literal form of marks of identity—fingerprints—I move on to thinking about the obsession of modern societies with issues of identity, then veer into instances of individual self-obsession and what these have to say not only about persons but also the society or culture in which they must survive. The case of an impostor then leads to thinking about hiding, revealing, masking, transforming what at its most vertiginous becomes a protean sense of self. Then, autoeroticism as an obsessive theme in several modern writers may suggest a discovery that self-love—narcissism—is the primary and original form of the erotic, which makes the socialization of the individual as crucial as it is difficult and possibly doomed. The question of searches and seizures in the law, and the legal doctrines both protecting the individual and providing for his or her capture by social institutions, images a kind of standoff between the self and knowledge of it. And that, returning to the individual's inner problem of knowledge, in turn suggests the importance of the place of the knower in relation to the known, the narrating *I* to the narrated *I*, when they are one and "the same" person—whatever that oneness and sameness may mean, which in fact turns out to be problematic. Finally, the self facing its extinction may make particularly concerted, wild, mad reactions to the impending nothingness of its identity, in late work of a new, unbound creativity.

If there is one constant here, it seems to be the discovery that self-reflection, the work of memory on the self, the telling of a past self by "the same" self in the present, will always run up against an insoluble problem: Is there any valid distinction between the self known and the self as knower here? The need to postulate their continuity—I am the same as I ever was—and the simultaneous claim of progress, change, and thus the possibility of an enhanced self-understanding, come into conflict, since in the very process of self-knowledge the knowing self obtrudes its presence over, and sometimes against, the self to be known: you can't get to the latter except by way of the claims of the former, which may repress the past self, distort it, make it dependent on its present reinterpretation. In this regard, the way stories of the self are told takes on a new importance—including in law, which often seems to treat stories as if they were interchangeable and unproblematically related to "the facts" that they recount, whereas in truth the telling is crucial to the establishment of the facts—to what law wants to use as evidence in the establishment of guilt or innocence of persons, as markers of their identity.

The inner and the outer dimensions of the effort to know identity coalesce in what we might call the identity paradigm as characteristic of modern individuals and societies: that nexus of issues and inquests, beliefs and techniques of knowing that seems so central to our age and its aspirations and anxieties. More accurate might be the identificatory paradigm, laying emphasis less on what it is that needs to be known than on the process of its knowing, its capture in words and techniques, in statistics and categories. To see the identificatory paradigm at work, in a range of cultural and social contexts—from detective stories to psychoanalysis, from autobiographical self-inquest to policing of searches and seizures, from novelistic character to protean impostor—is to bring to attention something characteristic and important about our lives, singly and collectively.

We know that it matters crucially to be able to say who we are, why we are here, and where we are going. We also know that like the boy in the train Sartre describes as protagonist of his recurring night-

mares, when asked by the conductor for our ticket, we can't find it. That doesn't mean we won't keep looking for it, inventing it, producing various excuses for being in our seat on the train. We need to keep saying what our identity might be and where it might lie, and how we might find it authenticated by other identities. I can't imagine a world in which that would cease to be the case.