One occupational hazard of spending too much time in close quarters with Rousseau's autobiographies is the risk we run of catching his incapacity for spontaneous self-irony and, by way of compensation, carrying self-irony to ludicrous extremes. It is partly to have done with the demons of fluctuating tone and excruciating self-awareness that I offer the following accounting for the way this book has turned out.

Earlier versions were not nearly so concerned as this one with multiplying and elongating the moments of Rousseau's coming to write about himself. My exorbitant fascination with the question of how anyone could bring herself or himself to do such a thing nonetheless extends as far back as, Rousseau abetting, I can now remember. Painful or pleasurable, anything but affectively neutral, talking publicly about himself is one thing to which Rousseau's autobiographical texts never quite seem to come naturally. The defiant "moi. Moi seul" of the preamble to the Confessions only echoes less endearingly the antiphonal asides of the "Préface" to Narcisse ("Il faut malgré ma répugnance que je Parle de moi") and the Lettres à Malesherbes ("J'aime trop à parler de moi").

Striking a chord, Rousseau's labored beginnings remind me of growing up in a household where what seemed like thousands of mirrors were clearly off limits and designated as ornaments to be looked at, not into. Enshrining the master bathtub in damning testimony to the character flaws of former owners, a galerie de glaces furnished the occasion pro-
chaine of sins committed by my brother and me on the watches of unwit­
ting babysitters. Was there really a self or two in the house? At the time of
these early reconnaissance missions, we had no way of knowing that for
me, as a girl growing up in the fifties, the question would turn out to be
moot; there was, in any event, no self worth talking about. Cut to Mr.
Barclay's Friday afternoon ballroom dancing classes, where the fox-trot
and cha-cha provided incidental music for further lessons in living right,
which involved crossing our legs at the ankles, turning to the gentleman
on our left, and beseeching him to give us a full accounting of his in-
terests. By the time we had figured out the part about the ankles well
enough to “know” full well what was on our partners' minds, it was too
late to break the habit of our discreet, other-directed inquiries. Since
boys were in short supply, the tallest girls were sometimes recruited to
cross over, with the result that, on the dance floor at least, I still always
lead a little. But when it came time for small talk, we single-sex couples
were strictly on our own—allowed to chat, as I recall, but required by
the master script only to mark time with both pairs of ankles crossed.

To the published confidences of women like Hélène Cixous I am
grateful for validating and easing my discomfiture, and for nudging this
book about perennial comings to self-inscription over the final concep-
tual hurdle. Cixous's “Sorties” evoke the inextinguishable resonances in
any woman's writing of the momentous “déchirement qu'est pour la
femme la prise de la parole orale—'prise' qui est effectuée comme un
arrachement, un essor vertigineux et une lancée de soi, une plongée.”
This feeling is not entirely lost on the Rousseau of the Confessions, who
mourns the innumerable missed occasions for speaking up and out from
the depths of his being that someone less constitutionally slow-witted
than Jean-Jacques would have known how to seize. Except that he of
supreme faith in staircase wit (as, among other things, an indelible trait of
his own character) thinks finally to take his revenge on real life. To his
Confessions falls the task of driving a differential wedge between past and
present, and of positing a former lifetime of failure to express his self in
conversational context. Rousseau's act to end all acts of self-inscription
aspires to remember and remedy without commemorating the former
failure.

My heart goes out more spontaneously to the earlier Rousseaus of
less grandiose and single-minded ambitions for writing off the recurring
wrench of coming to writing as a one-time investment in permanent self-
hood. For the women of my generation, that wrench has become less uniformly traumatic since I first stared in disbelief at the interminable spaces allotted on my college applications for "personal" essays. But the fear and exhilaration of crossing the line have never entirely gone away, whether the transgression consists in sneaking enough of a peek at the mirror to recall that I am for all practical purposes still there or, more usually, in improvising an alternative to Mr. Barclay's scenario where we girls would assume responsibility for formulating our own questions.

But taking responsibility has little to do with the pathetic isolationism of Rousseau's sometimes wanting to befriend the truth to the point where there would be no further need for the help and support of real friends. I thank my teachers at Ohio State and my colleagues at Duke and Boston Universities for nurturing and challenging this project at every stage along the way. To Ron Rosbottom goes special gratitude for staying cheerfully and effectively on the case long beyond the endpoint of official obligations. At a critical moment, a Junior Fellowship from the Humanities Foundation at Boston University made time for sustained reading and thinking. I am lucky beyond measure to have parents who strongly encouraged those two activities when I was inclined to get by with less, and who understood when I eventually leapt to the opposite extreme of taking their encouragement over-seriously. I wish finally to acknowledge that portions of chapter 3 previously appeared as an article entitled "Text and Context of Rousseau's Relations with Diderot" in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*.

To Hannah and Nathaniel, I am indebted for their keeping things always slightly out of control and in perspective. For them and for the room to grow in fits and starts, I dedicate this book to Richard.