

CHAPTER I

Autobiography in Tibet

SURELY, leading autobiography theorist Georges Gusdorf was wrong when, reflecting a view widespread among literary critics, cultural historians, and philosophers, he wrote in an influential article: "Autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man. . . . The concern, which seems so natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it, is not at all universal. It asserts itself only in recent centuries and only on a small part of the map of the world."¹ At the very least, Gusdorf will have to acknowledge that Tibetans also had the concern of which he speaks.

For Tibetans have been recollecting their lives in order to narrate them since close to the birth of Tibetan writing, and not only of the arcane kind we have just seen in the secret autobiographies of Jigme Lingpa. Tibetan literature is full of conventional accounts of experiences and careers. Early examples of the Tibetan self-written life story are to be had from Zhang Rinpoche (1123–93), the Tsalpa Kagyu hierarch;² the Second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi (1204–83);³ Shangpa Kagyu patriarchs Rigongpa and Sangye Tonpa (twelfth–thirteenth centuries);⁴ and Treasure discoverer Guru Chowang (1212–70).⁵ The genre virtually explodes by the seventeenth century, with the massive autobiographical output of the "Great Fifth" Dalai Lama. Among the Great Fifth's many autobiographical writings, his annalistic three-volume outer autobiography became a prototype for the most common kind of Tibetan autobiography. Structured like a diary, it records the innumerable services he presided over, consecrations he performed, sermons he gave, audiences he granted, envoys he received.⁶ We find the same level of detail in the many other lengthy outer autobiographies written from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries; Jigme Lingpa's own 455-page outer autobiography is a case in point.

Over 150 book-length Tibetan autobiographies are currently extant, many of which are several hundred pages long.⁷ This number does not include, moreover, the autobiographies written by Tibetans for a Western audience since the Chinese takeover of Tibet nor the autobiographical collections of meditative songs called "gur" (*mgur*), and it counts only as one the entire autobiographical corpus of authors who, like Jigme Lingpa, wrote several different autobiographical works. Many manuscripts in private collections remain to be catalogued as well. I would not be surprised if a systematic survey of extant traditional book-length autobiographies in Tibet and exile communities were to yield twice the number I have just ventured.

The Tibetan case should also disabuse Gusdorf and others of the presumption that when autobiography is produced by non-Western authors, it is to be attributed to those persons' subjection to Western influences.⁸ This presumption is related to the realization in anthropology that the autobiographical accounts we have of persons from nonliterate cultures have been elicited, framed, and edited by ethnographers; that is, we would not have what we think of as those persons' autobiographies were it not for ethnographers.⁹ To recognize that ethnographers not only encourage the production of autobiographical accounts but also tend to select for analysis those accounts that exemplify what they want to find—namely, that their objects of study have a very different sense of self (if they have one at all) than “we” do—is certainly a valuable insight. But my point here is simply that such caveats do not pertain to Tibetan autobiographies. These works are prior to and uninformed by modernity and/or the West; in fact, it is difficult to find any extra-Tibetan influence to account for their genesis at all. Moreover, unlike the nonliterate cultures often studied by anthropologists, Tibetan religious culture has been a very literate one since the eleventh century. Tibetans—lay and monastic, wealthy and poor, male and female (though many more males than females)¹⁰—write, edit, and publish their autobiographies by themselves, for themselves, in their own way.

It is not in any event anthropological data on nonliterate cultures that would demonstrate the uniqueness of Western autobiographical writing. Rather, the proper crucible in which to assess such imputed uniqueness would be a comparison with those civilizations that have a commensurable history of writing. But autobiography theorists have chosen largely to ignore Asian literature. Until recently, only one critic, as far as I know, Avrom Fleishman, had even thought to question whether the reigning characterizations of autobiography (and the novel) as exclusively Western might be contradicted by empirical evidence.¹¹

Of late, theorists have become interested in how the autobiographies of women may differ from those of men and how persons producing autobiography under Western influences may in turn be shaping the genre in new ways due to non-Western cultural traditions and/or different senses of self.¹² In this chapter I will lay the ground for a discussion of two examples of autobiographical writing that had no Western influence at all, and that will stretch our notions of autobiography and self-conception altogether. This requires a brief introduction to Tibetan autobiographical writing in general, its historical conditions, and certain pertinent theoretical issues.

Tibetan Life-Writing

I have already alluded in the introduction to the close connection between Tibetan autobiography and biography. Although there is a critical distinction, the Tibetan life story written by oneself and by another have many formal features in common. Adding the very large number of Tibetan biographies—striking evidence of the popularity of the charismatic individual in Tibetan soci-

ety—to the already impressive count of autobiographies, reveals a considerable literary precedent indeed for Jigme Lingpa's rendering of his secret life.¹³

As in other languages, the standard Tibetan term for the “life of an individual written by himself” (as Larousse defined autobiography in 1866) is distinguished from the term for biography only by the addition of a reflexive prefix.¹⁴ Autobiography is “rangnam” (*rang-rnam*, or *rang-gi rnam-thar*): the “namtar,” or “full liberation [story],” of oneself. But apart from their common genre label, autobiography and biography also overlap on account of Tibetan writing practices. What is labeled biography not infrequently turns out to have been dictated by the subject to a scribe.¹⁵ Even biographies composed centuries later reproduce passages, from either oral or written sources, that originate with the subject.¹⁶ On the other hand, works that are considered autobiography are often completed and sometimes edited by the subject's disciple.¹⁷

Virtually all of these kinds of Tibetan life stories, that is, stories of “full liberation,” share the presumption—or at least the suggestion—that the protagonist reached full liberation, and that the life story being told is an example for others.¹⁸ Although the term does not always have such a lofty connotation—“namtar” can be used prosaically to describe any account of the events in a life, even a sinful or ignorant life—usually the label indicates the Buddhist character of the narrative.¹⁹ This feature in turn should be understood in terms of one of the polemical agendas of life-story writing in Tibet, namely, to assert the religious achievements of a master and his or her lineage in contrast to those of rival schools. Both autobiography and biography reflect the competitive climate of Tibetan sectarian politics, upon which I will comment later.

The self-written liberation story also shares with the liberation story written by others the perception that there are multiple levels of a life. Not limited to the “outer” and “secret” perspectives, both biography and autobiography can also recount the “inner” life, focusing upon teachings received and meditative states.²⁰ I would note, however, that in practice it is often difficult to discern a real difference between these varying versions of a life; one suspects that the proliferation of labels naming increasingly esoteric levels of discourse (there is also a “doubly secret” life story, as well as a biography or autobiography of “thusness”) is often more a matter of rhetoric than genuinely descriptive of content.²¹

In addition to its polemical function, the life-writing impulse in Tibet reflects a long tradition of record keeping. Autobiography in particular is closely related to the personal diary.²² Autobiographies are in fact often based on the author's diaries—as in the case of Jigme Lingpa, who, according to Do Drubchen Rinpoche, probably kept rough diaries during his retreat and later consulted them when he wrote his secret autobiographies. But the autobiography itself can also substitute for such a record. Do Drubchen felt that Jigme Lingpa's primary impulse in writing *Dancing Moon* was to have a record of the high points of his meditative retreat, some of which are indeed dated like diary entries. This record-keeping impulse also shows the affinity of autobiography with the list of

lineages, teachers, and teachings received (*thob-yig* or *gsan-yig*). This list shares with inner and secret autobiography a focus on transmission, although it lacks autobiography's discursive and reflective character. The Fifth Dalai Lama once commented that the list of teachings almost suffices as an autobiography, at least regarding one's life of learning.²³

The life-story tradition is equally indebted to another impulse in Tibetan writing, the impulse to express experiences and realizations, as Jigme Lingpa's own lyrical label of his secret autobiographies suggests. Although poetic songs, or "gur," which express personal religious insights are usually published in separate works, they are also often weaved into autobiography and biography.²⁴ Jigme Lingpa reproduces many of his own songs at the appropriate points of his outer autobiography, and a few passages of his secret autobiographies resemble gur as well, although these should be distinguished from the narrative verse that comprises the bulk of *Dancing Moon*. The gur tend not to be narrative, offering instead atemporal reflections on themes in Buddhist doctrine, even if they refer to particular events in the author's life. But their presence in Tibetan autobiography serves to link that kind of writing with Indian Buddhist poetical genres such as the *gāthā*, which occasionally can be autobiographical.²⁵ The *doha* and *caryāgiti*, the coded or metaphorical songs about esoteric yogic experience from late Indian tantric Buddhism, are also close to the gur.²⁶ *Dancing Moon* contains at least one passage, in 28, that is especially reminiscent of the *caryāgiti*.

Apart from songs, experiences are expressed in Tibetan literature in the form of dream and vision accounts. Especially germane to secret autobiography, reports of dreams and visions are particularly prominent in the life stories of the Treasure discoverers, who have been among the most prolific autobiographers in Tibet. At least by the thirteenth century there can be written a series of autobiographical texts as rich as that of the Treasure discoverer Guru Chowang, filled with lengthy meditations on his dreams and his personal psychology.²⁷ Somewhat later we have massive corpora of life-story writing like that of seventeenth-century discoverer Terdag Lingpa, replete with various outer, inner, and secret accounts of his experiences written both by himself and by his brother.²⁸ The Fifth Dalai Lama, himself the revealer of Treasures and a series of visions pertaining to national security, produced outstanding expressions of visionary experiences. Not only did his outer autobiography constitute a watershed in Tibetan literature; his famous secret autobiography, *The Sealed One* (*Gyachen*), became a principal prototype for subsequent secret autobiographies; we know that Jigme Lingpa read it, felt a strong connection with it, and even taught it to his own disciples.²⁹ The Great Fifth also wrote numerous other secret autobiographical accounts, often with the same studied diffidence and elaborate epiphanies that we find in Jigme Lingpa's secret-life writing.³⁰

But the secret autobiography is not the exclusive preserve of the Treasure discoverers. Tibetans widely consider their dreams and other experiences to be personally significant, even if they do not result in a Treasure revelation. Visions

and dreams are a major focus of religious practice, and techniques to facilitate and master them are described at length in Tibetan literature. This interest, coupled with the fact that esteem and support reward the virtuoso who can report brilliant visions and prescient dreams, accounts for the prominence of such experiences in the autobiographies of Tibetan religious figures, at least as early as the writings of the Shangpa patriarchs mentioned above. And although the account of a vision or dream should originate with its subject, unlike the publically observable act that can as easily be known by another, Tibetan biographies also describe the visionary experiences of their protagonists, illustrating again the fuzzy border between autobiography and biography.

There is, however, one critical difference between the self-written life story and that recounted by another. Since it converges with certain central issues in Jigme Lingpa's secret autobiographies, it bears some discussion here. The distinction concerns the stance of the author with respect to the subject matter. The self-written life account, due to powerful constraints in Tibetan linguistic convention on how one should talk about oneself, typically exhibits a studied diffidence, whereas the life written by someone else typically exhibits an equally studied reverence. Notwithstanding such meticulous biographers as Karma Chagme—whose vow not to exaggerate the virtues of his subject Migyur Dorje nor to assert what he does not know to be a fact is the exception that proves the rule³¹—Tibetan biographers often present the life of their master in glorified, idealized terms. It is this quality that led scholars such as Tucci to decry Tibetan biography, which "human events have nothing to do with" and which makes the historian "resign himself to . . . go through hundreds of pages to find . . . an important piece of information"—although Tucci soon admits that, "the *nam t'ar* show an endless variety, according to their author and to the public for which they were written; some are plain and simple, written in the spoken language of the people."³² Nonetheless, the hagiographical quality of some Tibetan biography that irritated him serves to point up its important difference from Tibetan autobiography, in which convention dictates that autobiographers portray themselves as ambivalent about the value of writing about their deluded life and sham of a religious career.³³ The difference in the rhetoric is striking.

To write a diffident autobiography is a complex project. A variety of strategies were developed to allow autobiographers to recount their own achievements. Even though Tibetan autobiographers usually end up portraying themselves positively, even self-aggrandizingly, they do so always in light of a tension that is missing in biography. The tension results from a pair of conflicting social norms: one requiring that persons refer to themselves with humility and the other that religious teachers present themselves as venerable exemplars. Ultimately, we should note, the show of diffidence will also satisfy the latter expectation, since it is itself a sign of the author's admirable incorporation of Buddhist sensibilities and Tibetan mores, hence worthiness as a role model. Still, the rhetorical dissonance remains.

Moreover, the tension produces the need to reflect on the autobiographical project itself; typically autobiographers will introduce their work with worries about whether their life story deserves telling at all. In considering such questions, they look to models—other autobiographical and biographical texts—although sometimes the models are rejected.³⁴ Many Tibetan autobiographers write of striving to tell their life stories honestly, without either undue self-praise or undue self-critique.³⁵ And it is just on this point, when Jigme Lingpa shows himself probing his experience for its true value, that *Dancing Moon* and *Dakki's Secret-Talk* depart from biographical convention and betray their primary indebtedness to the Tibetan autobiographical tradition as such.

Rangnam as Autobiography

Even if literary critics have failed to acknowledge an important autobiographical tradition in Tibet, it is hardly the case that Western literary theory would have nothing valid to say about Tibetan autobiography if such a question were considered. And again, literary theory's complicity in some rather self-serving agendas regarding Western identity does not necessarily infect everything that has been said by such theorists about autobiographical writing. A review even of the formal criteria of autobiography—offered by those few intrepid critics who have been willing to hazard a definition of the genre—shows aspects of Western literary theory to be in fact quite relevant to Tibetan autobiography, highlighting instructive issues that we might not have thought to consider had we only described rangnam in emic terms. Not parenthetically, such a consideration brings home the validity of translating “rangnam” as “autobiography” in the first place, while also making clear how the meaning of that term is stretched even by the conventional Tibetan outer autobiography, let alone by a strange subgenre like secret autobiography.

A set of basic criteria formulated by Elizabeth Bruss already brings to the fore certain pertinent questions for the Tibetan rangnam. Bruss, who like other theorists defines autobiography from the perspective of the reader, proposed that a key feature of what readers consider to be autobiography is that the experiences and events reported therein are presented as true, and are believed to be true by the author.³⁶ Tibetan autobiographers also comply with such an expectation; their struggle with the twin propensities for self-aggrandizement and self-deprecation notwithstanding, they present their stories as truth—unlike, for example, the fictional autobiography that became popular in seventeenth-century China. Bruss's requirement does not obviate an argument advanced by recent critics, namely, that the self constructed in autobiography is in an important sense a fiction—a point easily granted by Tibetan Buddhists.³⁷ We will see in chapter 5 that the issue of what is true and what is fictional in autobiography becomes a very complex puzzle indeed for Jigme Lingpa. But there is no question that he presents the episodes of his visionary autobiography as real occurrences. While we cannot know if Jigme Lingpa actually “had” the visions that

he says he did—and certainly there are some Tibetan autobiographers who deliberately fabricate—the point is that such falsification would violate the expectations of the Tibetan readership, for autobiographical truth in Bruss's sense is assumed as a convention of the genre.³⁸

A related criterion, with complex ramifications for Tibetan autobiography, is Philippe Lejeune's “autobiographical pact.” This names another expectation on the part of readers of autobiography: the author should be identical to its principal character and to its narrator.³⁹ When one reads an autobiography, one assumes that it was written by and in the voice of the person whose life it recounts. Again, this applies to the readership of the Tibetan rangnam too. The fact that autobiographies are often edited by disciples is of little import, since readers expect such editing; in any event, editors are credited clearly in the text's colophon. Tibetan life stories that are actually composed by someone else, even if written in the first person, are not called rangnam.⁴⁰

But while much Tibetan autobiography unambiguously fulfills Lejeune's autobiographical pact, certain arcane dimensions of secret autobiography show the pact's ultimate insufficiency with respect to Tibetan concepts of the person. For one thing, there is the matter of personal identity stretching beyond (i.e., before) birth to include previous lives, a critical component of Jigme Lingpa's secret self-presentation. The practice in which some Tibetan autobiographers engage of recollecting previous lifetimes, sometimes in very lengthy narratives, will render considerably more complex Lejeune's requirement that author and protagonist are identical.⁴¹ Lejeune puts much stock in the name of the author—the “signature,” usually presented on the title page—since this is the representation of the author's identity to the reader. But what happens to the equation of name and author when a significant portion of the autobiography concerns past incarnations, who had different names than the current author? Less at issue is the fact that most Tibetans, Jigme Lingpa included, have several different personal names. This in itself will not violate the pact; as Lejeune maintains with respect to pseudonyms, there is no problem as long as the reader is able to identify the real person behind the author's signature.⁴² The more difficult question would be posed from the Buddhist perspective: where do we find this “real person” who makes possible Lejeune's claim that one is “always capable of enunciating what is irreducible in naming (one)self?” For Jigme Lingpa, it is not the case, as Lejeune would have it, that the “pseudonym is simply a differentiation . . . which changes nothing in the identity.” I will discuss how name affects personal identity in chapter 3.

Another issue to which Lejeune's autobiographical pact draws our attention, and which becomes particularly slippery for Jigme Lingpa's secret autobiographies, concerns the narrator. Again, most Tibetan autobiographies are unambiguously narrated by their author/protagonist. Jigme Lingpa's secret autobiographies also seem to be narrated by Jigme Lingpa, at least on first reading. Yet the title *Dakki's Secret-Talk* seems to suggest that this work is told instead by the female figure of the *dakini*. This reminds us of Jacques Derrida's enigmatic

contention that all autobiography ultimately is “from” the woman, and as will become clear in the final chapter, this is not an inappropriate characterization of the role of the *ḍākinī* in Jigme Lingpa’s secret life. There is also a sense in which the text of Jigme Lingpa’s life has been predetermined by Padmasambhava, so he too is perhaps the true narrator of Jigme Lingpa’s life; he is explicitly so in the prophecies. We shall return to this problem too in the following chapters. Neither of these complexities ultimately compromises the status of Jigme Lingpa’s secret life story as autobiography, for Jigme Lingpa’s religious tradition makes the figures of the *ḍākinī* and Padmasambhava special facets of the virtuoso’s selfhood, and therefore the narrator still equals author, albeit in complex ways. But the significance of narrator to which Lejeune has pointed does reveal how far personal identity can be stretched when “I” tell the story of what “I” have done. Indeed, many theorists—including Lejeune himself in more recent writings—have also realized that the entire project of establishing identity between author, protagonist, and narrator is rather problematic.⁴³

Issues of temporality, which have been much discussed with respect to autobiography, reveal further complexities about the status of the subject of Tibetan autobiography. A superficial version of this line of thought is Lejeune’s requirement that autobiography be written in narrative prose rather than in verse (although he later reversed his position, and many other critics have recognized the poetical autobiography).⁴⁴ The more significant expectation explored by Lejeune and others is that autobiography should present primarily a retrospective narrative of a life, rather than, say, an atemporal, psychological portrait of the self.

As Lejeune put it, an autobiography is a “discourse, one in which the question ‘who am I?’ is answered by a narrative that tells ‘how I became who I am.’”⁴⁵ Karl Weintraub also distinguishes the self-portrait from autobiography, insisting on the essentially narrative character of autobiography and the concomitant need for the autobiographer to regard his or her life as a process.⁴⁶ This stipulation carries some metaphysical baggage, and it has been recently disputed by some critics.⁴⁷ But before we try to unpack it, let us first note that, again, the criterion accurately characterizes Tibetan autobiography, which is virtually always presented as a narrative, often in prose, but also, as in *Dancing Moon*, in verse. Further, Tibetan autobiography is virtually always told in the chronological sequence of the life itself, with considerable attention to dating. This is the case in Jigme Lingpa’s secret autobiographies, even if his visions can flash back to the distant past. Strict chronology per se is not in any case what contemporary theorists are getting at.⁴⁸ Rather, critics such as Paul John Eakin are based in a larger movement in philosophy that is concerned with the essentially narrative nature of experience itself.⁴⁹

Narrativity comes to be related to autobiography by virtue of a fundamental assumption, found in many strains of Western thought, that an interest in process, or evolution over time, reflects a developed sense of self. The idea is that the person writing autobiography sees his or her life as having direction,

producing something, and in particular producing some sort of unity of self-conception.⁵⁰ Related to this teleology of autobiography is the idea that it is typically written from a retrospective point of view.⁵¹ Authors remember their lives from a vantage point that allows the overall significance of the life to emerge. This is the principal ground on which certain theorists have distinguished autobiography from episodic oral autobiographical narratives, such as those of Native Americans.⁵² The same criterion has been used to distinguish from autobiography the diary or journal, which chronicles events as they happen rather than in terms of their long-range significance.⁵³ Some problems with such a distinction begin to emerge if we consider, for example, certain Japanese diaries, which reflect deeply about the course and meaning of the life overall, even if this is done in desultory fashion rather than developed into a single coherent view. Postmodern critics have argued that the diary may even be the most appropriate kind of autobiography after all, since it depicts a more accurate, unmediated self than does the retrospective account that imposes an artificial cohesion on the self.⁵⁴

In any event, the association of autobiography with a comprehensive view of the self will not hold for all Tibetan outer autobiographies, some of which have little to distinguish them from a diary. Even though most were written over a single period, the outer autobiography often retains a very episodic quality. It tends to recount one experience or deed after another, with little explicit linkage or sense of cohesive development other than the reiterated “I have done this and this,” an assertion meant to impress and gain respect, not entirely unlike the “Who’s Who” assertions of an Egyptian tomb inscription, the *res gestae* of classical antiquity, or the Native American coup tale.⁵⁵ But other Tibetan outer autobiographies mix this sort of running chronology of accomplishments with comprehensive personal reflection. Jigme Lingpa’s own outer autobiography offers a good example. He often pauses to consider himself in a general way, marking personal and “psychological” turning points as well as spiritual ones, in contrast, for example, to the Native American autobiographical accounts studied by David Brumble, which appear to lack such turning points.⁵⁶ The issues of retrospection and overall unity of direction serve in particular to bring the sense of self in Jigme Lingpa’s secret autobiographies into high relief. Although *Dancing Moon* does seem to heap vision upon vision, the unmistakable underlying thread is the question of who Jigme Lingpa is, what his past was, and what he has to do to become who he should be—all posed in a much more pointed way than is ever achieved in his outer autobiography.

Time, Self, and Representations of Individuality

The literary theoretical expectation that autobiography should be concerned with a particular course of events is intimately connected with the valuation of historical consciousness in Western thought. Gusdorf has thematized the point well: if one holds a theory of eternal recurrence, whereby “there is nothing new

under the sun," one tends to have a corresponding lack of concern for the two fundamental features of autobiography, namely, an interest in particular events in time and a sense of personal uniqueness. In other words, if one believes that all that is important is what is permanent and universal—and hence not subject to historical specificity—one would not write autobiography. If there is to be an eternally repeating sequence of people just like me, why bother to write about myself in particular? The sense of personal uniqueness, on the other hand, the feeling that one's idiosyncratic experiences and self are important enough to write about, represents an entrance into "the perilous domain of history," where "the present differs from the past and will not be repeated in the future." Hence the concern to fix an image of that which is unique and subject to change.⁵⁷

Are such notions about time and uniqueness operative in Tibetan autobiography? Certainly in one Tibetan tradition, that of the Treasure discoverers, historical difference is of fundamental import, and as I discuss in chapter 3, it has direct impact upon the self-conception of the discoverers. Gusdorf's remarks in fact help to explain why so many Treasure discoverers wrote autobiography. We might even be tempted to go further and predict that Gusdorf's linkage of autobiography with an interest in historical change would appropriately characterize the impulse behind any Buddhist autobiography. For contrary to a common misconception, Buddhism does not have a doctrine of eternal recurrence regarding individual persons; rather, the salient doctrines about the individual are impermanence, inexorable change, and inevitable death. Indeed, in those cases when Buddhists do write autobiographically, contingency and impending death are typically thematized; witness, for example, their brilliant exploration in the poetic autobiographical journals of the Japanese haiku master Bashō.⁵⁸ Concern with death and life span is equally a leitmotif of Jigme Lingpa's secret autobiographies.

Yet we cannot conflate the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence with Western notions of history. Never does a doctrine about time or historical difference achieve in Buddhism anything like the significance of historical time in Christian theology or Western philosophy.⁵⁹ Even more to the point, the Western emphasis upon history is concomitant with a metaphysics of individuality—the paradigmatic autobiographical representation of which is often identified as the *Confessions* of Rousseau—while the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence is just what undermines a metaphysics of the individual, who is rendered empty of essence precisely because of the inevitability of death. And again, nowhere can we find an ideology about the status of the person in Buddhism that is analogous in content and salience with that of modern Western "individualism."⁶⁰

Nonetheless, Tibetan autobiography must exhibit some kind of individualistic self-portrayal, and Gusdorf's thesis must at least be partially relevant to the Tibetan case. A "life story" about oneself that lacked anything whatsoever to distinguish it from the life story of everyone else—a veritable Everybody's Au-

tobiography, as in Gertrude Stein's mischievously oxymoronic title—would not be called rangnam for the same reasons that it would not be called autobiography. If one is writing something about oneself that is equally true of everyone, then one isn't writing the life story of an individual by any culture's criteria.

The interesting question about the Tibetan self-written life story, then, is not whether individualistic features are present but what weight they are given. One way to study the "personality conception" in autobiography has been suggested by Karl Weintraub: does the author's self-portrayal emphasize an adherence to personality norms, or is it invested in a deviation from norms? Arguing a point similar to Gusdorf's, albeit conceived synchronically, Weintraub maintains that it is only when one ceases to see oneself as obligated to conform to an ideal personality type, and in fact feels falsified and hemmed in by such a model, that one will express what is unique to oneself. The more the deviation from the normative "script for life," the more the story about oneself achieves the fullest potential of autobiographical writing.⁶¹

We will not easily be able to measure the individualistic character of Tibetan self-figuration by this standard, however, for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the simple fact that few Tibetan autobiographies have been studied in literary-theoretical light, let alone scrutinized for personality conception. But more important, even when Tibetan autobiographical literature has been fully catalogued and studied, generalizations will prove elusive, for not only are there many kinds of autobiographical writing in Tibet, but within each subgenre we find considerable variety, depending on the autobiographer's social class, level of education, sectarian background, attitudes toward academic study, attitudes toward meditative practice, artistry as a writer, and so on. Or perhaps we should just say that personalities vary widely. In an earlier study, I considered just one of the many questions that could be asked about autobiographical self-image: is the autobiographer self-effacing, proud, or objective about achievements? Surveying a range of Tibetan autobiographies, I found that few generalizations were valid. Nor was I able to identify a development over time; I discovered both early and late instances of expressly self-aggrandizing accounts, self-critical ones, and, in between, straightforward self-accounts.⁶²

There is similar variation in other dimensions of autobiographical personality conception. Many Tibetan autobiographers do portray themselves according to a "script for life," as Weintraub calls it, failing to emphasize what made them unique, even while individual factors inevitably figure into their narratives.⁶³ In the Tibetan Buddhist context the normative life story repeats idealized patterns modeled on the hagiographies of the Buddha and other saints in Indian and Tibetan lore. In the outer autobiography this typically begins with an early renunciation of worldly life (often preceded by a mischievous childhood), followed by the protagonist's meeting with teachers, taking vows, entering a retreat, acquiring students, teaching, and, finally, assuming institutional positions. This is the basic outline of Jigme Lingpa's own outer autobiography, in fact.

Yet in between the lines of this schema there is room for personal variation, and some Tibetan autobiographers take advantage of it. Charles Taylor has drawn attention to how an emphasis upon ordinary, everyday details in autobiography can indicate an individualistic self-conception, whereas life stories that fixate on the ideal norm would relate details only if they have didactic value.⁶⁴ Personal detail that is related for its inherent interest dawns in the West with the secular humanist, who is "concerned exclusively with the autonomous secular self . . . and justifies his self-study on its intrinsic merits, without pretense at religious or even moral instruction."⁶⁵ Tibetan autobiography, often hundreds of pages long, is of course filled with detail, the didactic value of which refers directly to Tibetan religious and cultural schemata.⁶⁶ (I took such-and-such initiation, I circumambulated this stūpa, I was visited by this hierarchy; see what merit I have gained; see what benefit comes of religious practice!) But with some Tibetan autobiographers this didactic import becomes increasingly implicit, if not buried, and there is evidence of interest in the ordinary vicissitudes of the self, just for their own sake, whether they have soteriological import or not.⁶⁷ Details on deviations from the ideal often emerge in discussions of childhood, as when Zhang Rinpoche (twelfth century) writes of torturing fish and bugs in his youth.⁶⁸ But adult deviations are also revealed, and if sometimes these appear to convey a didactic message, not unlike the way Augustine's account of how evil he was proves the greatness of God in saving him, Tibetan personal detail can also reflect a desire simply to tell "a clear and honest story of my ways," as Rigzin Kunzang Dorje (1738–1805) put it.⁶⁹ When the aristocratic monastic hierarch Sampo Tenzin Dondrub (1925–87) writes at length of the tricks he tried to play on his governesses as a child;⁷⁰ or the monk Shankawa Gyurme Sonam Tobgyal (1896–1967) tells his readers frankly and in detail about how he felt when he lost his vows of celibacy in a love affair;⁷¹ or the Seventieth Ganden Tripa, Yongzin Paṇḍita Ngawang Chopel (d. 1951?) tells his readers that when he was a young monk he was fond of vulgar jokes and that even when he became the grand abbot of Ganden he still couldn't get rid of the predilection,⁷² we can speculate that Tibetan autobiographical self-exploration has begun to develop on its own steam, as it were. Once it virtually comes to be expected of eminent Buddhists that they will write hundreds of pages about their lives, as it increasingly did in Tibet after the seventeenth century, it would seem to be inevitable that at least some would use this as an opportunity to enjoy the memory of the eccentricities of their own personal past.

In the secret autobiography of a Treasure discoverer such as Jigme Lingpa it is particularly difficult to disentangle hagiographical trope from ordinary detail. What is reported in secret autobiography, however idiosyncratically and minutely, is hardly ordinary, for the discourse is about esoteric meditative experiences, not mundane life, much less mundane experience. In large part the details of the secret life are scrutinized in autobiography so as to find therein signs of divine providence (as, for example, in the story of Robinson Crusoe) rather

than to valorize the details as such.⁷³ And yet one also detects in secret autobiography a delight in the vicissitudes of experience for its own sake and, in Jigme Lingpa's case, a virtual obsession with the idiosyncracies of his personal condition. Much the same focus upon individual specificity is already apparent in the visionary autobiographies of the thirteenth-century Treasure discoverer Guru Chowang, so that even a dream of the mythic figure of Padmasambhava is laced with the dreamer's concern with the eccentricities of his own physical body or the exigencies of his memory.⁷⁴

A systematic cross-cultural comparison of the role of personality models in autobiographical writing might show Jigme Lingpa to be analogous to a medieval Christian mystic, who is also immersed in interior religious experience and yet anxious to demonstrate the compatibility of his or her vision with normative tradition. But there are incommensurabilities in such a comparison. Scholars have so far failed to recognize a linear development in Tibetan autobiographical self-conception such as is widely seen to have accompanied the Western movement into modernity, and which locates the self of the mystic at a middle point on Western civilization's ineluctable path toward individualism.⁷⁵ With the exception of a few who question such periodization,⁷⁶ theorists show Western autobiographical self-presentation to have progressed in increments, from the accounts of great deeds (*res gestae*), important events witnessed (memoir), and philosophers' lives of classical antiquity, into the medieval confession literature and subsequent spiritual and developmental autobiographies, and culminating in the autobiographies of modern individualists like Rousseau. The consensus is that the considerable body of "autobiographical writings" produced prior to the modern period—even the *Confessions* of Augustine, which is sometimes characterized as the first autobiography—lacks the fully developed sense of individual selfhood that is only found at the end of the path, in "autobiography proper."⁷⁷

If the model of a trajectory over time toward an ideal cannot be superimposed upon Tibetan literature, other elements of the Tibetan Buddhist cultural matrix likewise make a Jigme Lingpa's degree of autobiographical individuality incommensurate with, say, that of a Teresa of Avila. The very norms in which Jigme Lingpa is embedded endow him with a distinctively Buddhist skepticism about norms, a predisposition that can be traced to a long tradition of questioning any absolute category. While we can see that Jigme Lingpa's concern to demonstrate his unconventionality, his uniqueness, and even his own ironic distance from his autobiographical project is itself determined by certain "scripts for life," this cannot completely invalidate the individualistic posture that he strikes, nor the uniquely Tibetan character of that posture. The role of the Buddhist meditative retreat, with its accompanying rhetoric of separation from society and authority, also influences the personality conception of a virtuoso such as Jigme Lingpa. Just as renunciation in traditional India became, in Louis Dumont's characterization, "the religion of individual choice," meditative practices and

the associated yogic lifestyle in Buddhism created certain distinctive individualistic personality norms, as has recently been recognized in the Ch'an case by Bernard Faure.⁷⁸

The reading of literary self-figuration for its covert metaphysics is in any event a complex undertaking and needs to be carried out carefully and with respect to a specific context. While it is useful and provocative to sketch out the broad comparative issues, the details of such an investigation will best be conceived in strictly local terms, as much as that is possible. It is for this reason that I have focused this book on one very particular case, the secret autobiographies of Jigme Lingpa: what in his background made for an individualistic self-conception, what militated against it, and how the resulting tensions are played out in his own particular autobiographical writings.

While we must save further generalizations about Tibetan autobiographical self-conception until many other individual works have been studied closely, we are at least in a position to reject as inapplicable to Tibetan literature what the founder of autobiographical studies, Georges Misch, observed about classical literature. Misch wrote, "Insofar as the logos was assumed to be universal, the endpoint of the quest is not likely to differ from one Philosopher's Life to another. The shamans sought and exercised animistic power, just as the philosophers pursued the logos. These were not individualists."⁷⁹ But the facts indicate that in the Tibetan case, even if Buddhists believe that all selves, as empty illusions, are the same, it does not follow that in the conventional sense, one person's life or character or sense of him or herself will be the same as everyone else's. Even more to the point, the primary reason why a Buddhist society such as Tibet became invested in distinguishing the virtues of individual masters autobiographically is not to be found in religious metaphysics anyway. Rather, it must be attributed to other factors, to which we should now briefly turn.

The Historical Conditions for Autobiography— or Lack Thereof

Whatever certain critics' myopia regarding literature outside the West, they are correct in assuming, with Gusdorf, that "the genre of autobiography seems limited in time and in space: it has not always existed nor does it exist everywhere."⁸⁰ We need only look at India and China, Tibet's two powerful neighbors, to see a very different history of autobiography.

Classical India provides us with the paradigmatic case of a highly literate and sophisticated culture that comes close to having no autobiography whatsoever. It is a difficult phenomenon to explain, except by recourse to another, more general anomaly, namely, the paucity of historical writing in traditional India altogether—despite a voluminous epic literature, extensive narrative tradition, and notable concern with genealogy. With the exception of the Sri Lankan Buddhist *vamsa* literature,⁸¹ it is largely not until the eleventh century, in Kashmir, that Indic historical writing seems to begin in earnest.⁸² Similarly, autobio-

graphical writing is scarcely apparent in India prior to this same period, when it begins to be found among Jains, reflecting the growth of sectarian competition, and in the writings of a few figures such as the famed Śaivite tantric philosopher, Abhinavagupta.⁸³ First-person discourse about one's life is virtually nonexistent in Indian Buddhist literature; we can only mention the *Therī-* and *Theragāthā*, which contain a few poems that *may* be autobiographical, and occasional statements attributed to the Buddha.⁸⁴ Even Indian Buddhist hagiographical narratives are scarce and are limited to idealized renderings of the life of the Buddha⁸⁵ and a few other works.⁸⁶ The reasons for this apparent gap have yet to be adequately understood; Indologists typically invoke the Indian love of philosophy, downplaying of the individual, and predominantly cyclical sense of time.⁸⁷ But increasingly, such generalizations appear simplistic. Moreover, it is likely that the investigation of Indic vernacular traditions will reveal previously unrecognized historical and autobiographical materials. Until such discoveries are made, the virtual absence of autobiographical writing in traditional India must stand in stark contrast to the easily identifiable Tibetan autobiographical corpus. This disparity also demonstrates that Tibetan autobiography developed independently of Indian literary traditions, which otherwise had great influence on the form and content of Tibetan writing.

China had a considerably greater incidence of autobiographical writing than did India. Still, for the present purposes, much the same can be said of China as of India: traditional China never produced the salient and voluminous body of autobiography that traditional Tibet did. Moreover, no evidence suggests that autobiographical writing in China had any effect on the development of the genre in Tibet.

An excellent recent book by Pei-yi Wu has a great deal to say about the paucity of Chinese autobiography.⁸⁸ In brief, despite the considerable volume of Chinese historical writing—far different than the Indian case—as well as the large number of Chinese biographies, personal writing about the self is only rarely met with in traditional Chinese literature until the sixteenth century. Wu shows that when it did occasionally surface, it was critiqued for its failure to be impartial and objective—that is, for failing to adhere to the conventions of Chinese historiography.⁸⁹ This standard distinguishes Chinese autobiographical writing from the secular autobiography that was produced in Japan, throughout most of its literary history, beginning with the diary autobiography (*nikki bungaku*) of the tenth to thirteenth centuries.⁹⁰ The Japanese diaries were written largely by women, and in a colloquial language that could accommodate personal feelings, idiosyncrasies, and self-reflection. In contrast, the Chinese "self-account" was limited by the terse characters of Chinese, which are divorced from speech and which encourage a kind of writing that is universal and devoid of personal or regional idiosyncrasy. While a brief spate of recorded sermons by Ch'an masters on their own conversions and spiritual realizations became popular in Buddhist circles during the thirteenth century, Wu shows that a leading Lin-chi master took a strong stand against self-revelation, bringing this genre of

writing to a quick end.⁹¹ It was not until the late Ming, whose intellectual climate fostered idiosyncrasy and unconventionality, that there flowered a genre of fictionalized autobiography, and the self was aggrandized in Chinese literature virtually for the first time.⁹²

THESE CASES serve well to prove that autobiography is not produced in all literate cultures; much less is it a universal human phenomenon. Rather, autobiographical writing has occurred only under some historical circumstances. In the West, these circumstances are associated with modernity. Key moments are located in the Protestant Reformation, the Copernican Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the Age of Romanticism.⁹³ Each contributed to the development of the very notions of the individual self that are thought to be intrinsic to autobiography. Central factors in this development included the independence from tradition that the rationality of the Enlightenment marked and Lockean theories of the person in the legal sphere.⁹⁴ The subjectivity represented in modern literature also reflects the isolation of the individual from ancestral place and social matrix that occurred with eighteenth-century urbanization and the increasing specialization of occupational roles.⁹⁵ The "internalization of conscience" inspired by religious movements in Puritanism and Calvinism contributed profoundly to confessional writing as well.⁹⁶

But if Tibet, which knew none of these moments, developed a literary genre that shares many features with Western autobiography, it must be the case that other historical circumstances than those that obtained in the West can produce this kind of writing. What historical conditions, then, fostered the self-written life story in Tibet? Aside from the broad comparative virtues of such a consideration, it provides some critical clues to the particular autobiographical self created by Jigme Lingpa.

Historical and Cultural Conditions for Tibetan Autobiography

If circumstances didn't come together to yield substantial autobiographical writing in India or China, they did in Tibet. Compelling reasons for self-assertion and distinction can be traced to the dawn of the hegemony of Buddhism in Tibet, which produced a competitive climate in which the personal accomplishments of the individual religious master became a centerpiece in the struggle to establish a lineage and eventually an institution and a power base. Other Tibetan sociohistorical conditions contributed to this situation as well. Ultimately it was the conjunction of many factors that made writing of autobiography possible and desirable; no one ingredient was in itself sufficient to bring about this kind of writing, and indeed some of them are present in other places where there is no autobiography.

We can note firstly that, in contradistinction to Indians, but like Chinese, Tibetans had a strong tradition of recording history. Dynastic chronicles were

produced soon after the invention of the Tibetan script.⁹⁷ Court secretaries (*yig-tshangs-pa*), perhaps influenced by Chinese models, had already by the ninth century written an annal and a chronicle detailing the events of several reigns of the Yarlung empire.⁹⁸ Other early Tibetan chronicles and records have been found in Central Asia, and another widely used genre, the history of Buddhism (*chos-byung*), also appears to date from the end of the dynastic period.⁹⁹ Later Tibetan historians are notable for their references to stone inscriptions, state archival material, Chinese court annals, and ancient Tibetan chronicles.¹⁰⁰

In addition to the predilection for recording historical events, a related tendency that in the Tibetan context contributed to the development of autobiographical writing is the penchant for relating narratives of origin. Royal genealogies (usually called *rgyal-rabs*) of the Yarlung dynasty were written as early as the chronicle found at Tun-huang.¹⁰¹ In another early document, there is evidence of a connection between royal genealogy and the ritual recitation of litanies of fealty and suppression of evil spirits.¹⁰² Tibetans produce genealogies for virtually everything, from the origins of clans (the generic term is usually *gdungs-rabs*) to such particular items as the bard's hat or a marriage custom.¹⁰³ A document called "bone repository" (*rus-mdzod*) presents genealogies and/or histories of the deeds of clan members and is used in legal disputes concerning land ownership and to establish kinship status.¹⁰⁴ The accomplishments and vital statistics of family groups are often recorded in a "bone list" (*rus-tho*); family history is also related orally to children by parents and other elders.¹⁰⁵ Origin narratives proliferate everywhere in Tibetan literature (the Treasure tradition is a premier example), and just as widely, they are rehearsed orally, at festivals and communal celebrations, horse races, masked dances.¹⁰⁶

Whether origin harkens back to a deity, as in the Bon rendition of the Tibetan royal genealogy, or to certain spirits in the "secret" rendition of the same, or to foreign humans such as Indians in the Buddhist version, the public demonstration of where a custom or a group or ultimately the autobiographical "I" comes from achieves something of powerful import in the Tibetan context.¹⁰⁷ To present a thing's genealogy is tantamount to an assertion of its legitimacy. The genealogy even "protects the kingdom," in the words of R. A. Stein; "the correct recitation of legends of origin was a religious act, necessary for upholding the order of world and society."¹⁰⁸

To know one's origins also demonstrates access to those sublime sources. In the oral context, rehearsing of origins often involves transic possession.¹⁰⁹ The epic bard experiences a "descent of the story" (*sgrung-'bab*), like the oracle medium's "descent of the gods" (*lha-'bab*). The reciters of origin stories themselves embody the legitimating powers that they are recalling. We can note that Treasure revelation also involves a kind of possession, a "descent of [Buddha-]Word" (*bka'-'bab*). One of the functions of the Treasure discoverer's autobiography is precisely to bear witness to that revelatory event.

To have divine origins is impressive and attracts followers. In the period of the Yarlung dynasty what was at stake in the telling of origins was military unity

and loyalty. Later, the issue was sectarian loyalty and faith in a religious lineage and/or monastic institution. Autobiography, by recounting the development of spiritual power, indeed virtual divinity, in the religious hierarchy, inspired such faith and was thus continuous with ancient traditions of recalling the past and asserting power on the basis of origins. But as much as the autobiography of the hierarchy might have continued to serve the interests of a clanlike sect or lineage, the dynamics of loyalty had been transformed. In Tibet's new ecclesiastical, Buddhist world order, power no longer automatically followed from membership in a clan or group, but rather had to be individually achieved.

THE INTRODUCTION of Buddhism in Tibet in the seventh century C.E. and the subsequent demise of the Tibetan empire two centuries later created a cultural transformation that bears some similarity—albeit in barest outline—to the European turn away from tradition and toward individual autonomy after the Enlightenment.¹¹⁰ It was a complex transition, and it took several hundred years to unfold fully (and for autobiographical writing to emerge). The hegemony of Buddhism precipitated a radical revolution not only in Tibetan religion but in the very constitution of tradition as such, which included the bases of political power as well as the very self-conception of Tibetans. All told, the nature of the reception and influence of Buddhism in Tibet is the single most important factor distinguishing the Tibetan autobiographical situation from that of its two powerful neighbors, India and China. Both of the latter also underwent major changes when Buddhism was introduced, yet neither lost track of its older religious and cultural moorings. Both eventually witnessed the demise of Buddhism as an autonomous and influential force and an assimilation of the innovations of Buddhism into the older traditions (the Vedic and the Confucian-Taoist, respectively). In contrast, Tibet never reverted to its indigenous cultural self-identification. Rather, it remained pervasively Buddhist (with the exception of the Bonpo tradition, itself heavily influenced by Buddhism), with traces of its previous practices and ideas appropriated under the rubric of the new faith. Thus we can say that for Tibetan civilization, the primary thrust in its self-identification as Buddhist was not toward the old but toward the new—or at least a new old, that is, a foreign old tradition, imported in the form of scriptures, icons, and religious culture.

Part and parcel of Buddhism's decimation of indigenous Tibetan power bases was an argument that proved especially instrumental in creating a climate for the self-assertion and self-consciousness that emerges in autobiography. One of the principal strategies of early Tibetan Buddhist rhetoric was to characterize traditional Tibetan culture as uncivilized. Tibet before Buddhism was portrayed as the "Land of the Bad Ones," "Land of the Red-Faced Flesh-Eating Demons."¹¹¹ It is a characterization that has remained dominant in Tibetan self-consciousness. It is repeated in Jigme Lingpa's own reverie immediately preceding his Treasure revelation [42]. The point of the image is clear: Tibetans, left in their raw state, are barbaric; their only hope for development is to take on the

vastly superior methods of Buddhism. And so salvation for the Tibetans is not to be taken for granted, and there can be no confidence in being simply who one is. Unlike the Chinese and Indians, both of whose cultures also produced iconoclastic and self-conscious sage-heros, but who still knew their civilization to be at the center of the universe, or who maintained a strong sense of pride in the Dharma of their ancestors, Tibetan Buddhists needed to reshape themselves and to assume an utterly new identity, one to which their ancestral, barbaric nature was anathema.¹¹² The promise of liberation could only encourage those with sufficient energy to transform themselves—selves that were filled with passions and obscurations and that were very far from the ideal. But we should notice that such a perspective leaves the individual self-conscious of his or her real and human failings. If personal shortcomings were something the Chinese autobiographer was shamed into concealing, they were the starting point for the Tibetan Buddhist path, and the basis for the distinctive self-criticism and self-awareness that a Tibetan Buddhist autobiographer such as Jigme Lingpa would display.

I submit, then, that the radical overthrowing of the past and the construction of a new cultural identity that occurred with the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet was the principal factor that made for the development and flourishing of autobiography. The Tibetan, made painfully aware by Buddhism of an apparently barbaric patrimony as well as of personal obscurations, and yet presented with the possibility of spiritual liberation along with position, esteem, and the control of resources, embarked on a process of transformation in which the individual was the focus of attention. After the fall of the Yarlung dynasty, the loss of prestige of the royal descendants, the succeeding period of chaos and decentralization, and the eventual birth, in the eleventh century, of a new order based on religious sects, the focus of power in Tibet shifted to the powerful master: the translator who had been to India and mastered Sanskrit scholastic literature; the celibate ascetic who could maintain awesome heights of purity; the magician who could bring spirits, competitors, disciples, and patrons under sway; the visionary who received special transmissions of esoteric teachings; and finally, the yogic virtuoso who could remember past lives. The latter feat was the foundation of the reincarnated "tulku" (*sprul-sku*) phenomenon that eventually became the prominent mode, rather than inheritance, for the transfer of power in Tibetan Buddhist institutions.¹¹³ The comparative absence of culture and traditional authority in the wake of the collapsed empire gave the individual religious entrepreneur considerable leeway for self-assertion. Such figures did not need to be aristocrats, even if some, especially the early Treasure discoverers, were of noble lineage or had aristocratic patrons; instead, religious power and prestige were based upon ability and personal achievements. Even when local myriarchs or Mongolian chiefs later came to influence powerfully both secular and religious affairs, these military leaders were legitimized by and closely associated with Buddhist institutions, at the center of which was the virtuoso. The old Tibetan clans no longer could depend on their inherited authority; in fact, many of the old aristocratic families were in decline by the

eleventh century, replaced by new noble houses. Meanwhile, religious masters forged their own self-legitimation. Origin myths tracing lineages back to the ancient Tibetan clans were still rehearsed, as was done by the Sakyapa and Pagmo Drupa hierarchs, but in the keen vying for patronage upon which the clerical establishment depended, the personal virtues of the individual lama were often the deciding factor. Paradigmatic cases are Godan Khan's selection of Sakya Paṇḍita as the most religious lama in Tibet and investment of him with temporal authority over central Tibet; and subsequent patronage by Chinese emperors of certain of the Karmapas, Dalai Lamas, and Paṇchen Lamas.¹¹⁴ And it was precisely at the dawn of this sectarian competition, which lasted for all intents and purposes until the Communist takeover in the middle of the twentieth century, that both biography and autobiography were first written.¹¹⁵ Both genres served to position a charismatic figure at the center of a religious establishment, but autobiography had a special advantage. If we recall the relation that obtains between spirit possession and the recounting of origins in the Tibetan context, we can appreciate the significance of the fact that autobiography represents the voice of the very source, the subject, the experiencer of the meditative states and spiritual realizations that make that subject an appropriate recipient of devotion and support.

THE COMPETITIVE context in which such a charismatic individual became the center of a self-asserting polemic—and the protagonist of autobiography—was heightened by other tendencies already in place in Tibetan culture. Certainly the harsh climate and scarcity of food sources contributed to a rivalry between groups that later manifested in sectarian conflict, and, as Geoffrey Samuel has noted, a persistent fragility of centralized political control.¹¹⁶ The flip side of this competitiveness has been a fierce loyalty within the group, be it the clan, the religious sect, or even the smaller unit of the family, and a marked investment in distinguishing “us” from the others. The autonomy and antirelationalism that Sherry Ortner found at the base of the social structure of the Sherpas (a Tibetan group that migrated to Nepal) and especially its emphasis on “vertical” allegiances over “horizontal”—that is, on one's forebears over one's consociates—often come to the fore in Tibetan autobiographical writing.¹¹⁷ Although horizontal alliances certainly obtain widely too—for example, in the tantric Buddhist fraternity—vertical allegiances are often what a tantric practitioner such as Jigme Lingpa stresses in his autobiographies, where he repeatedly praises the superior virtues of his lineage of teachers, while denigrating his charlatan contemporaries.¹¹⁸

While there are few systematic studies of the “delight in open air and open spaces coupled with a sturdy individualism” that has summarily been observed in Tibetans, a celebration of individual autonomy is readily recognizable in autobiography.¹¹⁹ Witness Zhabkar Tsokdrug Rangdrol (1781–1851) advising a sister against marriage: “There's no more pleasant place than your own home. It is pleasant to be free from domestic slavery. It is pleasant to be free to do as

you please. It is pleasant to be free to eat what you like. It is pleasant to wear your own clothes.”¹²⁰ Historically, traditional Tibetan society, despite the feudalistic serf (*mi-ser*) system, countenanced a significant amount of personal independence, evidenced, for example, in the mobility of individual workers.¹²¹ Mobility allowed a profitable way of life for the tent-dwelling Tibetan nomads, as well as the many traders who journeyed far afield every year.¹²² An analogous lifestyle on the religious scene was that of the wandering yogin. An oral autobiographical account by a twentieth-century female practitioner indicates that there was an extensive subculture of yogins who wandered freely across Tibet, facilitated by an ability (cultivated in ascetic practice) to sleep in caves and live on alms.¹²³ Such a lifestyle, open to people of all classes, was only possible for the highly determined with strong constitutions, but an occasional taste of it was had by a larger portion of the population when they went on pilgrimage. (We can note that the Tibetan love of personal freedom and independence clashes tragically with the cultural norms of the [post-]Confucian Communist Chinese today.)

THE BUDDHIST renunciatory ideal and (at least theoretically) homeless lifestyle return us to what Buddhist ideology, quite beyond its rhetorical denigration of indigenous Tibetan tradition, contributed to Tibetan individualistic sentiments, and ultimately the writing of autobiography. The devaluation of family ties entailed in “leaving home” and then working to “collect” moral and spiritual merit (*dge-ba bsag; bsoḍ-nams/ye-shes-kyi tshogs*) again suggests a curious parallel to the individualist who left home in eighteenth-century England for economically profitable pursuits.¹²⁴ Certainly in its most extreme enactment—the hermitic retreat from the world into a cave or meditation cell—the renunciant individual is divorced from community life. Mistrusting crowds, he or she valorizes the life spent alone. But just as scholars, building on Dumont's work, have pointed to ways in which Indian renunciation and asceticism are practiced within society,¹²⁵ we can note that in Tibet, some worldly values are regularly rejected by lay persons who are still in fact engaged in the world. Such attitudes influence the predisposition of society as a whole. For example, although Tibetan society is hardly egalitarian and hardly bereft of a privileged wealthy class, there is a widespread sentiment, inherited from Buddhist critiques of materialism, that the life of the rich is sinful and to be avoided. Jigme Lingpa's own autobiographical stance is paradigmatic of this attitude, especially in his outer autobiography, where he reflects on his luck in not having been born into a wealthy family and shows himself actively dodging invitations from royalty and nobility, musing to himself on the faults of those who approached him.

I shall leave for chapter 5 the issue of how the autonomous and self-assertive impulses fostered in Tibetan Buddhist society and reflected in autobiography might be affected by the Buddhist doctrine on the ultimate emptiness of the self. This doctrine in any event does not imply the absence of the conventional self, nor does it proscribe all forms of self-assertion. Some idealist strains of Buddhist

doctrine, influential in Jigme Lingpa's own school, even offer a suggestive analogue to the philosophical idealism in the West that was closely associated with modernity and the development of individuality and autobiography. We will also study in chapter 4 the kinds of subjectivity and self-awareness that were fostered by introspective Buddhist meditative techniques, which might end up serving autobiographical memory as well.

THESE ARE some of the factors that fostered certain individualistic tendencies in Tibet. Given the sociohistorical conditions for self-assertion, I would maintain that such tendencies served to produce autobiographical writing—especially at its best, that is, when it achieves a character distinct from objective biography and idealized hagiography. To argue that Buddhist ideology and practices contributed to this development is not to argue that Buddhism makes for autobiographical self-consciousness generically; the evidence from Buddhist India, and indeed most Buddhist civilizations, testifies to the contrary. Tibetan and Indian Buddhists shared a common canon of scriptures and many religious practices, and yet one group produced autobiography and the other did not. Tibetan autobiographical writing thus acquired its unique character from factors other than Buddhism, but which then operated in concert with Buddhist traditions.

The Autos of Tibetan Autobiography (or, The Rang of Rangnam)

Just as the social changes that brought about the Tibetan self-written life story differ markedly from the conditions that fostered Western autobiography, Tibetan individualistic sentiments differ significantly from what is depicted in Western autobiography. Yet these differences, not only in kind but also in degree, do not undermine certain broad formal commonalities. Tibetans did come to look back on their personal past, and muse over who they were and how they were different from others, even if they were yogins, monastic hierarchs, and Treasure discoverers embedded in religious traditions, rather than philosophers, scientists, and artists invested in making a final break from all such tradition. Tibetan autobiographers do think of their life in developmental terms, even if the way that this development is to occur and the directions in which it is oriented are informed by Buddhist psychology and soteriology and a traditional Central Asian society in transition, rather than by secular humanism, psychoanalysis, and a Euro-American society born of the Industrial Revolution.

In studying Jigme Lingpa's secret autobiographies, I am considering a subgenre of writing that is far from what is usually thought of as autobiography—certainly further than the much more familiar Tibetan outer autobiography. My purpose in any case is not to discover an analogue to the Western individual, much less to trace out the features of self-conception that would be at the bottom of all autobiography. Rather, my goal is to understand the specificities

of these two particular works, and their particular Tibetan background and character.

Various elements of Jigme Lingpa's self-conception will come to fore in the following analysis, from his culturally determined roles as teacher, visionary, and monastery builder, to his personal identity and memory of past lives, the lineage with which he identifies, the self-visualization techniques he employs in meditation, the apparitional figures that appear to him, and the complex gender of his secret autobiographical voice. Throughout these discussions the term "self" will (and already has been) used frequently, but not in the technical sense of the theoretical construct *ātman* that is critiqued in Buddhism. Rather, "self" here will refer to the relational sense of self in contradistinction to others (often indicated by first-person pronouns) and to self as a reflexive pronoun (*rang* in Tibetan). The word will also be employed as an umbrella term for the entire sense that *autos* or Tibetan *rang* (or *bdag* or *kho-bo*) has as the subject matter of autobiography. The point in employing this ambiguous and culturally loaded term as the centerpiece of this discussion is precisely as a reminder that the self that is constructed in autobiography cannot be reduced to metaphysical essence, socially determined personhood, or anything else.¹²⁶ Rather, the self is both so complex and so opaque that it emerges only through adumbration and cannot be summed up in a definition. Forever in flux, as the Buddhists would say, it is constructed in time, in language, and in imagery, well suited indeed to the literary art of narration.¹²⁷

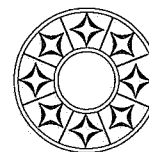
What is adumbrated in the case of Jigme Lingpa's secret autobiographical writing is an exceptionally multivalent sense of self, truly a "homo multiplex," to adopt Bernard Faure's felicitous phrase.¹²⁸ This heterogeneity directly reflects the complex cultural matrix in which, and for which, Jigme Lingpa created his secret identities. I turn now to the historical circumstances of his public career, and the social interactions within his local scene, especially as these are represented in his outer autobiography. These interactions anticipate the dynamic tensions of his "secret" life as well.



1. Jigme Lingpa. Painting in Tibet; provenance and owner unknown.
The photograph was brought out of Tibet in the 1950s.

Apparitions of the Self

The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary



A Translation and Study
of Jigme Lingpa's

Dancing Moon in the Water
and

Dākki's Grand Secret-Talk

JANET GYATSO

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*Dedicated to the perduring brilliance
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