

What Is This Thing Called Self?

Although we know what we mean by a self representation or an object representation, what do we mean by the self? Is it the sum of internal representations? We refer to *the self* as an object of an internal dialogue—one talks to one's self, for example—which suggests another. But we also define shifting states of self, particularly in emotional experiences, so do we include such shifting states in our notion of the self? And can there be a self state and a relationship to the self at the same time?

Waving goodbye to relatives from a ship that is about to depart, one might be sad thinking of those one is leaving behind, aware of a loss of part of one's self. A person flying away on a business trip may be anxious about the work to be done or perhaps about flying; his self and object representations may be intermittently populated with imaginary scenes of the business meetings to come or of the plane's engines failing. Are these feelings and representations the person's self state? A Freudian view considers them only partial derivatives of an inner psychic

reality, of the continuously moving experience of the self.

When I think of a friend, I evoke a complex inner constellation always sponsored by the name of the friend but with discrete representations emerging upon each rethinking. Such inner constellations are subject to change, and discrete representations are liable to emerge which are determined by the vicissitudes of life, in which affection, admiration, and gratitude mingle with less pleasing feelings of competitiveness, envy, or narcissistic injury. Still, the circumstances of life affecting these representational derivatives of the internal object, in this case my friend, do not eradicate it. No internal object can be changed by eradication, although it may be altered.

The theory of internal objects does not describe or define a self state, for any episode of self experience is dynamic and complex, a matrix beyond representation. In the Lacanian lexicon, it could be assigned to the real, to that reality which is beyond either imaginary or symbolic grasp, even though *it* is there. Imagine what happens when asked to think of your mother. Perhaps you are requested to describe her. Whatever course of narrative action you take and no matter how long you talk or write about her, you never reach a point at which you feel you have conveyed that inner presence which you carry within you and which is evoked by her name.

Each of us has such relations to the inner complex. We experience *it*, we will think about *it*, and we will even narrate *it*. This is a curious position to occupy. For the part of us that stores and organizes psychic events is obviously unconscious, while the conscious part of us that experiences it aims to *think* it. But isn't to experience this internal event to think it? How can a mental phenomenon evoked within one's mind at the sound of the signifier not

be thinking? Perhaps I hedge. If the psychic texture has been formed over many years by countless experiences, it has already been thought, a thousand times over; a great deal of thought has gone into its making. Further, some of the mental operations that go into it, such as thinking about a particular moment with one's mother, were never representationally considered but rather acquired in practice, such as when mother and child acted out a relational scheme between them, never subjecting it to thought proper.

As conscious selves, we thus have an intriguing relation to our mental contents, some of which are part of a moving or dynamic inner presence that we experience but cannot put into words except by partial derivatives. Freud certainly knew this. His descriptions of the unconscious and later of the id are references to an *it* within us that we cannot put into consciousness. Indeed, his theory of the dream work—particularly condensation—describes the overdetermined and cumulatively constituted internal object. As a person matures, these inner objects, added to continuously, become increasingly complex and evoke dense inner experience upon the calling. I think that one of the reasons “self” is an apparently indefinable yet seemingly essential word is that it names its thing: saturated with *it*, the indescribable is signified.

What happens when I say “Christopher Bollas”? Does the same kind of inner event occur as when I name a friend? Not quite. The sounding of my own name does not conjure the same kind of internal object. Do I conclude that I do not exist inside myself, that I have no self of my own?

It is interesting that we do not have such a precise inner experience of our own self as we do of an other, but

surely it is because “we” or “I” is too near to experience to become its own signifier: it cannot call itself into delimited representation. Further, the object—not being equivalent to ourselves—is introjected into a place within our “internal world,” dense with meaning but ultimately limited, while our selves are composed of all such introjections, as well as the intelligence of organization that forms the precise sensibility of our inner worlds.

We certainly try to bring our selves to a place of calling. We talk to our selves. I address this self as “you,” often to encourage an action (i.e., “you should do the shopping”). The nature of this intrapsychic relation may tell us a good deal about incorporation of a particular feature of the mother and the father, who as parents were the first to address the self as “you.” The individual eventually takes over the “you” address from the parents and in this linguistic transference inevitably inherits some of the psychic consequences.

As Robert Nozick says: “The self’s special knowledge of and relationship to itself is expressed at the linguistic level in the use of such terms as ‘I,’ ‘me,’ ‘my,’ in contrast to proper names and definite descriptions” (71). But this “I” has no direct relation to “me”; it must go through the other first. “Will you give it to me?” “I would like you to spend time with me.” What does this linguistic route between the I and the me tell us about the self?

It seems to identify one crucial path taken by idiom.

“Where have you been?”

“Who, *me*?”

Why the need here to verify the self as “me”? A comic version has the person looking over his shoulder, hoping that someone else is being addressed. This comic moment expresses a fundamental structure to the signifier “me,”

part of the experience named by *self*. "Where have you been?" "What have you been doing?" "What have you been up to?" Such interrogations betray the inquisitiveness of consciousness in the face of the dynamic and never-ending wanderings of the unconscious self, which travels to worlds far from consciousness, encounters many a phantasm, gets up to many forms of mischief, and though always somewhere around escapes location.

"Of course you, who else would I be talking to?"

To the *me*. And the curious act of self effacement is ironically enough a very accurate interpolation. For the overwhelming amount of *our* time (i.e., the time of differing parts of the self) is spent in unconscious activity when we are lost in thought.

The presence of *me* also re-stages early history, for a child encounters many a thing, endures many an event, imagines many a phenomenon under the aegis of infantile amnesia and will not recall it. "So where were you?" we may ask. This is one of the questions a patient asks of himself when he enters analysis. Where was the self during its early history? Consciousness can only respond with a comedic counterquestion: "Who, *me*?"

If the *me* is situated in relation to the *I* only through the place of the other, it is also the part which has been, among other things, the recipient of parental care and parental projective identification. The linguistic partnership reflects the self's history. Where have you been? *With Mother. With Father. I think inside Mother. Inside Father. Between them. At their disposal.* But what have you learned? "Who, *me*?" The voice of the comic disavowal affirms that this wandering explorer of other worlds is without its own tongue: the *me* cannot speak. This is the preverbal self, always without words, silently exploring the textures of

experience. There was a time when people said “me-thinks,” but this archaism has been displaced by the less feudalistically affiliated and more entrepreneurial voice of the I. Yet the “me thinks” was a rather wonderfully simple voice, rather dumb, which spoke for a type of experience deep inside the self. In fact, the near muteness of “me thinks” seems its voice, seems saturated with the residues of vast unconscious experiences. How are we to reconcile the paradox that part of the core of us is an apparently absent presence rather than an articulate, active subject?

I think I know.

I believe that each of us begins life as a peculiar but unrealized idiom of being, and in a lifetime transforms that idiom into sensibility and personal reality. Our idiom is an aesthetic of being driven by an urge to articulate its theory of form by selecting and using objects so as to give them form.

Freud’s theory of the id was a bold attempt to conceptualize this inner complex that fashions being. Borrowing from Groddeck, he used the German phrase *das es* (the it) to identify an impersonal force informing human logic. But the id was doomed, overwhelmed by too many significations to be used theoretically, and psychoanalysts became more interested in the ego, a clearer concept. Winnicott made a further attempt to represent the “it” through his idea of the *true self*, which he linked to Freud’s theory of the instincts but which was also to stand for the “kernel” of the subject’s self. This was the inherited potential that indicates its gestural presence through spontaneous actions; for Winnicott the concept of the true self became more important as a signifier of signs of life than as one signifying compliance and capitulation.

Both conceptualizations allow us to address the “it”

inside us. I suggest, however, that the word "me," which also defies direct knowing, emphasizes a slightly different internal movement. First, when we think "me" without reference to any other term, we evoke a dense inner constellation, a psychic texture, existing not in the imaginary, although it yields derivatives there, but in the real, an area that can be experienced but cannot be represented in itself. I am aware that writing about such a mental phenomenon is not only hazardous but based on the false premise that the elusive "me as real" can be written about. However, I shall do so, for I think it is part of the phenomenology of *this* object relation: the relation of consciousness to an internal object that is sensible, that can be felt, even though it has no voice.

The me can be conceptually identified and its material discussed. It is composed of memories (including the history of desire), and these constitute the cumulative psychic outcome of idiom's theories and their enacted deployment in a life's experience. Many thousand experiential episodes, in which one's essential idiom meets up with its fate in the domain of lived experience, leave a vast, intricate web of derived senses, a kind of metaphysical synthesis, something which though part of us is not determined by us, arrived at through our peculiar engagement with the chance arrival of objects in our lifetime. This *totality* is an internal object we designate through the signifier *me*. The curious truth that me is an absent object and yet is felt to be the very core of my authorized actions is part of the intrapsychic history of the me, as the it's fate or destiny, as a voiceless core of being that has no direct representation but nonetheless in-forms gestures and consciousness.

The psychic texture of any episode in a life history can be evoked by name or memory. If, for example, I think of an evening in Oceanside, California, when I ran 220 yards for my school's relay team, I can psychically feel the trace of that moment. It is inaccurate to say that this feeling is equivalent to my discrete memories of that evening: the buoyant warm sea air meeting up with the desert chill, my teammates' exuberance over winning the race, jumping in the air, the sheer bliss of running in the night, my new Adidas track shoes, the coach showing me my time on one of his watches. These images are only derivatives of the inner presence that is activated in me when I recollect that night.

In fact, life is such that an inner sense of a remembered moment may occur to me in the flash of an inner eye, a mere fraction of a second, as it emerges in a chain of other senses, and yet it will have been there in its entirety.

Evocative psychic states may be called into inner experiencing by a name (i.e., track and field, Oceanside, Adidas), or by chance encounters (meeting someone from Oceanside), or by deliberate self recollections (recalling the events for narrative purposes), or by the environment (feeling warm sea air meet up with a chill), and also by the effect of the other who left a trace of his or her being in our inner world: not an image of the person, but a psychic texture composed of a vast network of psychosomatic processings of the other collated into an unconscious organization that is called into feeling when we evoke the other's name.

The self is such inner presences.

We may rightly wonder if such an interesting fact affects the nature of our mental processes and capacities. For example, a young child learns arithmetic and over the

years his study of arithmetic marries up with his cognitive development, enabling him in adolescence to have mathematical skills and indeed to have a part of his mind *trained* to perform such mental operations. Bion argued that the need to think thoughts forces us to develop a mind, this eventually leading to the development of mental structure. Similarly, we may say that self experience invites us to entertain its nature and appreciate in consciousness the particular feel of self states and emotional experience. Although this experience is too dense and psychosomatically intricate to be represented in itself, this is not to say it does not exist within our being, a unique area open to a special form of *inner perception*.

When we are interested in such inner objects, we develop an increased sense of them, repeatedly attending to psychic textures. This suggests the interesting conclusion that the sensing of self is open to development and increased skill. Ordinarily the phrase "sense of self" is taken to mean the sense of self that each of us has, but I shall give it a slightly different definition: the capability of perceiving the self. A separate sense. A sense that is only a potential in each person, who is born with this sense capacity, and who will, to a greater or lesser extent, develop it.

What value, if any, do we place on this capacity? That such a psychological talent is derived from repeated inner experience of self shapes, that the sense seems inextricably linked to and derived from the history of self experiences, brings the acquisition of language to mind, for speaking a language derives from the repetition of the language experience. If we have an appreciative sense of the self's experiences, isn't it likely that the organizer of such inner constellations will be unconsciously aware of introspective delight? This is no more than saying that a performer

enjoys the appreciation of an audience, except that now we are saying that the ego—the intelligent psychic organizer that coordinates self experience—has its own sense of being considered. Such endopsychic partnership—a generative narcissism in which the individual's increased sensing of self is appreciated by the ego that constellates self experience into internal objects—suggests that such a director will make its productions more available for consciousness.

If the ego appreciates the individual's sense, then there is an intrasubjective sensitivity; I think that poets, painters, musicians, and others engaged in creative work feel pleasure in their ego's contribution to this separate sense. Is it an occasion for the unconscious to pirouette and perform in the dimly lit world of the preconscious, with consciousness turned now inward, as Echo to Narcissus? I think so. Creativity in unconscious work responds to any audience delegated by the self.

In a psychoanalysis, we may observe a fascinating intrapsychic rapport develop, in which the analysand's introspective receptiveness is sensed by the ego, which responds by being more open. And we know that this evolution is substantially contingent upon the analyst's creating a sense of rapport. By remaining quiet for long periods of time he conveys his interest in the weight of the analysand's words. Silence gives the patient's words psychic value, as the free associations echo in both participants' minds. On the other hand, analytical intervention is usually directed to the patient's internal world, to the self and object representations, to the polyvalence of words, to the image saturated with condensed meaning; this kind of analytical attentiveness is unconsciously understood by the ego that now performs its work with a welcome

audience. In turn the analysand builds up in his or her mind an increased capacity for attending to the textures of intrapsychic life.

The developed sense supports the significance of the nuclei of self constellations as valued objects, even though these psychic textures cannot be directly known. The sense of self supports and increases the inner knowledge of psychic shapes in one's being. One comes to know of oneself, even though such knowing shall remain substantially unthinkable, albeit felt.

When Freud described free association as *Einfall*, he meant that in the course of talking to the analyst, an idea would suddenly fall into the patient's mind from nowhere. Winnicott's model imagines a different psychic surprise, as the individual falls into an inner experiencing entirely contingent for its effects upon cessation of speech and the loss of social awareness. It's as if the patient disappeared for a while. Winnicott may have found a niche in psychoanalysis for an experience valued in some Eastern religions, in which the "ego" cracks up, in which coherence or self narrative is regarded as a defense, and in which the path to knowing the self can be achieved only by forgetting this self . . . temporarily. Freud began this process when he said that self abandonment was intrinsic to the process of free association, and Winnicott added a vital next step with his idea of regression to dependence—from too much dependence on the mind to an object relation in which the analyst takes over mindfulness, allowing the patient to commune with the self's psychic textures.

There are moments in a psychoanalysis when patients are lost from insight, having slipped through a door into

speechless inner experiencings when they are only with their selves: lost in them, experiencing them, traveling through their textures. The word "self" seems apt in such moments: it names an essential elusiveness, an organization in being that is inexplicable, that cannot be represented or located. Our patients are in a world elsewhere. When they emerge from this place, they reflect *on* it, tell us *about* it, are moved *by* it, often in conflict *with* it, always *under* its influence, but inevitably *beyond* its boundaries.

As each person has sequential inner experiences, which we call self experiences, does it follow that he or she has a self? Do we need to argue that such a self exists? Why can we not settle on the notion that we have successional inner experiences, but that no superordinate psychical entity exists which is either the sum of the self states or their coordinator?

We can conjure any vivid self experience simply by recollecting it, but we cannot evoke our selves by speaking our names or any other invitational act. A self experience seems ready at hand upon its calling; the self, as a presumed psychical entity, seems nowhere to be found.

Psychoanalysts are usually thrown into the problematics of the self when a patient claims to have no self. Some time ago an adolescent patient told me he did not have a self and did not know what this term meant. He said that if he asked himself what his self was, he received no reply other than a kind of horrid sense of emptiness that was truly frightening. He asked me to tell him what a self was. Could I define it? The anguish in this young man was so intense that I felt a need to come up with the answer, but all I could think of was how irritatingly elusive this word was. I could not see how he could be in such anguish over

something that the word "self" designates when at the same time he could not feel this "self." The absence left both of us sensing that something horrid was afoot. I can still see the look on his face. My silence seemed to add to his fright.

Then I said that I experienced his self. I was not sure why I said this to him—it was a spontaneous comment, but the effect was immediate. He calmed down. He looked very hard at me, as if trying to discern what exactly I saw in him. I said I thought he was trying to look into the mirror to have some confirmation of how the mirror gets an image to reflect, that he wanted me to demonstrate to him what his self was. He nodded.

I said that trying to supply him with sight of his self reminded me of efforts he had made in the past to grasp the true meaning of a given word. He would repeat a word, such as "chair," until the signifier no longer called up the signified, until the sound meant nothing, and this would cause him great panic. Now he was doing the same thing not only with a more crucial signifier, self, but while looking at his body to see if somehow or other he could spot the self emanating from it or somehow triggering a spontaneous inner sense of what his self was. He agreed. Somewhat to my surprise, I said that this was a word which gave us access to the unobservable—but not the observable—presence that is us.

By the end of the hour he was no longer in a panic, and over the following sessions he was clearly less distressed over the question of the self. What had changed? What had precipitated the change? Was it my statement that I experienced his self? It rang true, although neither of us addressed what I meant by it. Was it my comment that he created panics by overintense scrutiny of the

essence of a word—in this case the idea of a self—which vaporized its meaning and precipitated a crisis within? This did have significance for him; he knew from the analysis that he did this kind of thing, bringing about acute states of depersonalization.

But these comments were not what helped him recuperate from his panic. Instead, I think it was my containment of his anxiety which allowed him to come back from such deep fear. When he posed this most vexing question, he put me through the anxiety that its problematic raises, and what did I do? He saw, not that I had an answer to it, but that I could find some way to live with the section in the library of consciousness marked “unknown” which this word signifies, that I could live with my own doubts as to its meaning.

And yet it was clear that his absence of a sense of self was quite terrifying indeed. He described how his internal conversations were not with some seemingly knowable (even if illusory) thing called self but with a kind of empty space. He would preoccupy himself with daily agendas, going over what he would do in the next week, the next twelve hours, the next five hours, the next hour. He wrote lists of intended actions. He thought about them a lot. “And that is all there is to me. I don’t have anything back. I just think and think about what I am going to do, where I am going to do it, and whether I can proceed to do it.” He lived in a perpetual present, with no past, and a future made up only of projected present moments linked by the agenda he set.

He had little reflective capacity and seemed impatient with the whole idea of looking back on experience. Yet he never had any difficulty describing a self experience. He could portray in minute detail what he had done in

the afternoon, and could tell me the feeling of the doing and recall any memories it evoked or desires that sponsored it. So he did not like to look back on experience, but he could do it.

One can describe self experiences, then, but still have no sense of what is meant by the word "self" and still claim to have no self; self does not seem to arise out of an inner summation of a person's episodic experiences. An individual can describe the sequence of inner experiences but still sustain the idea that no self exists.

Another patient came to analysis when he was in his early seventies. A highly successful art dealer, he had always been a depressed man and was now close to suicide. For years he disowned his own personal creativity, insisting that the analysis define itself only in relation to his "failures," which he invested with great mental energy. Significant headway was made when he began to understand his preference for what I metaphorically termed "negative capital," which he loved to invest in a "negative bank account," deposited against a future in which positive capital might upset this investment. After several years the metaphor was extended to include the notion of a "secret Swiss account of positive capital," that he did not want the world to see, because he would then lose his "credibility," which rested on the presentation of a negative self that used personal sourness to gain certain advantages in his business. Analysis of his unconscious omnipotence—insisting on banking the negative until only the positive was guaranteed by the gods—also helped him to understand another aspect of his investment in the negative, as did further analysis of his envy of those whom he saw as sustaining a smoothly running life. Ruining himself to spite his envious self, to spoil in advance the objectification of his own wishes, and realizing the competitive others,

helped him understand his omnipotence and his negativity. But only when, after four years of analysis, we grasped a very particular feature of his contempt did he truly change.

He began one session, as he often did, by saying that he knew from what others could say to him, and indeed from a certain objective part of himself, that he was a person who had accomplished many things, but actually from his point of view anything good that had ever derived from him had really, in truth, been a matter of "good fortune" and "luck." He bemoaned that he, unlike other men who were highly organized and knew exactly why they were doing what they were doing, had to sit around and wait for good fortune to strike. He reproached me, saying that although I had helped him to understand himself, I had nonetheless not understood that he really was a man who accomplished what he did purely in ways that were incomprehensible to him and came about merely by chance. I said, "I think you have an omnipotent wish to be conscious of the unconscious when it happens, so that you can possess it, and as you cannot, you project this capacity into other men, whom you then idealize and envy and to whom you compare yourself disadvantageously."

He was quite struck by this interpretation. "Where did you get that?" he asked. "It occurred to me," I replied. "Well, that's true inspiration, because, you know, I think what you have said is more correct than anything else you have said about this. You are right; I do imagine that others have an ability to be the managers of their unconscious and I do not." I replied, "You say it is an inspired idea when it derives from me, but when inspired ideas come from you, you say that they are only moments of 'fortune.'"

We discovered that when an inspired idea occurred to

him, he would wonder: Where did that come from? And because he did not know, he repudiated himself as its originator. What seemed an act of almost sacrificial honesty revealed itself to be a pernicious expression of his omnipotence. If he could not know the origins of the ideas that came *from the self*, then he wanted no part of it. He wanted everything: he wanted to take possession of the self from which the inspired idea emerged, and if he could not know this self, then his hate of it was such that he would deny its creativity and insist that the idea was only an act of fortune. The working-through of his frustration over his inability to know the origins of inspired ideas gave him an increased appreciation for the mystery of being a self and diminished the intensity of his self hate; in a way, it also raised his appreciation of just how mysterious it is to be a conscious being in relation to the unconscious parts of one's being from which involuntary, unguided, inspired ideas arise.

What contributes to the belief in the self—which apparently is noticeable only when it ceases to exist and we panic over its loss? We speak of a sense of the self—and earlier in this chapter I suggested that this sense is a certain type of internal work that enhances our appreciation of the self—even if this does not lead to an increased knowledge of its meaning. We can develop a sense to sense the self which brings us closer to the object of that sense. But what is it?

What are you sensing when you sense your self? (I am excluding derivatives such as self representations, object representations, or moods; I am after that thing which gives birth to such expressions.) In a way, it is a kind of presence, isn't it? We have a sense of a presence in our

being, a sense of our own being. We feel we are here. This is different from saying that we have evidence of being here: we can look in a mirror, gaze around for evidence of our being, but the sense of self is different: we have a direct feeling of an inner presence to our being.

But how is this different from saying that one has a sense of one's respiratory system, or the soma's intersystemic intelligence, or indeed an endopsychic projection of the sense itself? How does one not know that one is sensing the presence of the sense itself, projected into a vacuum? Couldn't a sense of self simply be a highly organized wish that conjures its object and then develops a wonderful intrapsychic romance?

I shall come to my reply by analogy. We all know what it feels like to be deeply immersed in a novel. Novels have their own atmospheres. The themes expressed in novels are usually relatively common, but the pleasure of being inside a special novel depends on the unique way the novelist fashions this world for us to live inside. The same is true of music. When I listen to a Mozart symphony I am clearly inside the moving atmosphere of a highly distinctive intelligence, instantly different, say, from that of Anton Bruckner. One has a belief in one's self because each of us is aware of having an internal world that is intelligently informed with its own unique atmosphere, a very peculiar aesthetic that creates within us our spirit of place.

But can we feel our own being in a manner as precise as the way we feel the atmosphere of a Jane Austen novel, comparing it to the feel of a Dostoyevsky novel? Well, in a way we can, and in other ways we cannot. Certainly we are conscious of thematic patterns to our perceptions, imaginations, verbal representations, gestural expressions,

and so on. But to what can we compare this? Can we compare it to another person's sense of his self? How would we know what that other person is feeling as his spirit of place? We can't know, can we? However, even if you do not know the character of your self precisely, because you are part of it and lack the distance necessary to experience it in that way, you nonetheless know that your spirit of place does constitute your self. This allows you to abstract a notion from the feeling that sponsors a belief that launches this word "self" into the language with a very specific psychic charge behind it.

Each of us, with many internal objects, develops an acute sense of how these objects differ from one another. But as we cannot compare our self experiences with another person's, we therefore cannot develop a definition that derives from difference.

We cannot conjure the spirit of our own selves.

Nor can we gain it from the other who has had us drift through him. If we hold the other to account, saying, "Right then, you've had me, tell me what my spirit is," I suggest that the other will look at us with absolute astonishment, as such a task is of course impossible. "But you just told me," we may respond, "that my name evokes a fully identifiable feeling within yourself, so then tell me what it is!" A harried person might try to talk about what that inner object gives rise to, and to come up with an image here, a memory there, an observation of this, an abstraction of that. But can he transform the spirit into the intelligence that it is and was?

The answer to this is a disappointing no. Absolutely not.

Can one not, however, gain through introspection a feel of the very particular self one is? Does one have no object for one's sense of self to sense?

The feel of an inner logic, the movement of desire, the dissemination of interests, do yield a feeling that one is invested by an intelligence that guides one through existence. You feel its effects, and it is through introspective awareness that you feel the spirit of place even if you do not know its character.

We may see how intelligent an act of projective nomination it was to believe from inner experience that some kind of deity was looking over us. The notion of a God living within each of us is, strangely, an unconscious return of the projection: God as that organizing intelligence that informs our existence and leaves us with a sense of there being something that transcends and yet looks after us. Sometimes the self feels like a kind of transcendental presence, an authorizing agency, greater than the sum of those self experiences which we can know in life but unknowable as a thing-in-itself.

Isn't this the unconscious? It is and it isn't. Certainly both the conscious and the unconscious are instrumental in the creation of a sense of self; but the unconscious is perhaps even more vital, since the psychic construction of a self is achieved by unconscious mental processes. But Freud's theory did not address this specific atmosphere of place which prevails in any person's unconscious life—its aesthetic intelligence and structure. So when we speak of the self we are speaking not simply of the unconscious but of its endopsychic derivative. Unconscious work gives birth to the spirit of place within the individual, which is felt when it is there and terrifyingly missed when it seems to have departed.

It may seem that I am now arguing that the self differs fundamentally from its "parts." Certainly we can objectify aspects of the self and talk about them; dream contents

organize self experience and are partly knowable; symptoms express unconscious conflicts within the self; and we reflect upon our self experiences continually and thus come to know certain manifestations of our selves. But when we refer to the parts of the self in psychoanalysis, we are usually referring to some of the contents of the self, its introjections and identifications, its psychic structures.

The self is not the sum of its parts.

It is an aesthetic intelligence.

So what can we make of those people who claim to have no self or to have lost the self? Certainly we could not argue that they have lost their idiom in being. We can see how they express peculiarity (i.e., human being). We could discuss their mental contents with them, and they would not generally disown authorship of a particular mental content. But it seems to me they are right in saying that they do not get back from that inner dream work a sense of its presence. People who are extremely distressed will speak of feeling lightweight, of believing that any breeze might carry them off; others may sit tightly on their chair, desperately afraid that they are on the verge of falling forever into an abyss. Confronted by such fears, we are compelled to take the individual's claims very seriously and push ourselves to answer the question: What exactly is the thing we call self?

It may be unknowable, but when one senses that it is there, it gives a person a sense of being the author of his existence. For a fearful person, it seems that intrapsychic contact with the forming part of being has been lost. But if he has mental contents and can be shown how his dream is unlike any other person's dream, why does this not

bring him into contact with the unique forming intelligence in him that works upon the stuff of life? There is no easy answer, and I can give only a partial response.

Those familiar with ego psychology rightly suggest that the agency of this inner aesthetic is the ego, and that the word "ego" would do where I use "self." I accept that the actual dream working that goes into episodes of self experience is labor of the ego, but the person who claims to have no self is not claiming that he has no sense of his own ego, at least as I use this term. The ego is the agency of the mind that performs its mental operations, rather like the psychic equivalent of a brain. Even a person with no sense of self does have a sense that he is thinking, judging, and dreaming; he knows that he is present as an ego. His complaint is more specific than that: he urges us to realize that he does not have an inner relation to the intelligence behind the ego, to that which makes him feel guided, as it were, by some inner logic in being. Freud used "ego" and "self" interchangeably in his early writings, but later tended to use "ego" to identify an unconscious organizing skill; "self" was the subject's conscious sense of his own being. This separation of the terms "ego" and "self" is important. "Self" designates the peculiar aesthetic intelligence that informs the ego; it can be felt endopsychically as a kind of background intelligence.

Does each person have a different "feel" when feeling the self? Does my feeling differ from your feeling of your being? Or is the feel—whatever that is—more or less the same for each person? In other words, does the idiom of each subject cast a different feeling and texture into consciousness than that cast by the idiom of another subject? This may be an impossible question to answer, insofar as representation of the feel of the self is impos-

sible, but perhaps we can compromise. I can imagine that each person who feels the unconscious factors of his own being, and who knows that at any moment he is perceiving the feel of his own idiom, shares a common experience, is feeling that which cannot be represented. Each person who engages in this unique intrapsychic task shares with others a common perceptual place and, furthermore, a similar perceptual sense, which is quite different from any other perceptual skill. And yet the very differences among people's idioms suggest to me that the factors going into an inner feel of self will also differ—perhaps more like differences we hear in different composers' music than like differences in words: not a music of the spheres, but a music of one's character, a song line in the aesthetic of one's being.

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In order to arrive at what you do not know
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
 In order to possess what you do not possess
 You must go by the way of dispossession.

—T. S. Eliot, "East Coker"

Some of what we come to know of our selves is no more and no less than the shape of what we do not know. As Freud established in his theory of free association, and as I suggest, idiom's dissemination through the use of the object is accomplished only by loss of consciousness, as one becomes a simple experiencing self. In order to possess a knowledge of who we are, we must be dispossessed of the search; only through this strange dispossession will we gain a closer sense of the object we seek, a sense that will

yield us—at least as I read Eliot—the shape of our own ignorance, an ironic but telling knowledge.

He who fears he has lost the self and cannot find it is, interestingly, the very one who cannot engage in Eliot's ironic quest: unable to abandon himself to generative ignorance. A psychoanalyst will often work quite diligently to get a patient to abandon the militant question and simply talk about inner thoughts or feelings. With a schizophrenic patient he will make links between his seemingly unreferential hallucinations and his experience of events in his immediate world. More than once I have told psychotic patients the story of the anxious farmer who, alarmed when his corn did not grow, went into his fields each day to pluck the crop up by the stem to see what was wrong with the roots. In recounting this story I am telling the patients to stop looking so hard, give up the effort to see direct evidence of the meaning of being, and get to what one can know by simply relaxing and talking.

Freud's model of free association, which he regarded as a technique for the arrival of unconscious latent contents, sets the stage for all subsequent psychoanalytical interests in the self and, we might add, it sets the stage for self experience and an ironic but essential "knowing" of the self that we are.

Winnicott, Lacan, and Kohut recognized in their different ways the necessity of the other in the individual's knowing of that self. Lacan saw it as a moment of constituting alienation, but ironically enough, he only emphasized the inevitable part played by the other in the self's constitution. In the session with the adolescent patient with no sense of self, described above, I spontaneously told him he had a self because I experienced it, and this was momentarily calming. I meant that I had my own

inner experience of him, one that was different from that of all other patients; on the basis of this idiomatic organization in myself I could say with certainty that he was the cause of it and therefore he had a self that was affecting me. Psychoanalysts will recognize the areas of transference and countertransference here, although in a slightly different context, as we are now considering the total effect of the patient on the analyst—not so much as an object representation, which brings up the analyst's implicit self representations, but rather as an idiom that sponsors all such representations. As patients use their analysts as their object, the analysts are shaped by the patients' desires and thereby gain an inner sense of their idiom. It is this kind of dynamic that permits us to write about the "spirit" of the other which lives in and through us long after its departure: when we think of them or when their name comes to mind, the inner feel of that person is evoked within.

As a patient works to understand himself, he unconsciously knows that such work owes much to an unconscious intersubjectivity, in which both he and the analyst affect and shape each other's self experience so as to convey information that cannot be communicated in the abstract, in articulate speech, or in diction texture; this is a cumulative, unconscious effect deriving from many differing orders of unconscious representation. We could say that this is work in the area of the self, usable only when one does not know one is there to labor away, and accomplished only by simple self immersion in being and relating. Patients who suffer from a serious loss of self or who feel on the verge of losing the self eventually recover from this terror because the analyst suggests an area for inter-being that is the outcome of generative loss of

consciousness; intuition plays an important role in what one says, how one says it, in what one feels, how one expresses it, in what one wonders about and how one puzzles it, in what one senses in one's body knowledge and how one organizes it. The clinician involves the analysand in free associating, free feeling, free expressing, in breaking the overly rigid ego's observational function. This very process that Freud invented is itself curative of the loss of presence of self.

As analyst and patient shape one another, working from intuitional areas much of the time, the analysand whose self has been lost is working with a sensory system in the other who senses his self. The third ear listens to the latent contents concealed in the manifest text. The analyst's self works with an inner, intuitional ear that listens to an altogether different message, suggesting an altogether different route to knowing, one that does not yield discrete knowledge but perceives and allies with the shaping effect of the other's idiom in being. The analyst's perception may enable him to learn something at a deeply unconscious level about the nature of the other's forming intelligence, and just as the aesthetics of literature or music have much to do with timing, pausing, and punctuational breathing, it may well be that he, too, works technically—knowing when to make a comment, what diction texture to choose, when to remain silent, what image to pick at what moment, when to use his feelings as the basis of an interpretation, or when to scrutinize a word presentation. These decisions are aesthetic choices, and should be in tune with the analysand's self—namely, his aesthetic presence and its articulation. Such “technical decisions” involve work at the level of self to self, of the analyst's self sensing the patient's self, and over time he may convey to the

analysand, through care and skill, a feel for how to work in this area and, ultimately, how to live with the organized ignorance that springs to mind when one thinks of the contents of the self. There is a feeling there of one's being, of something there, but not a something we can either touch or know; only sense, and it is the most important sensed phenomenon in our life. As the patient comes to know the analyst's inner ear, how he responds to and handles his self, he does not adopt the analyst's technique, but he gains a greater appreciation for the psychic skills; from this, important lessons about the dissemination and handling of the core self can be internalized.

We are capable of developing through our life experiences a sense of the self as an aesthetic movement that can be felt psychically. Each and every one of us has thousands of self experiences. I ride a bicycle, and it yields an inner experience linked to this object. I read a book on the American Federalist period, about Jefferson and Madison, and I enter a world with a particular feel to it. I listen to a recording of Mahler's Second Symphony, and I am transported. I am telephoned by a friend, and he puts me through his character. And so on and so on. These self experiences do not yield precise representations. Each is a condensation of its many constituents: somatic, bodily, mnemonic, perceptual, fantastical, imaginary, symbolic, and so on. Self experience is too complex for representation in itself; though we can talk about or express an experience in many ways, that inner experience we have, that "in-stress," as Gerard Manley Hopkins called it, cannot be represented. However, we do something interesting with that "that," and it is a small lesson in the stuff of which the self exists—its material. We can feel the material of

self in any and all self experiences, and it is this—for lack of a better phrase I shall term it psychic texture—that we use in our projections to serve the term “self.”

Thus far, then, I maintain that one’s sense of “self” is fashioned from several sources: from an inner feel of the authorizing aesthetic that gives polysemous (not unitary) shape to one’s being; from an inner feel of internal objects which are the outcome of the other’s effect upon one’s self; from the shape of discrete episodes of self experience. These psychic “innards” are not the self but are closely enough linked to it to allow us to use such textures for projection: out of these valorizations in being one constitutes one’s self. Such projections are not equivalent to the self, cannot be directly apprehended, but they are projections of like kind, sufficient to give the person an internal object that will represent the self, even though it will not be the self.

In his poem “A Primitive Like an Orb,” about “the essential poem at the center of things,” Wallace Stevens writes:

We do not prove the existence of the poem.
It is something seen and known in lesser poems
It is the huge, high harmony that sounds
A little and a little, suddenly,
By means of a separate sense.

We think of the sense of our self as a separate sense independently contributing to that object of its perception, like a poet who, unconsciously gathering the material for a poem he does not even yet know about, gathers his observations into an inner area marked “poem to be

written." Stevens writes of a poem that is the structure of poetry itself:

The central poem is the poem of the whole,
 The poem of the composition of the whole,
 The composition of blue sea and of green,
 Of blue light and of green, as lesser poems,
 And the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems,
 Not merely into a whole, but a poem of
 The whole, the essential compact of the parts
 The roundness that pulls tight the final ring.

From the psychic instress created by the logic of our own being, from the feel of the internal objects we collect in our life, and from the textures of self experience, we create *a new object*: the self—a poem of the composition of the whole.

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"In my beginning is my end," writes Eliot.

The mother who gives us birth also brings us in touch with death. The adult has an idea of nonexistence, not only, as Winnicott suggests, because he has come from nowhere to somewhere, but because as an infant he has experienced the continuous, one might even say generative, endings of consciousness, as he tries to perceive the gods that surround him. For every illumination in an infant's life there are long periods of sleep and darkness. Is this a form of preparation for the intrapsychic consequence, that now and then we think we can see the light at the end of our tunnel—that looks, doesn't it, like my self there?—and yet we are forever fated to live in recurring darkness, our livings ended for a moment.

I think there is a clue here to our understanding of certain psychotic patients who are terrified by loss of self.

In a way, they are now without a meaningful relation to death, not engaged in generative interplay between life and death, between origins and endings, between absolute dark and enlightenment.

Death has a particularly generative meaning in Western culture, signifying a mysterious, unknowable ending to our being, but one that strangely ennobles our existence. It is the question of all questions. What is it like to die? What do we experience when we die? Where do we go, if anywhere, in the moment of death?

These days in psychoanalysis we perplex ourselves with the question of self, but in a certain sense this word suits our secular profession and its patients because it is a personal way of objectifying the unknown. When we ask: What is the self? we interrogate the meaningful unknown; in the end, death is the most meaningful unknown we have in our large depository of unanswered questions. In previous centuries, the signifier occupying the place of the self was very likely the word "God," serving our need to objectify the place of the meaningful unknown; and the Protestant concept of the God who lives inside us all served as a bridge to the concept of the self, something that lives in and yet seemingly transcends us.

Analysts who see in this word a signifier for an elusive and yet essential organization to the person's being will inevitably respect the limits of psychoanalysis: the self cannot be addressed, found, or analyzed. In some ways the word "self" is an interrogative. One cannot ask a question of a question. "What is this?" "What is this 'it' to my being that has me organized into an evolving person?" One does not reply, "Yes, what is it?" as one gains only an echo in return: "What is it?" We are enthralled by this narcissistic discourse.

We have found a signifier that totally befuddles us, even

though it bears a truth to its word that we shall never know. Heidegger wrote, "The more original a thought, the richer its unthought becomes. The unthought is the highest gift that a thought can give." For psychoanalysts who value this word and what it designates, there is a particular disposition to the value of the question rather than the discrete resolve of the answer, for in the word "self" we have found the word that contains the highest degree of the unthought.

At the same time, surely, we see the pleasure the question provides. Perhaps after centuries of living out this pleasure in relation to the notion of an omnipotent being (our deity, of course), and after existentialism's morose wakefulness, in which death, death, and more death occupied this place, we at last take pleasure in asking this question that loves to be asked.

The psychoanalyst who believes that the concept of the self is of use recognizes the pleasure of the interrogative's relation to the unanswerable. Put to the test—"Who am I?"—the response is an intelligent echo through which we hear the question and from which we learn that the question is the only answer we shall ever have. This offers a different clinical perspective from those psychoanalytical writings that seem, perhaps unwittingly, to give technical answers to the discovery of the analysand's meaning. Bearing in mind that each analysand has a self, but one that cannot be grasped, analysts are aware that in the end the question of the self belies any notion of a comprehensive view of the subject, regardless of how deep their interpretative work goes. Indeed, some may plunge into the deep because the surface, which announces the narcissistic dilemma posed by the visage, which raises questions that only raise further questions, is too exacting to tolerate. Sight of the woods can lead many to plunge into

the trees, forlornly hoping that in so doing they will gain a better access to the sight of the woods.

Knowing that in psychoanalyzing a person I shall gain only a very limited relation to his self paradoxically frees me to consider and analyze those representations and enactments that derive from his idiom. This is indeed the stuff of psychoanalysis, and it is here, in the expressions and articulations of the self, that the analyst comes to understand and analyze the patient's disturbed object relations and the marks of his life history. It is a strange but essential factor of the analyst's work that he keeps in mind what is beyond his knowing although not beyond the facilitations of the analytical process.

In setting up a procedure that can enable the patient to settle into the generative calm of a silence supplied by the other, the analyst provides a place and a process that sanctions the inner movement of self states; if time is allowed to move on, and then move on, and then move on, it gradually yields that inner sense to one's being that the word "self" designates. Such inner experiencing also includes the repeatedly unsuccessful efforts of the subject to interrogate his own being, as he always fails to come to a summative moment that stops any further meaning. But in the quiet spaces of an analysis, the patient survives these failures to know; he goes on being; and he is quite pleased, now and then, when he is discovered by his recovery of a fantasy, or a memory, or the organizing acuity of a demand in the transference. Thus will he know something of his self. But that inner feel to which he heads during the silences, that area that is so familiar and so essentially him, will always evade his effort to snatch it into representation.

If the self-in-itself, a phenomenon of the real, evades our grasp, it is nonetheless of continuing interest that we all

have experience of a special kind that is like a visitation of the real. In the dream we are immersed in our own selves. Freud rightly saw the dream as a condensed event with a suggestive force disseminating in a thousand directions, leading to an infinite reading of its meaning. His admonition that we must not regard the manifest text as the meaning of the dream unfortunately led to a crucial failure to see in just what ways the dream also had an integrity of its own: after all, the subject is living his own ego organization! As such, each person is graced by the visitation of the dream, which brings him into his self, right into the structure of his being, taking him through its processional logic and character. Furthermore, each dream has its own peculiar unity. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

As the sleeper is in the dark until internally illuminated by the dream event, it is little wonder that this moment often brings to mind in poetry and literature the notion of birth, for it seemingly re-creates the evolution that characterizes human ontology—from the darkness to the illumination that is life. Indeed, each dream is rather like a lifetime, lived between the two essential darknesses that predetermine and terminate us. It has an integrity unto itself, and when this integrity is allowed to stand, the dream can also be seen as the only uncontested moment in which one experiences the self that one is as one lives *through* one's psychic structure.

It is time to close this chapter and I hear in the background of my mind a nagging voice: "Wait a minute! You have missed it, you have missed the entire point!" "Of what?" "Of the self." And I know that in a way I have, something that needed to wait until nearly the end.

When you think of your own being and when you look

back upon the life you have lived, it feels just natural to use this word “self” as somehow the proper word to designate the subjective place of your being, your lived experiences, your accidents and your good fortunes, your cultural places and your escapes, your others and their others, your body which is so familiar yet so different from consciousness, and so on. Simple yet unidentifiable, “self” is the word we use to designate our way of being, a formation that cannot be put into words yet demands a sign for itself, and for this we cast the word “self” as sufficient: it defies meaning in its own right and yet persists as a favored word.

The word “self” would not have the depth of feel to it—in spite of its extraordinary overusage—unless it linked in the unconscious to an area of designation with direct access to the core of being and existence itself. It is this that gives the word its utter and somewhat maddening simplicity. Languages other than English may or may not have a word to embody this relation—between the inscrutable yet informative deep logic of our own being and the simple object that we can perceive and say, “Ah yes, that’s me, isn’t it?”—a word that designates the rendezvous between the unthought known and the simplest of thinkings, a place where we just seem to live our life.