

The Evolution of the Modern Self in Three Easy Jumps

from David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*

Up through the eighteenth century individual identity was assumed to be fixed, consistent, and wholly vested in the present. Indeed, well into the eighteenth century, even thoughtful people took life to be more of less, a 'discontinuous procession of sensory experiences' interspersed with abstract reflections. Such lives, as Jean Starobinski says, had no distant goal, no finality beyond the limits of the immediate environment of time. [This view began to change as the notion of self-development took hold.] Identity (rooted in personal memory) now came to include change. 'We are ourselves, always ourselves, and not for one moment the same,' in Diderot's words. Followers of Rousseau and Wordsworth began to see their childhood selves forming their adult identity, and hence to view life as an *interconnected narrative*. Within a few decades (i.e., by the early 19C) the relation of the sense of the past to personal memory became part of the mental equipment and expectations at least of the educated. Awareness of personal memory, often narcissistic and usually suffused with Romanticist sensibility [e.g., transcendent rapture; joy; brooding melancholy, etc], began to stimulate a degree of self-consciousness previously unknown. It is hard to realize that this sense of personal continuity was rare before the 19C. By the end of the 19C such introspective recovery of one's personal past led to the founding of psychoanalysis. As one critic has put it, Wordsworth had historicized the personality, so Freud aimed to make Wordsworths out of his patients.

from W. S. Johnson: Self-Consciousness and the Victorians

[The] quality of self-consciousness in the important writers of the [Victorian] age . . . may justify our saying that in a particular sense, which does not apply to the times before or after, the period from the 1830's to the 1880's is the most self-conscious of all periods in English literary history. But Victorian self-consciousness is radically different from the Romanticism *out of which it initially developed*. The English Romantics are deeply concerned with their own personalities: the consciousness of self--for them--means the most complete awareness of that living universe which a human mind in part apprehends and in part creates. This consciousness can be a source of joy or pain, as the self chooses one means or another to experience identity with the cosmos: the means by which Romantic egoism would absorb all existence into the expanding self; or the means of Romantic melancholy, even of self-annihilation, that would allow the individual consciousness to be absorbed into the Infinite. Romantic self-consciousness can be expressed in the sublime "egoism" of Wordsworth. But Victorian self-consciousness is much more the experience of self-division and strong feelings of alienation from the cosmos.

Joseph Conrad, from a letter written in March, 1896

When once the truth is grasped that one's own personality is only a ridiculous and aimless masquerade of something hopelessly unknown the attainment of serenity is not very far off. There then remains nothing but the surrender of one's impulses, the fidelity to passing emotions which is perhaps a nearer approach to truth than any other

philosophy of life [compare Walter Pater!] —and why not? If we are “ever becoming—never being” then I would be a fool if I tried to become this thing rather than that; for I know well that I never will be anything. I would rather grasp the solid satisfaction of my wrong-headedness and shake my fist at the idiotic mystery of Heaven.