THE PROJECT

Beginning with the idea of a series entitled “Visions of the Self,” a number of possibilities came to mind. As with any signifier, its meaning was not universally shared. Instead, separate and differing associations were evoked—some intellectual and some experiential, some theoretical and some personal.

The very word self has come to prominence in theoretical psychoanalysis only in the past thirty years or so. Before that, as a concept it was primarily claimed by humanistic and existential thinkers—psychologists as well as philosophers. The experiential vision of self, or “sense of self,” has been addressed by Bonime (1989) and by Bromberg (1993) as a major factor in resistance to change in psychoanalytic treatment. This “sense of self,” which can be shattered by trauma, is not the same as the cognitive structure referred to as the self-representation that evolves through a sequence of developmental stages in the earliest years of life. How does one affect the other? How does our vision of self account for clinical differences between early developmental failure of later emotional trauma? Or does it?

And how do Kleinians, Sullivanians, Horneyans, Kohutians, Object Relations theorists, Jungians, or Poststructuralists conceive of a Vision of the Self? (Was self merely a reflexive pronoun for Freud?) Is there a common thread? Is there one or are there several organizing principles that may lead eventually to a system for classifying Visions of the Self?

As with any journey of discovery, it is best to allow for some degree of ambiguity, lest preformed notions rather than the data determine the outcome. It is with some excitement that we begin our series with the first paper by Richard Chessick. In The Dead Self, Chessick, from an experiential perspective, poetically conveys the annihilating impact on the sense of self inflicted by life-threatening illness. And he illustrates the role of the structural self-representation, the nuclear self laid down in early development, in the recovery process.
O man, citizenship of this great world-city has been yours. Whether for five years or five score, what is that to you? Whatever the law of that city decrees is fair to one and all alike. Wherein, then, is your grievance? You are not ejected from the city by any unjust judge or tyrant, but by the selfsame Nature that brought you into it; just as when an actor is dismissed by the manager who engaged him. "But I have played no more than three of the five acts." Just so; in your drama of life, three acts are all the play. Its point of completeness is determined by him who formally sanctioned your creation and today sanctions your dissolution. Neither of those decisions lay within yourself. Pass on your way, then, with a smiling face under the smile of him who bids you to go.

—Marcus Aurelius (Meditations)

How difficult it is to write about nothingness! Yet psychoanalysts must understand it somehow, so I will try. Nietzsche said that the price of creative fruitfulness is to be rich in internal opposition. Also, in Thus Spoke Zarathustra he (1968) said we should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once. Here is my dance for today, in the spirit of Ibsen (Kadarkay, 1991), who wrote that "living means fighting within you the ghosts of dark powers; writing is putting on trial your inmost self" (p. 401). Dear colleagues, I want to put that self on trial for you; perhaps patients have told you they have a "dead self," empty and depleted. This is what it is like.

Richard D. Chessick, M.D., Ph.D., is Professor of Psychiatry, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. Senior Attending Psychiatrist, Evanston Hospital.

Address correspondence to: 636 Church Street, Suite 628, Evanston, IL 60201.