



Self-Haunting

Gnosticism, Romanticism, Kierkegaard, Beckett and Ashbery

By Laura Quinney

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Explores how thinkers and writers from the Gnostics to Ashbery portray the self's profound uncertainty, revealing a paradoxical subject that longs to be whole yet persists in its fragmented search for identity.

It has been fashionable to declare that there is no self. Certainly the notion of the unitary subject—a transcendent subject linked to the traditional religious idea of the immortal soul—has not had currency in academic discourse for a very long time, perhaps as much as a century and a half. The psychologically unified subject and the universal subject of shared experience are also things of the past. But is there nothing left of the experience of selfhood? For the self can disenchant itself. But what does the subject feel about itself once it begins to doubt its own integrity? How does it experience its own “decentering”? How does this “who” that is left define itself, for itself? For selfhood is an existential condition, and no matter how elusive the self is to itself, it does not and cannot wholly lose itself. This book analyzes how the Gnostics, the Romantics, Kierkegaard, Beckett, and Ashbery dramatize the self's self-doubt and what follows. The shared theme of these works, disparate as they are, is the bewilderment of selfhood, the pathos of subjectivity. The self encounters its own selfhood as puzzling and paradoxical. It wants to possess the qualities of an ideal self—to be whole, independent, and free—and it is disappointed to find it does not. Yet after the skeptical dismantling, something remains within, which represents itself as the self and continues to hear the (unfulfillable) call to selfhood. The self can neither become a self, nor cease to be agitated by the desire to become one.

Key selling points

Presents an original contribution to the literature on the self

Covers wide-ranging genres and periods

Combines study of philosophy, religion, and literature

Challenges the provocative idea that “there is no self”

About the Author(s) / Editor(s)

Laura Quinney teaches English and Comparative Literature at Brandeis University. She is the author of *Literary Power* and the *Criteria of Truth*, *The Poetics of Disappointment: Wordsworth to Ashbery*, and *William Blake on Self and Soul*.

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