

# The Messy Self

## An Introduction

by Jennifer Rosner

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*“I am large; I contain multitudes.”*  
—Walt Whitman

*“One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.”*  
—Friedrich Nietzsche

There is nothing simple about being a self. Even the drive for simplicity is complicated; the yearning for tidiness, messy. Being a self is messy and we are messy selves. We are ambivalent when we yearn to be resolute, and restless when striving for calm. Our feelings clash, our wills waver, our desires are incompatible. Our minds take leaps that defy logic; our dreams visit us as decodable illogic. We are only partly rational. Our growth is rarely linear. We can think in wishes and deny reality. Even as we doubt and deceive ourselves, we are creative, evaluative, and self-interpreting. And, always, we live with the possibility of falling apart.

The instability in our constitution is not a modern phenomenon. It is part of human nature; it has been true of us for as long as we have existed. The ancients recognized interior conflict, but it was the moderns who squarely acknowledged the disorder, the irrationality, and the disharmony at humanity’s heart. Freud, like Plato, conceived of the self as constituted of parts, ideally reconcilable yet always (and in reality) prone to clashing. But where Plato saw irrationality issuing from clashes among the self’s elements,

Freud saw irrationality inhering in the elements themselves, thereby locating the roots of our chaos and disorder far deeper than in the incidental clashing of ordered parts. Freud’s view of the irrational self was echoed in other modern movements, like cubist painting, atonal music, expressionistic literature, and existentialist theory, each reacting against classical and Enlightenment themes and together eroding confidence in thoroughgoing rationality, order, and contented civilization. The self - and indeed the universe in its entirety - lay largely outside the categories of human understanding.

We manifest a variety of reactions to this modern diagnosis of unreason: reactions of struggle, of acceptance, of denial, and alternations between. Denial is a favored strategy when our messiness gets too uncomfortable. We tidy our work-desks and our houses, and find ourselves buoyed by the promise that we *ourselves* might thereby be tidied. We saturate ourselves with antidotes to ambiguity and uncertainty, and grope for methods to reduce tension and ambivalence. We read magazines like *Real Simple*. We respond to the chaos that lurks beneath the thin veneer of civilization by rubbing another coat of polish on the veneer.

Our discomfort obscures the fact that breaks in reason enable creativity; that doubts lead to richer analysis and evaluation; that discordances bring texture to relationships that would otherwise be flat. The image of a tidy self is reassuring, yet falsely so. To tidy up our messes, or to deny them, can lead to an impoverished life: a narrowing of our aspirations, a stunting of our creativity, a less robust recovery from

our traumas, paler friendships, and muted loves.

A messy self may be disconcertingly easy to relate to, identify with, and describe. But it is by no means easy to define. Indeed, a tidy definition will miss the point. My own field of contemporary analytic philosophy works predominantly with an ideal of the self as resolute, unified, and rational -- an ideal I question, as surely as I fail to achieve it. This ideal is, of course, championed by the larger culture, with added emphasis on simplicity and its dangerous relative, oversimplification, exercised in much of public, especially political, discourse. I have felt propelled - by a sense of alienation from this ideal and the reductionism it encourages - to seek out new ideals and conceptions of self that can accommodate the ambivalence, incoherence, and irrationality that mark our human experience. As a starting point, I have invited thinkers from a variety of disciplines to write of lives, and of selves, that are -- in a word -- *messy*.

At the risk of appearing orderly, the writings in this *MR* issue broadly span five categories: love, self-understanding, self-deception, identification, and well-being.

Love takes many objects and forms; it pulls us in many directions. In the words of Jonathan Lear, "it establishes an ever-present undertow." Some have thought that love is a longing for beauty or for goodness. Others have speculated that love aims to restore a lost unity with another. In Aristophanes' myth, as depicted in Plato's *Symposium*, love is a pressure to be reunited with our long-lost halves. In Freudian theory, it is a

drive to restore our own pasts, a longing to return to an un-individuated, merged state.<sup>1</sup> In some traditions of thought, love ascends toward greater fulfillment, understanding, and flourishing; in others, love descends, with humility, into longing, incompleteness, and passivity.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, loving is a messy venture in which boundaries blur, dependencies transfer, self-conceptions are lost and traded and reclaimed. Diane Ackerman aptly titles her poem, "A Strange Disorder," and in it she deftly hunts out what is haunting both about caution and about passion. Gayle Pemberton celebrates love's power to affirm and heal, even if through tics, in "My Tourette's." In "Conservation," Debra Spark evokes sheer longing in a character's unmet desires for connection and comfort. Beth Ann Fennelly's poem, "Mommy at the Zoo," grapples with the dissolution of memory (and self?) in the throes of mothering. Jane Crosthwaite's "Prologue for Psyche" orients us to the layers of identity-contortion and moral challenge we confront in Wendy Wasserstein's newest play. In *Psyche in Love*, Wasserstein dramatizes love's messiness in a tale of betrayal and regained trust, through a sloughing off of sister-selves and a slathering on of beauty creams. John O'Donohue's "Since You Came" captures what utter transformation can come in the encountering of another.

"This ramshackle, this unwieldy, this jerry-built assemblage/this unfelt always felt disarray; is this the sum of me?" In C.K. Williams' poem, "The Clause," we witness a mind reaching to unfold the layers of its own unknowability, and we share in its unease to forge on as it cannot help but do, with longing and

with judgment. In “The Last Place on Earth,” Patricia Foster exposes an illness-shattered core, as she struggles against a breakdown that neither she nor her doctors understand. In Mary Kinzie’s poem, “Facing North,” the self is out of place, a traveler-pilgrim for whom attempts at self-understanding and repair result in new brokenness. Each of these writings represents a quest for deeper self-understanding, for clues to identity, even legitimacy, and for pathways to wellness. Rebecca Goldstein works from the process of writing itself, to show how we become receptive to large truths that transcend our personal experience when we enter into the lives of the fictional selves we write about and read. Knowledge seeps in as the bounds and constraints of personhood and time are loosened in our engagement with the selves of fiction. In “The Real Story,” Liv Pertzoff artfully questions whether a bounded self, or story, makes any sense at all.

Of course, our desires to know ourselves and our world are most times tempered by our suspicions and fears of what we might discover. The strategies by which we perpetuate our own ignorance and befuddlement are numerous, and whether or not we intentionally deceive ourselves, or engage in less paradoxical strategies, there is no doubt that we do much to avoid facts about ourselves that would be difficult to confront. Perhaps human flourishing requires judicious doses of self-deception. Certainly, we can tolerate even injudicious doses without apparent loss of integration. In “The Superficial Unity of Mind,” Sarah Buss contends that an integrated sense of self requires only the most superficial unity. Our powers of self-interpretation enable us to accommodate a vastly heterogeneous set of impulses, and to

tolerate, even if by glossing over, very deep internal conflict. According to Steven Pinker, what is intolerable to a sense of self is not its disunity, but the idea (and evidence) that one is not as beneficent and effective as one would like people to think. In “Kidding Ourselves,” Pinker shows the ingenuity of minds threatened by the appearance (and reality) of a lack of “benefectance.”

Conflict amongst our desires, hopes, dreams, and beliefs may challenge our sense of authenticity, even if it does not challenge our sense of unity. What it is to be authentic? And how do we emerge as individuals, related to others through sameness and through difference, in the larger community? In Ilan Stavans’ “The Disappearance,” the authenticity of a self is so compromised -- the boundaries of reality and fantasy so blurred -- as to prompt an interrogation into the very nature of subjectivity, reality, longing, and a sense of belonging. Richard Chess reveals a person in a pained straddle of faith, longing for refuge in this vast universe, in “With Solomon Ibn Gabirol.” “Gifts,” by Faith Adiele, shines a two-year old’s light on burgeoning authenticity and identification with others in the face of racial, religious, and economic difference. Meena Alexander’s lyric “Song of the Red Earth,” carries us to the dust, the dissolution, of an unretrievable childhood identity. In “We Are All Colored,” Huston Diehl illuminates muddles of color-perception, as she recalls teaching elementary school in rural Virginia in 1970.

To *flourish*, authentically, in the larger social world – is it possible with all our messiness? Perhaps it is impossible *without* it. In “Surprises of the Self,” Martha Nussbaum examines the life and

work of Donald Winnicott, a psychoanalyst for whom models of love, creativity, and good relationships necessarily presuppose the acceptance of messiness and imperfection in oneself and in others. When applied to society, Winnicott's ideas have rich implications for expression and growth. In "Buried," by Carol Edelstein, we find perfectionism posing a subterranean threat to wellness. Donald Morrill conjures creativity's golden magic and its maddening limits in "You there, listening..."

Perhaps it is because of our inherent instability, with threats to our integrity coming from inside and out, that it is also in our natures to impose order on our experience whenever possible. We categorize, organize, filter in, and filter out information about ourselves and the world around us. Moreover, we reflect on our desires and beliefs, and guide our actions in accordance with our reflections: we act for reasons. Certainly, we need to structure, in order to comprehend, the data of our experiences, and there is benefit to authorizing our actions through reflection and reasoned deliberation. Just as certainly, our restless minds need to break through the structures of understanding and the dictates of reason, to make leaps in growth and creativity. Well-being may require the acceptance of ourselves as much in the ways we are *irrational*, as in the ways we are rational. "The Messy Self" is intended as a forum in which to highlight our self-complexities. Taken together, the writings herein analyze, accept, bemoan, resist, frown upon, and ultimately *celebrate* our essential messiness.

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998): 148ff.

<sup>2</sup> For a fascinating and comprehensive discussion of love, and its role in ethical thought, see Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).