Relativizing the Ego and the Birth of Dialogue
Chapter 10 of:

INVISIBLE GUESTS
The Development of Imaginal Dialogues

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CHAPTER TEN

Relativizing the Ego and the Birth of Dialogue

As psychic life is peopled with multiple characters who enjoy varying degrees of autonomy and who are known in their complexity, there occurs a radical shift with respect to the “ego.” The “I” becomes not just the one who observes the others. It is now seen as well. It too is like a character, with certain styles of being and interacting which the imaginal others recognize: organizer, narrator, confidant, supervisor. One character may see “ego” as power hungry, another as an infidel, always deserting him or her. Each reveals a different persona, often eclipsing our habitual conceptions of ourselves. As the imaginal others speak and act, they do not just answer the “I’s” questions, but speak about the “I” and also about their relations with each other, seemingly apart from the ego. As in literature,

[the] characters do not develop only single and linear roads of destiny but are, so to speak, human crossroads. It is within this pattern, this meshing together of individualities, that they preserve their autonomy...(Harvey, 1965, 69)

Through this process there is a relative de-centration of psychic life, which can restrict the strength and functions of the ego. Truth becomes redefined. It is not the province of a single voice, but arises between the voices at the interface of the characters’ multiple perspectives.

This narrowing of the ego’s domain, this view of the ego as another character, would at first seem antithetical to the current trend of ego psychology in the direction of ego strengthening. Hillman
(1975b, 25-26) points out that in psychoanalytic thought a dominant fantasy is the Roman-like process of ego development. Consider Freud’s description of this process:

To strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the superego, to widen the field of perception and enlarge its organization so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id, where id was there the ego should be. It is a work of culture. (Freud, 1932/1965, 106)

In a more polycentric psychology, this gradual assimilation of other portions of psyche by the ego is not the goal. In a polycentric psychology, one attuned to and respectful of the multiplicity of the Self, one would attempt to restore some autonomy to the colonies. One function of personifying is “to save the diversity and autonomy of the psyche from dominion by any single power.... Personifying is the soul’s answer to egocentricity” (Hillman, 1975b). The ego, though not strengthened through the assimilatory process envisioned by Freud, is nonetheless fortified as its function becomes one of being aware of the multiplicity around and within it.

Not only is there a multiplicity of imaginal others experienced in the distance, but the “I” changes role or identity, as in dreams and playing—now whiny child, now scientist, now sophisticated cosmopolitan. The everyday subtle changes in intonation, gesture, or mood give way to the imaginal figures beneath them, as happens in a dream, where anger may be revealed as a lion or Hitler, or an unknown rapist.

This shift in the position and function of the “I,” its relativization, is a primary difference between modern and pre-modern novels. D. H. Lawrence writes that “You mustn’t look in my novels for the old stable ego of character. There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable” (1962, 282). Robert Kiely, in a discussion of Lawrence and James Joyce, notices that in their work the “self is released from the prison of ‘stable form’; it is projected into the environment, freed to move from shape to shape” (1980, 11). Modern novelists for the most part have abandoned an omniscient narrator who tells the readers the “truth” about each character, who sees the characters as extensions of himself. Now the characters are more often free to tell their own stories, and the tale of each is relativized by the voices of the others.
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Luigi Pirandello’s play, Six Characters in Search of an Author, classically portrays this situation. Here the six characters enter a theater where a play is being rehearsed. They attempt to tell their stories in an effort to find an author who will help let their suffering be known. Each character has his or her own version which pits itself against the others’ in an effort to claim reality.

In studying the dramatic nature of thought we need to become familiar with all the modes of narration exhibited in literature. They will help us see how variously we each organize the multiplicity we find within thought—how we, like authors, shift between omniscient and non-omniscient postures with respect to the voices we encounter in dreams, fantasy and thought. In the omniscient novels of the past the author or one of his characters would describe all the other characters in the beginning of the work. The characters’ attributed dispositions were then borne out in subsequent scenes. The belief among novelists of this period (from Trollope through Austen) appears to have been that an accurate accounting of who one is can either be given as a static description of characteristics or a listing of how one responds externally to a series of situations (Daiches, 1960, 15).

The critic David Daiches points out that in the nineteenth-century novel

characters were deployed before the reader (author and reader standing together, as it were, on the reviewing stand, with the author where necessary whispering explanatory remarks into the reader’s ear) and revealed their inward development by their outward behavior. The correlation between internal and external, between moral or intellectual development and appropriate observable action or in-action was taken for granted. (1960, 2)

Standing there together amidst a stable hierarchical society, the author could take it for granted that he and the reader shared the same sense

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26 As we shall see in Chapter Eleven, the novel was born during a historical period when the experience of hearing voices was being turned over by religion to psychiatry. It is little wonder, then, that the surrender and devotion to voices so characteristic of the religious experience should be carefully avoided by the early novelists, who seemed to control the medley of characters mediated by the novel much as God had his creatures. Paradoxically, during the Romantic period, as religion continued to lose to science its dominion over the definition of reality, literature began to assume some of the functions of religion vis a vis respect for the autonomy of the voices.
of what was significant in life. "What was significant in human events was itself manifested in publicly visible doing or suffering, in action or passion related to status or fortune" (Daiches, 1960, 4). Omniscient narration was possible because people agreed about the nature and perception of reality. Reality was something objective, something "out there."

Just as astronomy had displaced man from the center so had philosophy, and so would literature in its turn. Locke argued that we each know our own impressions of reality but not reality per se. If reality itself is not knowable, what happens to a literature "whose object is the imitation of reality? It too is then destined to undergo a shift of center" (Tuveson, 1974, 25-26).

It was not simply that omniscience began to fade as one narrative technique replaced another. But rather the omniscient style became an impossibility for many authors, partly because reality itself seemed to be changing. It changed as the twentieth century approached, bringing with it the horrors of world wars, the thriving of multiple and discrepant ideologies, and the insights of a new science, and psychology. The objective position became untenable, leaving us to see how we each effect the known. Nowadays we might nostalgically side with Virginia Woolf in looking back on Jane Austen's period when the world was a commonly shared one. Woolf remarks of Austen:

To believe that your impressions hold good for others is to be released from the cramp and confinement of personality. One of the marks of the modern novelist is that he is unable to hold that belief. (quoted in Daiches, 1960, 3)

And thus the author had to find a different place to stand in relation to the characters.

Modern literary criticism is filled with debates about what happens when the previously omniscient author withdraws from the work and allows the characters to carry the drama (see Harvey, 1965). Even if the characters appear spontaneously and have their own ideas about the unfolding drama, does not the author observe and coordinate these events, searching for the most expressive details and moments to convey the plot?

In short in imaginal dialogues in which the ego is made relative and non-omniscient, it does not cease to fulfill important functions. A part of the ego—sometimes called the "observing ego"—sometimes
the “reflective self-representation” (Schafer, 1968)—is an agent for an awareness of the dialogue as it unfolds. We can liken this part of the Self to a stage manager, narrator, or “histor,”27 or to the internal observer that actors become aware of when they are playing a part. In Stanislavski’s words,

As I was taking my bath I recalled the fact that while I was playing the part of the Critic I still did not lose the sense of being myself... Actually, I was my own observer at the same time that another part of me was being a fault-finding, critical creature... I divided myself, as it were, into two personalities. One continued as an actor, the other was an observer. Strangely enough this duality not only did not impede, it actually promoted my creative work.

An actor is split into two parts when he is acting. You recall how Tommaso Salvini put it: “An actor lives, weeps and laughs, he observes his own tears and mirth. It is this double existence, this balance between life and acting that makes for art.”

As you see, this division does no harm to inspiration. On the contrary the one encourages the other. Moreover we lead a double existence in our actual lives. But this does not prevent our living and having strong emotions. (1936, 19, 167)

This division is like the one we experience when we read and imagine. The book’s scene is more vivid to us than the one we literally inhabit—as is the imaginal other with whom we converse in thought. But at the same time there exists ready to hand what Schumaker calls “aesthetic distance,” the realization that the imaginal scene exists in a universe apart from the room we are literally in. Some portion of awareness stands ready to see both realities (Schumaker, 1960, 15).

Schafer speaks of this process in psychoanalytic terms, maintaining that what differentiates daydreams from psychosis is the presence or easy recall of a “reflective self representation,” that is, an “implicit or explicit notation accompanying realistic thought that it is thought

27 The “histor” seeks to “find out the truth from the various” characters. He is “the narrator as inquirer, constructing a narrative on the basis of such evidence as he has been able to accumulate. The ‘histor’ is not a character in the narrative, but he is not exactly the author himself either. He is a persona, a projection of the author’s empirical virtues” (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966, 262, 265ff).
(e.g., memory, perception, anticipation, etc.) and not concrete reality” (1968, 109). In a fantasy which revolves around an imaginal figure, there is a “splitting of the ego” which “allows other ego processes to remain realistically oriented to internal and external circumstances and to note the actual absence of the imagined person…” (Schafer, 1968, 111). Whereas, in psychosis, there is a “limited or slow reversibility of the suspension of the reflective self representations” that occur in daydreams (96).

To enrich our thinking about these changes in “reflective self representation” and “the ego,” let us return to literature and see how it dealt with the deterioration of the omniscient stance—again analogizing the author and “her” characters to ego and “its” multiplicity. The decline of the omniscient narrator in fiction—often it was the author’s voice—did not entail the end of narrators. Rather narrators joined the ranks of characters. They too became fallible, their perspectives assailable.

What kind of narrators succeeded in carrying on within this more complicated reality? Might these narrators not be models for an ego struggling amidst the multiplicity of mind? Let us look briefly to those employed by Flaubert, James, and Conrad.

Flaubert tried consciously to remove himself from the narrative in *Madame Bovary* and found “that if the omniscient author is eliminated, the only remaining basis for the ‘point of view’ that justifies the text has to be the consciousness of someone: a character of the novel” (Morrisette, 1961-62, 4). With a decline in omniscience there was a heightened sensitivity to character. Flaubert became so involved in the process of transition from one character’s point of view to another that he suggested “that a novel could be written whose value would lie not in its subject at all but in its relationships and articulations: *un livre sur rien*, a book about nothing” (Morrisette, 1961-62, 4). Here Flaubert came close to that aspect of imagination that is based not on story or plot but on the relationship between characters, between points of view. It is the ongoing, ever evolving imagination that does not cease with this denouement or that chapter. Flaubert conceived of a novel more like the conversations in thought (a novel later to be written by Nathalie Sarraute and James Joyce, among others). It has been said of the works of Joyce and Faulkner that such a novel becomes an existence in itself—it is not about something, it is something (Szanto, 1972, 5).
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Henry James also realized that surrendering the omniscient stance meant that he must discover some other center or focus through which the story could be told. To achieve this the author must leave himself and enter the consciousness of the character: "A beautiful infatuation this, always, I think, the intensity of the creative effort to get into the skin of the creature" or character (James, quoted in Friedman, 1955, 1161).

But through what kind of consciousness should the story be seen? James felt this character should be "finely aware," "an illuminating intelligence," his mind a "lucid reflector" and "the most polished of possible mirrors." The new narrator must not only have the capacity to be agitated by what he sees. He must also have the capacity to be surprised, even bewildered. Edith Wharton agreed with James:

It should be the storyteller's first care to choose his reflecting mind deliberately, as one would choose a building site...and when this is done, to live inside the mind chosen, trying to feel, see and react exactly as the latter would, no more, no less and, above all, no otherwise. Only thus can the writer avoid attributing incongruities of thought and metaphor to his chosen interpreter. (quoted in Friedman, 1955, 1165)

The author gradually receded from the novel. He intruded less and in some cases disappeared altogether. James Joyce said that the author was "refined out of existence" As Friedman (1955) points out, this refinement entailed gradually limiting the author's channels of information and possible vantage points by staying within the consciousness of a particular character or set of characters.

This limitation of the author's vision—from omniscience to the point of view of a character—reflected a radical change in the function of fiction. Fiction could no longer imitate factual reality, but could only present imaginative reality (Scholes and Kellogg, 1966, 262), that reality to which one has access only through the eyes of characters. In some cases the author handed over his job to a "witness-narrator." Such a character did not possess the omniscience of the author, but through certain devices was able to supplement a merely human understanding of the minds and goings on about him. For example, Joseph Conrad would often use as his narrator a character "in whom others felt compelled to confide," a sharer of secrets. The diaries and
letters of others would fall into his possession. It was his or her presence which would be sought by the other characters for their late-night confessional—in the jungle, by the fire, and at the pub.

Would not such a narrator be a fitting hermetic go-between to the multiple voices one encounters: now a diplomat, now a confidant, now a drinking partner, depending on which character one is trying to understand? The flexibility, intelligence, empathy and savvy required by this kind of ego would be learned by interaction with characters, just as our ease with other people is gained slowly through early bumbling, embarrassment, faux pas, and self-centeredness brought “rudely” to our attention.

The development we have been describing does not have to do with the enlargement of the ego or with the building of ego strength in all its aspects. It does however, have to do with an increased ability to allow other voices to speak (which relativizes the ego) and with the increased agility of an observing ego which can be attentive to these imaginal dialogues. This quality of ego which is akin to a narrator cannot be assumed to be present. The ego all too often identifies with a given character without awareness of having done so. For example, take a man who identifies with a strong, independent, masterful character and is unaware that this is but one psychic possibility among many. Though he may alternate between positions of independence and dependence, feelings of strength and feelings of impotence, there may be little or no recognition on his part of these shifts in character.

As imaginal dialogues develop from dialogues in which the “I” is omniscient to ones in which the “I” is one voice among others, the term “dialogue” deepens in meaning. It pertains not only to the linguistic structure of communication between two or more parties, but to that kind of relating—often felt as spiritual—which preserves the integrity of both self and other. One neither abdicates selfhood nor incorporates the other. Each can address and be addressed. The development of this manner of relating—from “I-It” to “I-Thou” relation—is the central theme of Martin Buber’s philosophical and religious work.

For Buber these styles of relating are not limited to person-God or person-person relations, but include man’s relation to nature and intelligible forms—ideas, deeds, works of art (Pfuetze, 1973, 157). Buber contrasts abstract monologic thinking to dramatic speech-
thinking. He finds dialogic thought to be characterized by directedness to an other and openness to the unpredictable: “One can never know what the other will say, nor rehearse one’s reply” (Pfuetze, 1973, 129).

In “I-It” relations the other is a thing which I use, experience, or manipulate. I notice only those aspects of him, her, or it which relate to my purpose. I do not come to know the other in her essence. Nor do I come to know more deeply my own being. For Buber each person has two “I’s:” the “I” of “I-It” and the “I” of “I-Thou.” In “I- It,” I am never wholly myself, just as the other is not wholly himself or herself: “I become through my relation to the Thou, as I become I, I say Thou” (Buber, 1958, 11). This development from “I-It” to “I-Thou” is never completed once and for all. One continually falls back into, and then struggles out of, a relation of “I-It.”

In Daniel Buber (1915) writes that although we may first address the other, eventually we must be able to be addressed by the other—a process analogous to the doll’s change from being a passive recipient of the child’s action to its increasing animation in early childhood play. It is in this addressing and being addressed in relationship that self-knowledge arises.

Buber argues for a mysticism in which the integrity of both self and other is preserved. He argues against either a dissolution of the self into otherness, or the negation of otherness through the assertion of “the all embracing character of the self” (Pfuetze, 1973, 138). In dialogue one asserts the primacy of relation and struggles to maintain that tension rather than totally identifying with or incorporating the other. Buber firmly asserts the autonomy of the other, working against a theory of imagination that returns all images to the “I.”

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it—only in a different way. (1958, 8)

Similarly with artistic forms:

This is the eternal source of art: a man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work. This form is no offspring of his soul, but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power. The man is concerned with an act of his being. If he carries it through, if he speaks the primary word out of
his being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out, and the work arises.

I do not behold [the form] as a thing among the "inner" things nor as an image of my "fancy," but as that which exists in the present. If test is made of its objectivity the form is certainly not "there." Yet what is actually so much present as it is? And the relation in which I stand to it is real, for it affects me, as I affect it. (9-10)

The autonomy of the other does not exclude the possibility of putting one's own life into it for a while. Within dialogue there are moments in which one feels as though one were the other. Buber describes being with a pine tree and identifying so completely with the tree that he felt its bark as his own skin and its cones as his own children (1915, 133). In this moment, however, the being of the tree is not reduced to the being of the man. This momentary identification with the tree is similar to Cary's emphasis on the author's sympathy for his character. Dostoevsky, Cary claims, was Ivan while writing "Pro and Contra." Through this sympathy he experienced Ivan's arguments from the inside, even though they contradicted his intentions as author.

For Buber then, true dialogue with an imaginal other is a reciprocal, mutual relation in which the other is autonomous and has the freedom to address as well as to be addressed. In such a dialogue one would approach the other without intending to use or even to "experience" him or her. For in experiencing, Buber claims, we construe that experience arises from a self rather than between oneself and the world: "The world has no part in the experience. It permits itself to be experienced but has no concern in the matter. For it does nothing to the experience, and the experience does nothing to it" (1958, 5). True dialogic relation is not based on verbal exchange, but rather on the autonomy of the other and one's openness to the other. Indeed, there need be no words spoken for such a relation to exist. Though this meeting occasions the development of the "I," it radically mitigates against egocentricity. As dialogue may appear in silence, so may monologue be present within dialogue with another. While all the linguistic requirements of dialogue may be satisfied in a conversation, a relation more akin to monologue, to "I-It" relation, may nonetheless prevail.
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For Buber as for Jung, the development of a sense of the other’s autonomy does not entail the self’s subservience to the other’s will; one does not necessarily do what a voice might say. Instead, the autonomy of both sides of the relation—“I” and “Thou”—is retained. “I-It” and “I-Thou” are two modes of existence which characterize our relationship to others, both literal and imaginal. They correspond to Erich Fromm’s distinction between “having” and “being.” “In the having mode of existence my relationship to the world is one of possessing and owning, one in which I want to make everybody and everything including myself, my property” (1976, 12). In the being mode the other is not incorporated and is allowed to change. The other is permitted to exist in his/her autonomy, authenticity, truth, and aliveness. Fromm, in To Have or To Be, traces the transition from a societal emphasis on “being” to one on “having, “ and sees the rise of industrialism as a cultural turning point.

Industrialism, Fromm maintains, succeeded by virtue of two psychological premises:

(1) that the aim of life is happiness, that is, maximum pleasure, defined as the satisfaction of any desire or subjective need a person may feel (radical hedonism); (2) that egotism, selfishness, and greed, as the system needs to generate them in order to function, lead to peace and harmony. (1976, xxv)

Profit, meanwhile, lost its original meaning of “profit for the soul” and began to mean only material profit.

It may seem farfetched at first to speculate on how these dominant themes—which sustain our present culture, and in part breed our psychologies of imagination—impinge on our relation to imaginal others. However if we look at this transition as it unfolded for the Romantics, we find that while imagination was first lauded for its “sympathy”—its capacity to free us from a self-centered world and allow us into the roles of others—this same chameleon-like activity of imagination was later used to expand the limits of the Self, to enrich the Self with the bounty of the world. The poet would take on the qualities of the other—literal or imaginal—in order to expand himself. The rhetoric and sales pitches of much contemporary popular psychology concerning the imagination reflects this shift. We are urged to “expand our potential” through tapes and exercises that treat the
figures of the imaginal like consumer merchandise, like pawns of the 
ego to be used only for its own enrichment and betterment. In therapy 
where imaginal dialogues can be observed in detail, one often finds 
the characters themselves objecting to being treated as the ego’s 
objects: being used, being lectured to, being “had.”

In noting these differences among imaginal dialogues, we are 
moving toward considerations of pathology. Though we have argued 
against many of the usual notions of pathology with regard to the 
imaginal we can now begin, from a standpoint of basic respect for 
the imaginal, to articulate how the viewpoint presented here might 
itsel conceive of development and pathology.