



The Invention of the Self: The Hinge of Consciousness in the Eighteenth Century

Professor John O. Lyons

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The absence of self in Classical literature and the emergence in the eighteenth century of the concept of the unique and individual self asserting its existence and seeking its truth in private experience and feeling is often touched upon in cultural histories but little explained. Seeking the reasons for and the effects of the change of attitude toward one's concept of one's self in the "new" eighteenth-century attitude toward history, biography, travel literature, pornography, and the novel, Lyons finds, first, that the term *self* is deceptively vague. It evolved, he notes, to fill the vacuum created by doubt about the existence of the soul.

Second, Lyons finds that without a concept of the self—that ineffable something in a human being that to its inventors and their followers was an abstract of pure and intuited natural laws—the revolution and romanticism of the modern age would have been very different from what it has been. More importantly, Lyons concludes that the concept led to monumental error and to bitter disappointments rooted, as his illuminating history shows, in the impossibility of defining that which never was.

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