

**It.**

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This piece of writing originally formed part of [Exquisite Corpse](#), a ‘collectively authored chain of thought’, devised by Aura Satz, in which each participant was required to continue the text from the last sentence of their predecessor’s text. The piece was on show at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK, as part of the Hans Bellmer-Pierre Klossowski exhibition, 20 September-19th November 2006.

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No non-circular argument can validate it.

Or, more strictly, ‘it’. This is because ‘it’ – that specific thing that is being referred to in this particular pronoun - must always be presupposed in anything said of it. ‘It’, like other pronouns - ‘he’, ‘they’, ‘I’ - and deictics - ‘here’, ‘there’, ‘then’ – must always constitute an event of language rather than a simple pointing or reference. ‘It’ means that thing which must already have been named, implied, or otherwise delimited, in order to be intelligible. But, exactly because its reference is supposed to be understood, or determined in advance, ‘it’ is always itself in advance of its referent, which is yet to come, in the offing. ‘It’ is a stitch in time, that knits together the ravelled sleeve of speech. Thus it – that is, ‘it’ - is proleptic, parasitic, never entire or self-sustaining. It is always embedded in a world, an understanding, a situation, a given, a predicament (a ‘having-been-said’) even as it is also always minimally out of this world, precisely since it does not simply give up the reference that is given in it.

So embedded in the already given is ‘it’ that it tends to dwindle, as though trying to melt back into the background it indicates. *It* in English is already a truncation of the Old English *hit*, the nominative and accusative of the stem *hi-*, of which the masculine form gives us *he*. But then, in certain dialects, and in literary usages, *it* was thinned down even further to the barely audible dental tap at the beginning of *'twas*, *'twere*, or at the end of *'to't*, *'on't*, *'in't*. The same concealment occurs in the French ‘qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?’ (What is it that it is, that thing?) And of course, in our contemporary form of the it, IT, ‘it’ is able to lie undetectably low, concealed by its very ubiquity. Google it and weep.

Most databases will give you a message like the following: 'You searched for: it. Terms ignored: it. Number of results: 0'

But, however embedded, however definitionally *en situation* it must be, 'it' has also sometimes been able to expand into a curious kind of autonomy. In fact, the separation of *it* from *hit* is part of the coming into being of the neuter, or the emergence of the realm of the specifically human from a background newly, slowly, constituted as inanimate, impersonal and inhuman. Animals are held to occupy the realm of the neutral, and until quite recently, a child might also be nameable as 'it'. Indeed, the passage into the human condition is signified using the word: 'it's a girl!'. Children were also nameable as 'it' in the nineteenth century, though this usage is now very rare. E. Nesbit used the term to refer to children in the wriggling mass, in the opening page of her *Five Children And It* (1902): 'Everyone got its legs kicked or its feet trodden on in the scramble to get out of the carriage' (Nesbit 1994, 7), and the title of her book (in which the 'it' turns out to be a psammead, or sand-fairy) may refer obliquely to the emergence of children from the condition of the it. In fact, we should distinguish between the uninflected and the neutral. One of the reasons that 'its' was never likely to catch on as an ungendered form, leaving open the question of whether 'his', or 'her' is meant ('The artist and its responsibilities'), is that the domain of the it has become the domain of the nonhuman, not just the unmarked or sexually indifferent.

What is raining when 'it is raining'? What is twelve o'clock, when 'it' is? What is, when 'it is'? Nietzsche thought that the idea of the 'I' was merely a 'grammatical habit', or a 'logician's superstition': 'Thinking is an action; for every action, there is the one who is active in it – so therefore...' Furthermore, the 'it' of general causation was also a grammatical artefact, like the supposition of the ancient atomists that, given the existence of force, 'there must be a little clod of matter in which power resides, out of which it works – the atom'. Nietzsche looks forward to the day when perhaps we 'may learn to do without that little 'it' (to which the estimable old 'I' has shrivelled)' (Nietzsche 1886, 1.17).

Modernity is characterised by two contrary impulses: one to put aside the realm of the 'it', carefully distinguishing its operations and effects from the realm of the 'I'. The other is to predict, substantiate and autonomise the 'it', nearly always in order to rescue or protect the 'I' from its numbing, petrifying: 'wo es war, soll ich werden'. Three texts bearing witness to itness appeared in the space of a year. One was Martin Buber's *Ich und Du* (1922), which argued for a world of direct 'I-thou' relations, to replace the I-it relations of a world of

objects set against the frigidly sequestered I. Another was *The Book of the It*, by George Groddeck, a physician who espoused a wild form of psychosomatic theory, loosely based on psychoanalysis. The central belief of his book is that 'man is animated by the Unknown, that there is within him an "Es", an "It," some wondrous force which directs both what he himself does, and what happens to him. The affirmation "I live" is only conditionally correct, it expresses only a small and superficial part of the fundamental principle, "Man is lived by the It." '. Groddeck saw the operations of the 'It' in the tendency of the old to revert to the childish postures and the capacity of children suddenly to display the features of their parents, or the parents they will become – 'For the It, age does not exist, and in the It is our own real life.' Most of his essay is taken up with accounts of the perverse asexuality or bisexuality of the 'It', which is far from indifferent to sex, and impels men to want become women and women to want to become men. 'Yes, so wonderful is the It that it cares nothing at all for scientific anatomy or physiology, but in lordly fashion repeats the legend of Athene's birth from the head of Zeus.'

Freud, who corresponded with Groddeck, thought enough of the term to adopt it in his *The Ego and the Id*, also from 1923. Here 'the id' represents an expansion of the realm of the unconscious, to include, not just repressed contents, as in Freud's earlier, simpler scheme of ego and unconscious, but the whole of instinctive life, of which the ego itself is now said to be a modification. Freud has a bizarre thing to say about this field of mental life. Henceforth, he says, he will follow Groddeck 'in calling the other part of the mind [i.e., that part that is not the ego], into which this entity extends and which behaves as though it were *Ucs.* the "id" ' (Freud 362). Not, as I first assumed he must have written, 'behaves as though it were conscious', but behaves as though it were *unconscious*. I can make little of this, but there seems to be a lot in it. What can it mean? That the id pretends to be unconscious? That it looks and acts as though it were unconscious, but really is not? That it resembles 'the unconscious' as previously formulated (by Freud), but is not identical with it?

As so often, it is not the outcome that Freud thinks he is achieving that is interesting, but the perplexity, the flutters of his thinking in getting to it. This awkwardness is compounded by the fact the English readers encounter Freud's 'It' ('das Es') in the form of 'the id', the extraordinary translation which Strachey decided upon for his 1926 version of the text, presumably in order to complement 'the ego', which he had already routinely used to translate 'das Ich'. Sceptical interrogators of the possessed used sometimes to trip up their unlettered subjects when they claimed to be possessed by the devil, but

mangled their Latin tenses and cases in their replies (Satan can naturally be assumed to have a strong grasp of the language of the Catholic church). It seems that English readers are to assume a similar classical pedigree for the impersonal *it*. But Latin 'id', the stem of words like 'idiom' and 'identity', does not signify 'it-ness', but 'sameness'. The It which is never quite itself is here given the gift of identity with itself.

Only a few writers have centred on the off-centring powers of the *it*. One of them is Edward Thomas, in his poem 'Old Man', written in December 1914. Like many of Thomas's poems, it is about the difficult relation between names and what they name, here, in particular, the herb wormwood ([Artemisia absinthium](#)), known in England alternatively as 'Old Man' and 'Lad's Love'. Its name derives from the fact that it is used in making absinthe. It is poisonous, but claimed to be effective in small doses in alleviating gastric and menstrual pain. But in Thomas's poem, the herb names namelessness itself, since 'Even to one that knows it well, the names/Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is:/At least, what that is clings not to the names/In spite of time' (Thomas 1988, 104). The poem describes a child who breaks off tips of the herb as she runs in and out of the house at the door of which it grows. The speaker imagines the child growing to remember, or perhaps, like him, not fully to remember. For the herb itself is just an 'it' floating like an odour and diffusing its sound through the poem, most notably in the word 'bitter' – 'bitter scent,/Of garden rows, and ancient damson trees'; 'Where first I met the bitter scent is lost'; 'I would rather give up others more sweet,/With no meaning, than this bitter one' (Thomas 1988, 104). The bitterness of the herb is somehow bound up with its capacity to erase or suspend memory and nomination, which shrink to an insistent, but diminished chiming of short 'i' sounds, as though the very 'it' of the herb were being eroded or clipped: 'Often she waits there, snipping the tips'; 'it is not old;/So well she clips it'; 'me/Forbidding her to pick' (Thomas 1988, 104). Sniffing, snipping, clipping, picking, represent miniature examples of the 'spite of time' – time spited, and spiting, leaving nothing behind, but the shape or sensation of the lingering, unlimned, but illimitable *it* that the poem is and is not.

No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush  
Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,  
Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;  
Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end. (Thomas 1988, 104)

Naming the 'it' the 'id' assists the process of reifying it. In 1926, the racy society novelist Elinor Glyn published a story called 'It' in *Hearst's International*, about

the pursuit of a wealthy playboy by a sassy shopgirl. The following year, the story was made into a film of the same title, directed by Clarence Badger and starring Clara Bow, in 1927. Now 'it', as in 'the it girl', the phrase that bred from the film, had come to mean the magnetic power of sexual attraction. As Nicholas Daly has suggested, Glyn's 'It' marks the domestication of the Freudian 'id' (Daly 2004, 90-1). The it of sexual fascination is sutured to (only-just) earlier notions of animal magnetism, mesmeric power and the 'soul-subtlety' that were associated with the power of fascination (meaning, both the power to fascinate, and the power to be fascinated, the will to the power of being overpowered). This passional passivity brings together the supernaturalism of the late nineteenth century with the seductions of mass entertainment, especially in its technological forms (cinema, recorded music). Here the two modes of the 'it', the merely mechanical and the more-than-human (the spiritual, the spectral, the supernatural), cohere and commingle. Machine and ghost ramify and reiterate.

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