

Sean Burke

**The Web of Circumstance
Challenges Posed by the Biographical Question to Contemporary Theory**

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Preface

By Jon Helt Haarder

As well as being a demanding and exciting process involving well over 50 scholars and critics, editing a fourth edition of *Danske digtere i det 20. århundrede* (Danish Authors of the 20th Century) obviously raises a number of theoretical questions concerning the writing of literary history in general. More specifically the use, not of Sainte-Beuve's *method*, but his *genre* – *le portrait littéraire* – in telling the literary history of Denmark in the previous century awakens an old ghost within literary theory: the author.

Generations of students of literature have been taught that the author is long dead. They have grown up to be clinical literary scientists and/or cultural theorists vigorously exorcising the bad old subject. A lot of the younger Danish authors have degrees in literature and many among them are anxious to draw a line between life and text. At the same time biographies sell by the ton in the marketplace and biographists gathering under the banner of Goethe, shouting *Bildung* at anything new, have kept important strongholds within the study of Danish literature and can muster several leading critics. How can people from a camp divided like that possibly together write three volumes about the oeuvres of Danish authors in the 20th century?

The main prerequisite was to find a firm, competent and widely respected general editor. This could only be Anne-Marie Mai, professor at The University of Southern Denmark, connoisseur of modern Danish literature as well as a scholar versed in the theory of literary history. She gathered a small taskforce consisting of a text editor, Maria Davidsen, and a PhD.-scholar working with both editorial practicalities and theoretical matters, yours truly. We realized that a reevaluation of the author-debate was an important factor in the editorial process. Not because we wanted the contributors to tackle the question in one and the same fashion but because debating the issue of biographism in new ways might prove an inspiration to scholars taught to

forget about the author but commissioned to write about or via them anyway. *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* by Sean Burke of Durham University was where we started. This brilliant study deconstructs the anti-author theory and highlights how a return of the author might challenge the ideological foundations of theory as we know it. Having been inspired by Sean Burke, we invited him to give a lecture on the third of the annual meetings for the 54 contributors to *Danske digtere i det 20. århundrede*.

»The Web of Circumstance: Challenges Posed by the Biographical Question to Contemporary Theory« is based on his lecture in October 2000 at The University of Southern Denmark but has been reworked considerably. Setting off from the well-hidden biographism in a row of contemporary, contextualizing, theoretical 'schools', the article is an exploration of the ethical and epistemological stakes in a renewed interest in biographical criticism. In the end it makes the whole question more pragmatic than either the opponents of or the advocates for old-school biographism would care to acknowledge. The article is followed by an appendix which in a condensed form show the changing theories of authorship »from Plato to the Postmodern«.

The editorial staff of *Danske digtere I det 20. århundrede* take a decidedly pragmatic stand on the question of the author, leaving the contributors »to find their own way with it« as Professor Mai likes to say. The work of Sean Burke has been an important source in laying down the theoretical framework for such a pragmatic approach. Stanley Fish was right in claiming that »biography is not something from which we can swerve«, but failed to rise to his own conclusion.¹ Letting the reader – not the theorist, not the author – decide whether the author is relevant is a great step forwards and just might change the way we teach and do research in literature.

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1. Stanley Fish: »Biography and Intention«, in: William Epstein (ed): *Contesting the Subject. Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1991. S.

THE WEB OF CIRCUMSTANCE:

Challenges Posed by the Biographical Question to Contemporary Theory

by Sean Burke (University of Durham)

Half Dust, half deity, alike unfit

To sink or soar

[*Manfred*]

It would be facile to say that we have just emerged from a century in which the cultural appeal of biography has been matched only by the critical disrepute into which the genre has fallen. Psychobiography itself is a twentieth-century innovation and achieved a fragile, albeit lurid, respectability up until the 1950s, and scholarly biographies have continued to command the attention of literary academics. Furthermore, to judge from recent publications and conference papers, "biography" is once again a word and concept that can be freely owned by scholars and theorists concerned to reinvestigate the always vertiginous relationship between a life and a work. Fashion notwithstanding, this development follows upon some twenty years in which criticism has sought recontextualisation under the various headings of New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, Identity Politics and Postcolonial studies. With hindsight, this renewed interest in the authorial life has been inevitable in that new contextualisms have depended upon a biographical recourse that has failed to incorporate itself at a methodological level. Aside from the pioneering work of

Stephen Greenblatt in which the critic - like a latter-day Pierre Menard - rewrites the text in terms of information to which its actual author could not have had access - the creative conjunction of the factual and fictive has surreptitiously conformed to a positivist agenda. *Tel arbre, tel fruit*, in Sainte Beuve's famous formulation, still does a certain justice to the contemporary contextualising impulse, however theorised it might seem on the surface. Long ago, and with admirable, if complicitous, accuracy, Terry Eagleton observed:

It is not, naturally, that the organicist modes of Eliot's novels are the "expression" of her authorial ideology. As a literary producer, George Eliot delineates a "space" constituted by the insertion of "pastoral", religious and Romantic sub-ensembles into an ideological formation dominated by liberalism, scientific rationalism, and empiricism ... The phrase "George Eliot" signifies nothing more than the insertion of certain specific ideological determinations - Evangelical Christianity, rural organicism, incipient feminism, petty-bourgeois moralism - into a hegemonic ideological formation ... ¹

Perhaps so, according to a chastened model of reading rather than a generous model of writing. But, without that life lived as Mary Ann Evans - and then as the textually purer "George Eliot" - this "hegemonic ideological formation" would not have occurred. Albeit approvingly, Eagleton pointed to a methodological mystification central to all contextualisms that simultaneously invoke and cancel the biographical/authorial subject. Alike, the New Historicism sought to distance itself from the vulgar Marxian model whereby the author acts a bridge between the text and its materialised conditions of production. In textualising history and historicising textuality, the New Historicism could only arrive at what anthropologists call "thick description": theoretical issues were left aside in the hope that a methodology would emerge from an aggregation of readings. No such theory or methodology did emerge and confusion over authorial categories was only compounded by the repetition of the hitherto-productive uncertainties of Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?".

Authorship was construed as a transcendental category even within movements which

sought to demystify universalist assumptions via historical specificity. Louis Montrose, for example, writes of the need to resist "a prevalent tendency to posit and privilege a unified and autonomous individual - whether an Author or a Work - to be set against a social or literary background."² Similarly, Identity Politics and Postcolonial criticism fight shy of any seemingly humanistic investment in the author by way of various sleights-of-hand amounting to little more than an act of faith whereby we are asked to accept a name, a signature, a micro-narrative and a date, all those things put in place by a name, say that of "St Augustine", as though our voyage from the texts of the *Confessions* or *On Christian Doctrine* to the North African plains, to a colonial outsider, a speaker of patois, a transgressive sexuality, did not take place on the credit of an authorial signature. Neo-contextual criticism has thus participated in a reduction comparable to that practiced by twentieth-century formalisms. Resistant to theorisation or indeed candour, the biographical is again the shortfall of major critical enterprises, criticism once more announcing itself to be on the high road to literary knowledge leaving biographers to nestle amidst (in Clive Bell's words) "the warm snug hills of humanity". As with its apparent opposite, "aestheticism" - neo-contextualism has turned away from the vexed categories of biography and "lived experience": a hazily expanded notion of textuality was used to keep life - in all its barbarity - from the gates. But life, as ever, presses and pulses, asserts itself on the margins of the insecure discipline of literary studies. Impossible to assimilate, it shadows the critical enterprise like a dark interpreter. "We fall prey," says Paul de Man, "to an almost irresistible tendency to relapse unwittingly into the concerns of the self as they exist in the empirical world".³ Yet, the concerns of the personal self might equally be a cause for celebration rather than lament, for witting rather than unwitting relapse. Echoing Kierkegaard's authorial metaphor of the web in which the fruit hangs, Virginia Woolf says in *A Room of One's Own*:

... for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners ... when the web is pulled

askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.⁴

The word "grossly" is here *á propos* and probably chosen with an ironic backward glance at the impersonalist theories of Clive Bell and T.S. Eliot. Certainly, Woolf's elegant commonsense turns upon what we here designate as "the biographical imperative". Just as everyone knows that poems come out of a head not a hat, so too it is universally acknowledged that, however supernal their final cast, literary works emanate from the human-all-too-human. No sooner, though, is that recognition granted than an equally valid impulse overtakes us. To retrace the work to its author's life strikes us as unconscionable reduction. Like the Platonic and Freudian model of the soul or ego as a chariot pulled in contrary directions, literary critic and philosopher alike wonder how to reconcile the ideals of disinterest and objectivity with the quotidian realisation that a work or indeed a judgement upon a work arises from a specific perspective in a specific set of circumstances. The biographical imperative thus finds itself disowned as soon as owned, invalid in the very instant of its validation.

To pursue this matter further, we need to consider the insuperable difficulties involved in theorising the biographical as also to distinguish between the aesthetic and ethical stakes of such a voyage. These considerations, in turn, will lead us to view the rejection of the biographical with a historical sense that drives back to the opening of modernity and Kant's radical reduction of the subject to a biographically hollow postulate. How, we might ask, did the real world become a lie, life a pollutant, a poor relation of literary criticism? How did biography, the authorial life as lived, become the shadow self, the wraith of literature?

Borges's besieged Funes must devote an entire day to the recollection of an entire day. Those impossible cartographers who wish to practice "Exactitude in Science" must contrive unobtrusive maps that are one with the size of the kingdom. The mind of God, Borges tells us elsewhere, would see the footsteps taken by a man during his lifetime with the same intuitive certainty with which the finite mind recognises a triangle, square or circle. The perfect biography is a similarly inconceivable figure. As the Evangelist puts it: "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (*John*, 21:25). Borges's Pierre Menard puts his own quandary in terms applicable to the ideal biographer: "My task is not difficult, essentially ... I should only have to be immortal to carry it out".⁵

Locked into a correspondence theory of truth, biography-as-genre is untheorisable. Even in the purely agraphic instances of Socrates and Christ where we divine a perfect unity of life and teaching, the biographical imperative has proved parabolic or indeed tendentious. No work of representation can be complete but incompleteness is the very essence, the art or sullen craft of the biographer. Biography can only be an exercise in approximation. A haiku or lyric poem might, arguably, be incomplete according to an aesthetic measure but will never be incomplete in the manner of a biography. An epic poem or novel (to take the harder cases) may well be an imperfect actualisation of a potential structure but, inverting the eighteenth-century metaphor, we cannot know the stone in which the ideal sculpture resided. However, the raw materials of a biography - irrecoverable as they often are - have constituted a broad event in the concrete world. Hence the virtue of necessity that characterises antique biography. Lacking the range of information available to the modern biographer, authors such as Plutarch were free to take the shimmering instant, the resounding anecdote as emblematic of a life, a time. A depleted archive enforced proto-photographics: Alexander of Macedonia resting his head on his left shoulder and gazing absently as though his eyes would deliquesce into space; Zeno of Elea basking in the sun whilst eating figs. Indeed, Plutarch saw fit to draw attention to his method: "For it is not histories that I am writing, but lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not

always a manifestation of virtue and vice, nay a slight thing like a phrase or jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall" (*Alexander*, 1.1-2). Plutarch's instinct would be formally realised by the division of late-antique biography into *praxéis* and *ethos*, a division within which the latter was accorded the higher value.⁶

Revived in the twentieth century, this minimalist search for *ethos* was recommended by Boris Tomasevskij, for example, through a redrawing of boundaries whereby the literary legend constructed by authors could be encompassed within the aesthetic realm . It also informs Barthes's neo-classical notion of the biographeme as encapsulation, the paradigmatic instant in an authorial life that somehow calls back to being the embarrassed essence of a life as lived. Stasis, portraiture, replace the monumental biographies of the post-Johnsonian era. But even here, in this most modest of accounts, the biographical does not lend itself to theoretical extrapolation. This legendary reduction can posit only a vanishing point, a moment that scarcely happens in time at all. From the predicated infinity of empirical biography, we move to an eerie crystallisation, a definitive instant that can only define a life in the manner of snapshot, a hostage, a lie against time.

II

It is no doubt a commonplace to remark that the pioneers of impersonality were writers themselves. In one of many hygienic strictures, Coleridge spoke of a necessary aloofness on the part of the poet, Keats of negative capability, and Byron of the ideal of an aestheticised selfhood. Baudelaire, Proust and T.S. Eliot all formulated versions of the *moi profond*, a transcendental self that speaks over and above the personal voice: the self insatiable for non-self ("*un moi insatiable de non-moi*"), as Baudelaire put it in a resonant paradox (one which Eliot would rewrite in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"). Intriguingly, the repudiation of the prosaic, biographical self hearkened back to a romantic view of the author as a solitary, sage-like, Olympian figure - as far

elevated above the cares of everyday life as the visionary Nietzsche who, on the heights of Sils Maria, declared himself to be "6,000 feet above man and time". Like Caspar David Friedrich's cloaked *Wanderer*, or Byron's Manfred, this shamanic figure gathered its status in proportion to its radical alienation from the empirical world.

T.S. Eliot's attempts to formalise this tendency took an overtly anti-romantic line which is nonetheless belied by the figures of suffering, sacrifice and alienation that consort with the impersonalist theorem. The true poet, simply, suffers from insupportable emotion: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things." ⁷ Significantly this *a fortiori* paradox serves not to dislodge but to restore the romantic image of the imprisoned artist grounded in a mortal world of toil from which he would fly. Furthermore, personality and emotion are here the precondition for impersonality, the poetic "self" only transcending the empirical with a backward glance at the personal. One need only look to tense (e.g., "only those who *have*") to recognise that impersonality is a wish not a realisation, a vestibule and tanatalisation, an absence premised on a disturbing presence that the poet is compelled to affirm in the very moment of renunciation. We can see here something of the irony of the Joycean/Dedalean will-to-exile. Resolved to fly by those cultural nets, the young artificer has still to take flight, can only define *anomie* in terms of entrapment. In a silence that cannot but speak, the cunning of a weaver of nets, Dedalean exile depends upon the rooted in its dream of deracination, just as Eliotic impersonality is a stage in the homecoming of the poet's self. The flight from the self, as ever, leaves its own distinctive watermark, its own signature even as it longs to unsign itself. The atheist may indeed accord the highest praise to creation insofar as its perfect cast does not require a creator; not so, though with the onymous work which bears the signature, the date and place of its maker. It is not personality but intent that is exhausted in the act of writing. A work's final form, whether completed or - as Valéry would have it - *abandoned*, testifies to the exhaustion of intent. Draft-upon-draft,

the writer acts as a privileged reader of his work: so many acts of intention and interpretation are recycled into the "work" and its relinquishment.

III

This notion of finished form (*forma formata*) led Wimsatt and Beardsley to believe that where the privileges of the author end, those of the reading public begin. In surrendering the work from the private to the public sphere, the author abrogates any right to act as its most sapiential reader. Every last word, it is assumed, that the author has to say about the work disappears into the work, becomes the work and its final intention. The novel or poem is therefore the *summum bonum* of authorial intention; it is because of this plenitude rather than any poverty of intention that any subsequent statement by the author is deemed both *de trop*, and a hindrance to the activity of criticism.

"The Intentional Fallacy" is, though, maligned if located in terms of a contest between critic and author. Written within the last days of genuine *belles lettres*, the essay suited and served writers well. It provided a critical foundation for the modernist writer's conviction that the work is composite, unretraceable, a free-standing entity which should speak only for and of itself. Gentlemanly in its formulation, this critical move nonetheless lent itself to agonistic development. Upon the decline of an encompassing culture of letters, the *caveat* against intention was always open to radicalisation through an ethos and rhetoric of assassination ("the death of the author"). Albeit unwittingly, Wimsatt and Beardsley had set the stage for the loneliness of the contemporary author and the retreat of the academy into a pseudo-professionalism that seems ungrateful, tediously arcane and mystificatory.

Wimsatt and Beardsley allow that intention presides over the inception of a literary work but deny it any claim on the work's reception. To retrace the poem to authorial psychology or to evaluate it using intention as a yardstick is to misprize the object of study: "The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the

author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public."⁸ Thus the publication of a poem is an act of radical dispossession comparable to Barthes's notion of *écriture* or Derridean dissemination. Indeed Wimsatt and Beardsley close their piece by putting the author somewhat in the position the transcendental signified: "Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the Oracle".⁹ This seems at first glance to be a crowning metaphor and one which insists that no transcendental signified (author, intention) can close down interpretation. However, the oracular invocation is ill-judged. Oracular statements are precisely those upon which intention and biography cannot supervene. Of all sequences of words, those of the Oracle intend exactly what they mean, mean exactly what they intend. Lacking provenance, too, the Oracle cannot find its words retraced to an interpretative source: the testament of an Oracle is one which craves no contexts.

Doubtless, Wimsatt and Beardsley intended the oracular metaphor to ironise certain romantic conceptions of authorship. Perhaps they had also in mind the tendency of retrospective, *ex cathedra* statements of intent to assume an oral form. Indeed, their idea that words are "detached from the author at birth," and go about the world free of authorial control or intention is the very condition of writing as denounced in Plato's *Phaedrus*. However, Wimsatt and Beardsley fail to take account of the threat posed by this dissemination to textual autonomy. Their essay takes it for granted that the poem will move around as an unbroken, monadic and self-sufficient structure. One wonders, then, how Wimsatt and Beardsley would respond to the problems posed by iterability. Do the *Psalms* travel as a unity? Or, indeed, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* - snippets which were infamously misappropriated by Nazi propagandists? Surely in such iterative cases there is an ethico-biographical imperative through which the work can be traced to fuller authorial contexts. This applies not only to iteration and fragmentation but also to the authorial *corpus*. Might we not have a duty to retrace *Ecce Homo* to other works in the Nietzschean *oeuvre* as also to its circumstances of composition, to its author's gravely declining mental health? I strongly suspect that Wimsatt and

Beardsley would themselves encourage such recourse when appropriate, but their article leaves ethical considerations aside.

Evaluation is not at issue when we take into account Nietzsche's impending collapse: *Ecce Homo's* status as a good, bad, or damnably curious species of autobiographical writing is not compromised when we ask whether or not its author was in a state of diminished moral responsibility at the time of writing. In a context of discovery such a move seems incumbent upon us just as a context of validation would forbid any such move. Deranged mathematics is not mathematics at all; confessional writing, however *outré*, remains confessional writing. In both the New Critical and hermeneutic traditions, there is a consistent unwillingness to systematically distinguish between knowledge by justification and by discovery. Hirsch talks of validation, Wimsatt and Beardsley of evaluation. A species of category error is involved when literary criticism derives criteria from disciplines which proceed from axiomatic rather than axiological foundations. The moment of crisis which is criticism can only be resolved ethically, criticism itself constituting a non-ethical opening of ethics.

E.D. Hirsch sought to counter in such terms. "We can depend neither on metaphysics nor on neutral analysis in order to make decisions about the goals of interpretation," he wrote. For Hirsch, the moment of decision is stark, made without consolation or support from either scientific or metaphysical precedents: "We have to enter the realm of ethics. For, after rejecting ill-founded attempts to derive values and goals from the presumed nature of interpretation, or from the nature of [Heideggerian] Being, what really remains is ethical persuasion."¹⁰ Like Wimsatt and Beardsley, Hirsch claims his first inspiration in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Whereas the authors of "The Intentional Fallacy" developed Kant's notion of aesthetic "disinterestedness", Hirsch's ethic takes its bearings from the categorical imperative. He argues that neglect of authorial intention makes the author a means rather than an end: "When we simply use an author's words for our own purposes without respecting his intention, we transgress ... 'the ethics of language', just as we transgress ethical norms when we use a person merely for our own ends."¹¹

Like Plato, Hirsch is worried about the propensity of words to meander away from biographical source and authorial intention. But whereas Plato's concern is pragmatically directed towards the ethical dangers of misreception, Hirsch's more austere ethic insists that a strenuously dutiful contract should be honoured between critic and author: "... an interpreter, like any other person, falls under the basic moral imperative of speech, which is to respect an author's intention". Thus, Hirsch argues, "original meaning is the 'best meaning'".¹² But how to discover "original meaning"? The phrase itself is hesitantly poised between meaning recovered from intention and meaning recovered from biographical contexts. Just as "The Intentional Fallacy" might equally have been published as "The Biographical Fallacy", so Hirsch's ethic of intention is as much an ethic of biography as of intention. How do we get to original meaning other than by way of biographical recourse? Hirsch's position might be glossed thus: 'biographical information is ethically valid insofar as it assists in divining an author's original meaning'. There is, though, a real danger of circularity here. Either we must know the author's original meaning to be certain that the biographical information we invoke pertains to that meaning, or we must construct original meaning from biography, thus according to the latter the priority ascribed to the former. Moreover, the ethical stakes of the matter are shifted when we move from intention to biography. If we respect an author's original meaning (given that we can both find and validate it), then we do indeed adhere to a literary version of the categorical imperative. However, if we search for that meaning amidst biographical detail, then we are in danger of treating an author as a means rather than an end. Psychobiographical criticism is doubtless the most florid instance of such an abuse, but all biographical investigation will to some degree run this risk. Using a life as lived in search of an author's original meaning is a vexed issue in ethical terms, as is any breach of privacy in the interest of (non-legalistic) public ends. Treatment of the authorial life as a means to a critical end (a construction or hypothesis of original meaning) remains ethically problematic if not in quite the same way as does the neglect of authorial intention.

Here, one might set against ethical intentionalism what Tobin Siebers, in *The Ethics of Criticism*, calls "the ethics of autonomy".¹³ In a work that imputes (positive) intention to the authors of "The Intentional Fallacy", Siebers *cleverly* argues that the so-called fallacy served a mission more protective than puritanical. The author could no longer be held to account for his work: the biographical and the intentional were inadmissible. Much like Gregory the Great who said that it was as futile to ask who was the author of *Job* as to ask with what pen a writer inscribed his work, the denial of intention accords the work an untraceable, even transcendental status. Textual autonomy leads to personal autonomy, and the repudiation of authorial intention gains an ethical as well as aesthetic stature. No longer fearful of reprisal, this *cordon sanitaire* grants imaginative freedom to authors.

Once again, the biographical imperative cannot assert itself without calling its opposite into view. How to decide? Nothing straight, as Kant said, was ever made out of the crooked timber of humanity and there cannot be a general theory of the ethics of biography. The ethical critic can only proceed text by text, author by author, circumstance by circumstance. But the need to inhabit this contradiction between the transcendental and the empirical engages us in every moment of decision. Not just as critics, but as human beings, we feel the obligation to transcend our personalities and prejudices whilst being compelled to acknowledge that this very need abides within, and arises from, a limited, personal and situated perspective. The relation between criticism and biography is not merely a methodological issue but reflects an unresolved dilemma at the heart of modernity. How, as the philosopher Thomas Nagel put it, might we "combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included"? As Nagel adds: "It is a problem that faces every creature with the impulse and the capacity to transcend its particular point of view and to conceive of the world as a whole."¹⁴

In a typically poised essay, "The Sublimation of the Self", Paul de Man sets the empirical or personal self against a transcendental or ontological form of selfhood that speaks in the literary work. De Man's conclusion reveals what has all along been his starting point: "Literary criticism, in our century, has contributed to establishing [the] crucial distinction between an empirical and an ontological self; in that respect, it participates in some of the most audacious and advanced forms of contemporary thought".¹⁵ But what is this "ontological" self, one which de Man treats as synonymous with a transcendental self? It is surely to be distinguished from the more modestly tropical figures of the writerly mask, of impersonality, of the poet's ideal of negative capability, of the poet's capacity to recall emotion in tranquillity. Is it the Kantian subject, that hollow postulate which ontologises the transcendental unity of apperception? The *cogito* of Descartes or of Husserl?

The close of de Man's essay covers over a perplexity which might have more candidly served as a point of departure. A little earlier, de Man has declared that "[b]ecause it implies a forgetting of the personal self for a transcendental type of self that speaks in the work, the act of criticism can acquire exemplary value."¹⁶ Is this transcendental self a third self that arises from author and reader in the act of proper critical attention - the result of some intersubjective flash of illumination such as is described in the *Seventh Letter* commonly attributed to Plato? Or the mysterious process posited by Georges Poulet in which author and reader are conjoined in the textual "I"? The essay scrupulously avoids such questions. Of what self, de Man might have asked, can we speak when the personal, unique self has voided itself? What is this self which is neither an author, a person, nor a catena of historical and biographical circumstance?

One must question why literary theory elected, in the twentieth century, to replicate the Kantian gesture whereby the subject is reduced to a purely formal function. In treating a textual subject as analogous to an epistemological subject, does not theory implicitly deny specificity to the literary experience not to mention the specificity of individual acts of literature themselves? Indeed, at this point, one might be tempted to restore the overly bold Lukácsian distinctions that de Man has already demoted:

"Contrary to the theoretical subject of logic, and contrary to the hypothetical subject of ethics, the stylized subject of aesthetics is a living unity that contains within itself the fullness of experience that makes up the totality of the human species."¹⁷

Yet, there is a sense in which the act of reading presupposes a self or subject of the work which can never coincide with the personal self of the author of that work, still less with a reified, living unity of the species. In reading Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the presupposition of a transcendental self - which has shored up poetic fragments against the ruin of the empirical self - assures the readability of a poem which moves through so many seemingly incompatible subject positions. But to treat this emanatory self as an ontological entity would seem an immodest move, a multiplication of entities beyond necessity, a flouting of the Occamite principle of parsimony. What J.L. Mackie says of objective values or Platonic Forms applies equally to the presupposition of a transcendental self: to wit, that such notions are notions *per se* and "not part of the fabric of the world".¹⁸ The "transcendental type of self" does not abide; it is an alien entity whose composition conforms to no other sublunary object of experience. The transcendental subject of literary theory thus presents itself as a fiction of a fiction, a ghost of the Kantian ego which Nietzsche sought to expose in all its insubstantiality. Toward this end, Nietzsche often adumbrated a biographical critique of philosophical objectivity according to his conviction that "most of a philosopher's conscious thinking is secretly directed and compelled into definite channels by his instincts".¹⁹ One cannot now know what role this critique might have played in the promised "transvaluation", particularly given the centrality of will-to-power and a biologicistic theory of knowledge to the *Nachlass*. Certainly, Nietzsche had already hoped to instantiate the individuated self of ethics into the impersonal subject of epistemology ("Know what is good for you!"), just as he had constructed his own personal canon of *savants* on the grounds that their works constitute "the instinctive biography of a soul". However, it is difficult to imagine the extrapolation of this perspectivism without the most gross and egregious reductions. Using the biographical fact of Kant's piety in the context of a critique of the paralogisms may tell us a great deal about Kant's personal inclination toward austerity, but it would not impinge not one jot upon the viability or

intelligibility of the paralogisms. The retort "he would say that, wouldn't he?" can offer us no guidance on the truth or falsity of what has been articulated. Criticism of such kind does not amount to a deconstruction of philosophy so much as a refusal to do philosophy at all.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche's recognition of the human-all-too-human wellspring of philosophical systems needs to be acknowledged at one and the same time as we accord to those systems the right to be judged in rational, impartial terms. As Thomas Nagel says: "The personal flavor and motivation of each great philosopher's version of reality is unmistakable, and the same is true of many lesser efforts."²⁰ Nagel wishes to maintain the realism of this "view from somewhere" precisely because of its tension with the attempt to transcend personal concerns that he calls the "view from nowhere". As Christianity and the categorical imperative teach, morality is founded upon the normative act whereby we attempt to stand outside our own interests and prejudices. Although the word "biography" is not used in Nagel's *The View From Nowhere*, the thesis of a necessary conflict between the contingent self and its duty to transcend its contingent nature accurately captures the dilemma faced by literary theory as it negotiates between a crude but realistic recognition of textual empiricity and the ideal of a transcendently purified literary subject. As Nagel puts the matter for epistemology:

What really happens in the pursuit of objectivity is that a certain element of oneself, the impersonal or objective self, which can escape from the specific contingencies of one's creaturely point of view, is allowed to predominate. Withdrawing into this element one detaches from the rest and develops an impersonal conception of the world and, so far as possible, of the elements of self from which one has detached. That creates the new problem of reintegration, the problem of how to incorporate these results into the life and self-knowledge of an ordinary human being. One has to *be* the creature whom one has subjected to detached examination, and one has in one's entirety to *live* in the world that has been revealed to an extremely distilled fraction of oneself.²¹

This process of incorporation is akin to the work of biographical reading which, at its best, consists in reintegrating the authorial "view from nowhere" with the particularities of authorial experience. Only those who wish to see literature *sub specie aeternitatis*, or who would mire text and author in a Funes-like stream of unconceptualised becoming, will not feel this tension between the creatural origins of the literary work and the admirable desire on the part of the literary author to transcend those origins. The biographical imperative is thus the reflex of the transcendental imperative: it seeks commerce between contrary but parallel depictions of authorship. In a formulation reminiscent of the Woolfian image of the "web", Nagel writes:

A succession of objective advances may take us to a new conception of reality that leaves the personal or merely human perspective further and further behind. But if what we want to understand is the whole world, we can't forget about those subjective starting points indefinitely; we and our personal perspectives belong to the world.²²

Custodians of literature and tradition work between these competing claims in the hope that from this dialectic without synthesis, new energies and ideas will ensue. As Nagel says of epistemology and ethics, so too we might say of literary studies:

... the correct course is not to assign victory to either standpoint but to hold the opposition clearly within one's mind without suppressing either element. Apart from the chance that this kind of tension will generate something new, it is best to be aware of the ways in which life and thought are split, if that is how things are.²³

One need only substitute, in the above, "thought" with "literature" to arrive at the problems confronting any serious critic who treats a text neither as a historical record nor an *objet trouvé*.

It is tempting to keep faith with the notion of "things as they are" to the exclusion of the transcendental position. The Kantian "view from nowhere" cannot answer the

issue of specificity. Yet, as critics of Kant must themselves acknowledge, the transcendental deduction could not have been achieved without the absolute refusal of all particulars, passions and humours. It would have been an undertaking both absurd and impossible to elaborate a system of thought in which there were as many theories of perception as perceivers. A theory of the subject can only base itself on the form rather than the content of experience:

Unity of synthesis according to empirical concepts would be altogether accidental, if these latter were not based on a transcendental ground of unity. Otherwise it would be possible for appearances to crowd in upon the soul, and yet to be such as would never allow of experience ... The appearances might, indeed, constitute intuition without thought but not knowledge; and would consequently would be for us as good as nothing.²⁴

The problem posed by the biographical imperative, however, is to allow that appearances "crowd in upon the soul" even as the soul searches for transcendental clarity. A fully empirical subject, Kant says, "would be as good for as nothing", and, as he adds a little later, "less even than a dream".²⁵ Human beings are, indeed, in Majorie Greene's memorable phrase, "the upsurge of time". Activity of mind, she says, "is not a bare event, but a *doing*, and it must be done by *someone*. As some one is always some one in particular, born somewhere at some time of some parents, possessing some innate aptitudes, moulded somehow by the setting of his family, society, time."²⁶ The biographical imperative asks us to remain within this contradiction, to dwell in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts". To be negatively capable in this fashion will not lead to any immediate result but ensures that criticism remains realistically suspended between the poles of the transcendental and the empirical. Rather than forgetting the personal self for an ontological literary self, or refusing the latter in favour of a multitudinous, ungovernable specificity, the critical impulse should say "yes" and "no" simultaneously to both alternatives when confronted by that moment Kierkegaard called "the madness of decision". It should do so with embattled patience and in the

hope, as Nagel says, that something new will emerge. In refusing to decide between transcendental and empirical modes of selfhood, such criticism may well itself participate in "some of the most audacious and advanced forms of contemporary thought".

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NOTES

1. Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1976), pp.112-13. This paper was inspired by an invitation to lecture at the University of Southern Denmark, Campus Kolding on biography in the context of the annual conference for the scholars and critics writing the three volume work *Danske digtere i det 20 århundrede* [Danish Authors of the 20th Century]. I would like to extend my gratitude to Jon Helt Haarder for his vision and hospitality as also to Anne Borup and Anne-Marie Mai. I sincerely hope that this modest piece will do limited justice to this very fine project. This article is published simultaneously in print and electronic media. Copyright will remain with the author.
2. Louis Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp.777-85: p.80
3. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London and New York, Methuen, 1983), p.38
4. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1945), p.43
5. Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p.66.
6. For an interesting discussion of this issue, see Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983).
7. T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1975), p.43.
8. W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p.5.
9. *Ibid.*, p.18.
10. E.D. Hirsch, "Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics", " in David Newton-de Molina, *On Literary Intention* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), pp.194-209: p.203.
11. *Ibid.*, p.207.
12. *Ibid.*, p.209.
13. Tobin Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

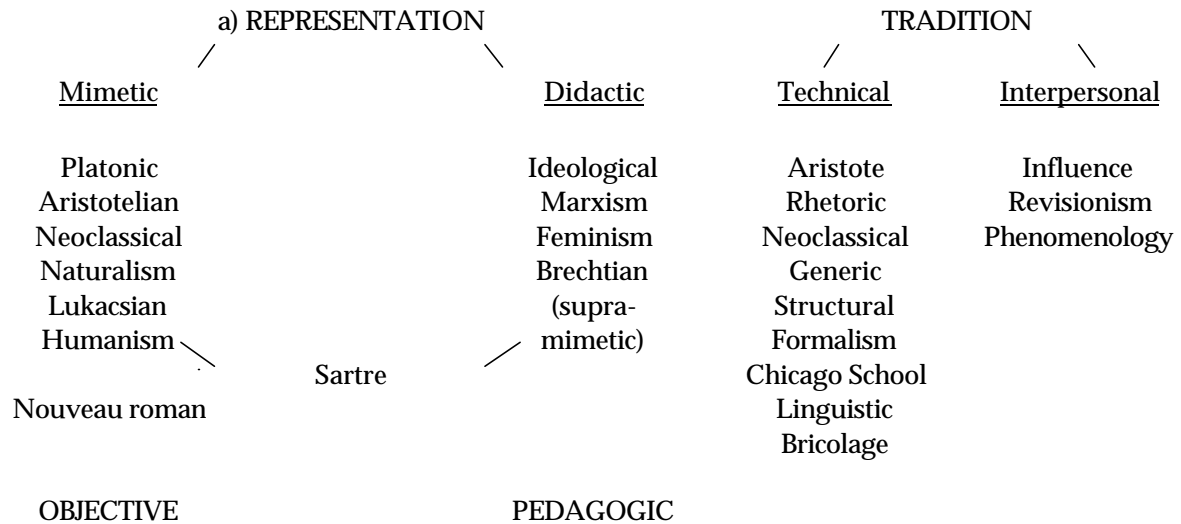
14. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.3.
15. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight, op. cit.*, p.50.
16. *Ibid.*, p.49.
17. Georg Lukács, cited in *ibid.*, p.42.
18. J.L. Mackie, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.38.
19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p.17.
20. Thomas Nagel, *op. cit.*, p.10.
21. *Ibid.*, p.9.
22. *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.
23. *Ibid.*, p.6.
24. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), A 111.
25. *Ibid.*, A 112.
26. Marjorie Greene, *The Knower and the Known* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p.143.

APPENDIX:

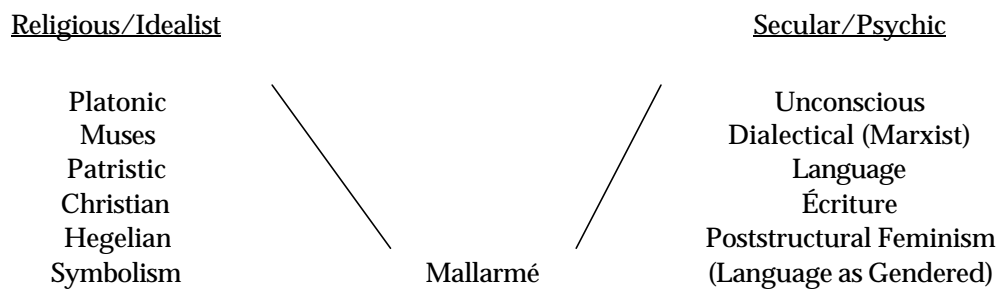
3 CATEGORIES WHICH HAVE DETERMINED THEORIES OF AUTHORSHIP FROM PLATO TO POSTMODERNISM

modern:	OTHERNESS	IMITATION	SUBJECTIVITY
aesthetic:	INSPIRATION	MIMESIS	IMAGINATION
religious:	GOD	NATURE	SOUL

IMITATION (Mimesis)



OTHERNESS (Inspiration)



Yeats
[Sacred & Idealist]

LOGOCENTRIC

Deconstruction
[Materialist & Linguistic]

DIFFERENTIAL

SUBJECTIVITY (Imagination)

ABSTRACT

SITUATED

[Disinterested]

[Interested]

[Disembodying]

[Embodying]

Transcendental

Impersonal

Kantian
Hegelian
High Romantic
Phenomenology

High Modernist
New Criticism

Perspectivism
Nietzscheanism
Freudianism
Genealogical
Postmodernism
New Historicism
Cultural Materialism
Postcolonialism
Identity Politics:
Queer theory,
Feminism,
Ethnic studies

I: IMITATION

A) REPRESENTATION

1) Mimetic Representation

Author as vessel *or point de passage* between objective truth and societal representation: hollow subject through whom truth, society, political structures, *ding-an-sich, en soi*, pass. Opposes colouring or nuances of subjectivity - unmediated transmission, absence

of intrusion (didactic, desiring, perspectival). Ideas or matter independent of mind that perceives/represents. Author as passive recorder: absence of transport as in inspirational discourse but ability of mind to render reality without mediation.

2) Didactic Representation

Author as *engagé*: faithful account of social conditions but selective according to higher social/political truth. Representation of deep structure of socio-political "reality". Truth distilled from political commitment and made parabolic in fiction. Two forks à la realism: trust in aesthetic modes to faithfully reflect; resistance to institutionalised/political power means that aesthetic approach is subordinated to propagandist aims in attempted fusion of artistic form and political content (Wells, Orwell, Sartre). Author evaluated primarily in terms of service to political justice.

B) TRADITION

1) Technical Imitation

Author as craftsperson; expertise rather than expression. Adept rather than elect (of inspirational mode). Timeserved novice within system - classical rhetorician, neoclassical pupilage, Formalist craftsperson, structural assembler and arranger of codes. Author imitates tradition, rules rather than reality. Subject defined in relation to *techné*, tradition.

2) Interpersonal Imitation

Arises upon sidelining of technical tradition. Author as novice but not to technical mastery but to originality. Consequent interpersonality of tradition - one subject vying for space of origination with another. Romantic and post-Romantic insistence upon

untutored, unique expression.. Oedipal rivalry (Bloom) - original production replaces apprentice model: psychodynamic interiorisation of tradition.

II: OTHERNESS

(Inspiration)

A) Sacred/Idealist

Author conceived of as privileged medium of the divine writing: truth not accessible to all but only to an elect who reveal the word to a preterite audience. Absence of intention, voln, volition, political function: Hellenic visitation by the gods - author privileged not as individual but in terms of divine charisma (Homeric Greece, Romanticism, High Modernism) or pentecostal function (patristics, Medieval theory of allegorical interpretation). Author set apart not as origin but as recipient of divine afflatus.

B) Secular/Psychic

Author as unprivileged site of discourse. Alterity writing itself through subject as index: culture, politics, unconscious or language disseminating itself through human subject - author as scrawl of an alien power, written not writing. No privilege due to *author per se*: author constituted in alterity as site through which alterity may speak.

III: SUBJECTIVITY

A) ABSTRACT

1) Transcendental

Author as suzerain subject: controlling but unfigured. Flaubert - author as everywhere present but nowhere visible; Joyce/Dedalus - indifferent, aloof, ironic transcendence as in G.F. Schlegel, Herder, *et. al*; above and beyond contradictions, monologic (Bakhtin); usurper of Divine function: religious translated into spilt religion of the artist, the romantic, the artistic.

2) Impersonal

Recognition that transcendence implies absence: Kantian autonomy of subject translated into autonomy of the text - refusal of the empirical equates with refusal of author as ultimate principle - text as *objet trouvé, sui generis*. Role of author similar to objective mimesis, but (i) Kantian lineage; (ii) referent denied - text as its own world, not world it figures forth.

B) SITUATED

Author as being in the world, traversed by history, culture, nation, politics, sexuality: synechdocally rendered as the "body". End of disengaged reason - Nietzschean anti-distinterestedness; Heideggerian "being-in-the-world" leading to postmodern notions of "locality", "islands of discourse". Author as agent and agency of the political - transmutation of (Sartrean) engaged-disengaged opposition into abstract-situated opposition. Embarrassment before notion of the author rendered as punctual subject: use of author (New Historicism; Cultural Materialism; Postcolonialism) covert rather than overt, reticence explicable by too-heavy investment in notion of author as sovereign subject rather than as situated human agent. Specificity of subject (sexual, national, ethnic) - in postmodern and political criticism - works against objectivisation of knowledge: influence of poststructuralism means that contemporary criticism

unable to work with anything other than objectified notion of authorship - counterproductive denial of potential role of author in demystifying discourse even as the “author” is affirmed as specifically “queer”, “colonised”, “male”, “female”, historically and politically defined or circumscribed in terms of cultural power.

A FEW NOTES on the DIAGRAM

1> Imitation, otherness and subjectivity are roughly the three categories which have informed conceptions of authorship for as long as people have speculated about the origins of literature and discourse in general. At any one time and within any one movement one or at most two of these categories are emphasised and even the most sophisticated literary theories or eras seem incapable of synthesising, or giving adequate account of all three models of textual production.

2> The authorial position taken up by both idealists and realists who propose mimetic views are similar if not identical: in Platonic terms the representation of ideal truth is authorless, subjectivity and place of human origin are beside the point - only Divinity/*aletheia* signs in the realm of autonomous truth. Thus in late-antiquity and Medieval theory, author seen as recipient of the writing of God-the-Holy Spirit, as blessed beneficiary of auctoritas like the shaman-like figure that haunts the close of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”. In Aristotelian and naturalist terms, the author is similarly unfigured - the subjectivity of the author is to be erased in the representation or faithful recounting of objective reality, social conditions etc. Hence Barthes notion of "castrating objectivity", true of the realist novelist, the Platonic “lover of wisdom”, the biblical author and the rationalist philosopher (pre-Nietzschean, pre-Foucauldian).

3> Whilst not overtly political, the New Criticism began the movement (consolidated in Structuralism) of loosening the text from authorial intention and thereby liberating literary discourse from the interiority of Romantic imagination. Henceforth the text could become a public site which need not always be referred back to the subjective

conditions of its emergence; the opening of discourse to the reader signalling, beyond the purest interiority of phenomenology, its opening to the public domain. Strange as it seems, the majority of postmodern political critiques are indebted in this regard to the New Criticism.

4> The stress of individual creativity, the genius of the writer, is prefigured in Renaissance (*viz.* Vasari), 18th-century and Enlightenment thought - and the notion of inspiration, à la the Miltonic invocation, though severely downplayed persisted: *viz.* Pope's introduction to "Windsor Forest", ironically deployed though it might be. What sets the Romantic period off (what makes it truly revolutionary) from say William Duff, Edward Young, Thoms Warton, is the emphasis on interiority. When Young talks of individual genius he does not talk of self-representation, the interior landscapes of consciousness; nor does he he talk of subjectivity as we now understand the word - he is talking of individuality only so far as the individual is defined in relation to the tradition - innovation rather than imaginative self-representation - an act which *is sui generis* only in terms of the tradition which preceded it rather than the cast of mind it reflects or by which it was prompted...

5> Diagram as *post factum* reconstitution - does not take account of nuances, deviations, overlappings, cannot be inclusive, and is set up purely to be challenged, as a starting point toward a more complex reflection; akin in this way to that ladder of Wittgenstein's which is to be kicked away after the higher ground has been claimed. Also, the historical construction may be challenged - the romantic imagination is presented in terms of romantic self-presentation: many - e.g. New Historicists - may wish to challenge that self-representation in terms of a modern notion of situated, traversed subjectivity. Diagram only indicates the literal sense in which romanticism presents itself and is not meant to indicate that such self-representation is veridical or exclusive and may not be more authoritatively rewritten *sub specie modernus*...

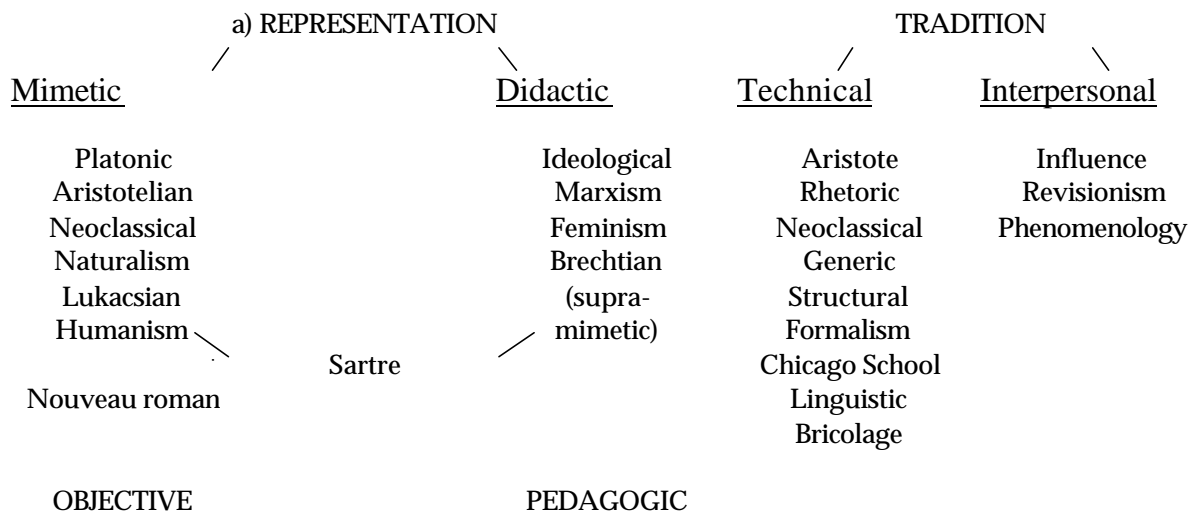
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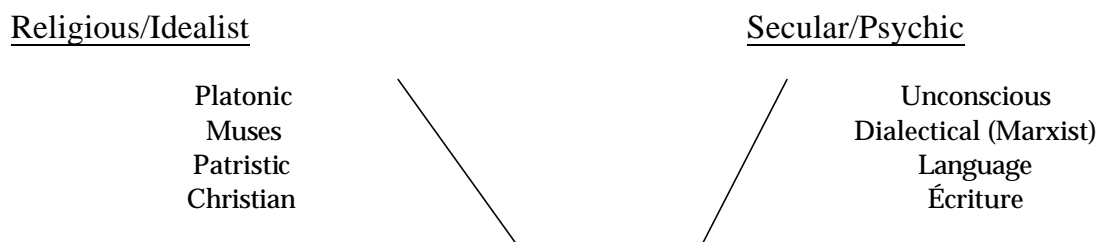
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IMITATION (Mimesis)



OTHERNESS (Inspiration)



Hegelian
Symbolism
Yeats
[Sacred & Idealist]

Mallarmé

Poststructural Feminism
(Language as Gendered)
Deconstruction
[Materialist & Linguistic]

LOGOCENTRIC

DIFFERENTIAL



SUBJECTIVITY (Imagination)

ABSTRACT

SITUATED

