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Theory into Poetry

New Approaches to the Lyr

Edited by
Eva Müller-Zettelmann
Margarete Rubik

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The Mental Context of Poetry: From Philosophical Concepts of Self to a Model of Poetic Consciousness (*Ethos* – Mode – Voice)

Mind and Poem

Why do philosophers of mind bother so little about poetry? This question haunted me as I was examining cognitive concepts of identity, personhood, and consciousness in an effort to redefine the voice that speaks in the poem and, according to postmodern theories, speaks with little authority. The effort was part of a comprehensive project of reading and mapping the poetry of a generation of women who came to maturity in the 1940s and 1950s. Critical concepts of the dead poet rivalled with the actual voices recorded at interviews and heard at poetry readings, with the letters I received and the odd scraps of paper, handwritten drafts and manuscripts I was screening, as I approached this lost generation.

Proceeding from the assumption that an excessive concern with schools and movements had generated maps of English poetry from which many important and interesting names were effectively effaced – especially women poets – my aim was to recover and (re)situate their work in the canon of modern English poetry. But how could this be done in a critical climate that either suggested the irrelevance of the author or insisted on the poet's gender? How could I read and contextualise their work without ignoring that there was an obvious connection between the poems and the persons, i.e. between text and mental dispositions, between lived experience and the poets' familiarity with the English poetic tradition, between their poetry and their other work: verse drama and libretti, opera translations, children's verse, biographies, autobiographies, critical studies, philosophical treatises. How could I avoid both the biographical fallacy of reading their poems in terms of their lives and the equally fallacious idea that the circumstances under which these poems were written were of no relevance to the text, its form, linguistic structure, and mode?

Anne Ridler's epistolary and polyphonous poems – meditations in two voices, as she herself subtitled them – were as much informed by the experience of separation and waiting imposed on women during the Second World War as they were the result of available aesthetic modes, discourses, and signifying practices. The apocalyptic images of fallen cities and wrecked bodies in Kathleen Raine's early poetry reflect both the symbolic language of English Surrealism and her commitment to the Perennial Philosophy. Stevie Smith's preoccupation with death is enshrined in the carnivalesque madness of her verse, its disruptive logic and subversive intertextuality. It was impossible to sidestep the question of contingency – "the sense that there is something gratuitous or contingent about one's being any particular individual at all", as Lars Hertzberg (143) has put it, even more so since the sense of contingency was particularly strong in these poets.

Some of them had died before my work was started (Frances Bellerby, Lilian Bowes Lyon, Sylvia Lynd, Ruth Pitter, Edith Sitwell, Stevie Smith, Dorothy Wellesley, Ursula Vaughan Williams, Sheila Wingfield), some were still alive (Phoebe Hesketh, Elizabeth

Jennings, Kathleen Raine, Anne Ridler, Joy Scovell). For the purpose of a critical reading, their poetry, no doubt, had to be approached from the same conceptual basis. Moreover, the corpus of poems at issue ranged from the most wildly fantastic, menippean flights (Hesketh) to the most objective or scientific, factual observations in Pound's Imagist sense (Wingfield), from dedicated religious meditations (Jennings) to a stance of confessional inwardness (Bellerby), from parody and pastiche (Pitter) to abstract word-play (Sitwell). The obvious problem to solve was: how could an approach integrate the issue of experience (which necessarily involves an experiencing subject) without falling back either on psychobiographical interpretation techniques or on post-Romantic expressive theories of the self, which are limited to the meditative, self-reflexive poetry underlying, for example, the definitions of 'lyric' offered by Emil Staiger and Northrop Frye more than half a century ago. Both methods were problematic.

On the one hand, poems often bore little resemblance to any other utterance made or work written by a particular poet, and it was obvious that metapoetic statements or experiences recounted by the poets themselves could not be taken as master-interpretations in what proved a complex exegetic effort involving such disparate materials as conversations and interviews, private records, critical and autobiographical comments, reviews, publications, and personal correspondence. On the other hand, to treat the poems as if they were wholly independent of processes in which experiences register in consciousness and contribute to a person's sense of identity – fears nurtured by the War, birth and stillbirth, bereavement, illness, turning points and moments of crisis – would have meant betraying the existential or cognitive (which is *not* the same as mimetic) dimension of poetry. The dilemma I was facing in view of radical non-referential or constructivist textual aesthetics was comparable to the precarious situation caused by a radical empiricist standpoint, as Ted Honderich has shown:

> By insisting we know everything through experience it makes us start from a position of total isolation from the world, and then it becomes miraculous that we could ever escape from there. [...] Evidently we must start from within the world itself, which means that in some sense we must already know some things, without having to find them out. The mind must be active, not just, as Locke thought, in manipulating and building on an experience already received passively, but also in receiving that experience itself. (Honderich 228)

Conceptually, radical empiricism has a great deal in common with radical constructivism, and the challenge for any viable concept of the self lies in overcoming what Daniel C. Dennett (421) has called the "chasm of absolutism" without ending in a constructivist free-for-all. Dennett himself has placed the self somewhere between "empirical idiocy" and "metaphysical claptrap", i.e. between denying that we exist and claiming "entities, either *in* our brains, or *over and above* our brains, that control our bodies, think our thoughts, make our decisions" (413).

Dennett's definition provides a good starting point. The voice in the poem, one may argue in analogy to his idea of the self, lies between metaphysical claptrap, on the one hand, and textual – or ideological – idiocy, on the other hand. Poems are not assembled like motor cars or cameras (if we leave aside, for the purpose of this paper, extreme forms of acciden-

tal and automatic writing as well as anonymous group poetry and other experimental forms recently evolved by virtual writers on the Web).[1] To start from what cognitive philosophy has called the "zombie"-position,[2] a position of total isolation in the world, will lead the critic into argumentative trouble when it comes to accounting for the processes or factors by which symbolic signifying practices produce new texts. How can discourses, signs, texts, and ideologies ever lead out of such isolation or, conversely, out of a total embeddedness in culture? Somewhere, at some stage in this process of production there is an editor, a meeting-point for these discourses, ideologies, signs and texts: a mind or consciousness, which "must be active, not just [...] in manipulating and building on an experience already received passively, but also in receiving that experience itself", to use Honderich's words.

Consciousness is the pivotal concept of my study of mid-twentieth-century British women's poetry, now published as *Revolution in Poetic Consciousness: An Existential Reading of Mid-Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (2002).[3] The typology evolved for reading and contextualising this corpus is based on three categories: types of *ethos*, modes, and voices. According to this model the poetic voice is seen as the site of interaction between fundamental self-world relations which constitute the human situation (types of *ethos*) and formal structures, aesthetic conventions as well as currents of thought prevailing or available at a particular time in a particular cultural environment (modes). The aim of the present paper is to explore the nexus between mind and poem, on which this model is predicated, from a broader cognitive perspective, addressing relevant philosophical and psychological concepts of self, personhood, identity, and consciousness. For this purpose I shall first examine the grounds on which philosophy of mind has excluded and, more recently, integrated the imagination in descriptions of identity. It will be argued that this conceptual shift is crucial for overcoming the problematic literary-critical distinction between empirical or biographical self ('the poet speaking in his or her own voice') and poetic or textual self ('persona'). Focusing in particular on notions of self-creation, narrative selfhood, and intentionality, I shall demonstrate the relevance of these philosophical aspects in approaching the mental context of poetry – the beliefs and attitudes (types of *ethos*) interacting with cultural forces and aesthetic conventions (*modes*) and actualised in the individual *voice*. A reading of Lilian Bowes Lyon's poem "Helen Mediates Before Her Portrait as a Woman" will illustrate the methodological implications of this conceptual framework.

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1. Internet publishing by groups of anonymous writers constitutes a radical answer in poetry to poststructuralist/posthumanist theory: the poem without a poet. It seems, however, too early to estimate the role of this shift from individual to virtual consciousness in the contemporary poetry scene and its impact on the genre.
2. See e.g. Dennett's definition: "[...] a zombie is or would be a human being who exhibits perfectly natural, alert, loquacious, vivacious behaviour but is in fact not conscious at all, but rather some sort of automaton. The whole point of the philosopher's notion of zombie is that you can't tell a zombie from a normal person by examining external behavior" (73).
3. Some of the key ideas presented in this paper, mainly in connection with the self as a centre of narrative gravity, are based on my theory of poetic consciousness evolved in Vol. I: *Poetry, Self, and Culture*, especially pp. 128-37.

Let me return to my initial question: why does philosophy of mind bother so little about poetry? The answer involves two aspects: (a) postmodern axioms about the death of the author, and (b) a fear of fiction pervading philosophy of mind.[4]

How Dead Is the Poet?

In the light of the postmodern breach with expressive and experiential concepts of art brought about almost four decades ago when Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault denied the author any authority over the text,[5] inquiries about the (poet's) mind were pushed to the outer margin of critical debates. The discussion of poetry became mainly a textual, intertextual, or discursive affair, a question of ideologies and reading communities. In fact, the poststructuralist verdict on metaphysics, more than any previous critical claim, polarised textual and materialist theories. In the seventies, for example, gynocritical feminism[6] became an established label for feminist practices of investigating the work of female writers. Moreover, the institutions of the literary world – publishing houses, libraries, anthologies, poetry readings, university syllabuses, copyright law, and so on – continued attaching importance to the author, not only as a social, academic or legal convention, but as a real person that speaks to audiences, receives royalties and prizes, holds copyrights and is photographed and interviewed for marketing purposes. In fact, the preoccupation with a poet's identity – as with identity in general – has never been greater than in the last couple of decades. Homepages and other electronic means of presenting one's person to the world (see, for example, contemporary poets' websites) are expressive of an ever-increasing obsession with individuality while paradoxically generating ever more functional and standardised images of selfhood.

Fotis Jannidis's collection of essays *Return of the Author* (1999) marks a recent effort to re-conceptualise a diehard phenomenon. In fact, far from obliterating the author as a critical or commercial category, as a symptom of the modern identity cult, and as a bearer of authorial rights, the debate about the death of the author has had an extremely invigorating effect on studies about the ego, self, or 'I', both in and outside literature departments. Identity was reconceived in terms of a dynamic flux, a product of ideologies, cultural signifying practices, or psy-technologies,[7] depending on whether the vantage point was psychoanalytical, feminist, or Marxist, or any combination of these. Simultaneously, the shift from the

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4 Cf. Kendall Walton.

5 Roland Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur" (1968); Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" (1969). See in this context also Jerrold Seigel's study of Foucault's anti-subjectivity, "Avoiding the Subject: A Foucaultian Itinerary".

6 On the two traditions in feminist criticism – woman as reader (*feminist critique*) and woman as writer (*gynocritics*) – see Elaine Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics", here pp. 25-6.

7 See Nikolas Rose's definition of the self in his essay "Authority and the Genealogy of Subjectivity", here p. 299: "The 'self' does not form the general substrate or object of practices of 'being human' but a particular style or relation that the human being is enjoined to adopt towards itself, one that links, genealogically, certain practices in Greek, Roman, Christian with those of our own times." See also Rose's *Inventing Our Selves*, especially his chapter "Assembling Ourselves" (pp. 169-97).

author to the reader, and from the autonomous individual to its determination by extraneous factors (material conditions, cultural constructions of gender, psy-specialists, internet-technology), stimulated a host of critical debates grappling with the burden of referentiality, and exploring ways of explaining literary activity without postulating it as a system of mimetic representations. What characterises the multi-faceted landscape of postmodern, in fact twentieth-century, theorising about poetry is not a surrender of the self, but a groping for alternative concepts and terms replacing the "core of sense-making activities" and the self-constructing "self of hermeneutics": mask, persona, voice, the author-function (Foucault 143), the assembled self (Rose, *Inventing* 177).

The postmodern distrust of mental categories, states and processes as having any relevance to the discussion of poetry is grounded on a metaphysical, idealist model of consciousness, long abandoned in cognitive philosophical theories in favour of alternative, and often radical, concepts of identity, such as Derek Parfit's reductionist theory of the self as a mere continuity of experiences which death simply ends: "This is all there is to the fact that there will be no one living who will be me."[8] Questions of poetic consciousness must therefore be raised against the background of these developments rather than by fighting again the humanist windmills attacked by Barthes and Foucault. What are the perspectives of cognitive philosophy[9] in respect of poetry and poetic positions of self, and how can they be applied to poetic theory and critical practice?

Folk-Psychology and the Subjective View

To argue that works of literature are *excluded* from (cognitive) philosophy is not correct, but poetry (and literature in general) is rarely given any serious or consistent attention in discussions of consciousness, self, and identity. The following examples will demonstrate this impression.[10]

In *I: The Philosophy and Psychology of Personal Identity* Jonathan Glover cites Ted Hughes, Goethe, Philip Larkin, Keats, and Sartre; in *Reasons and Persons* Parfit refers to Proust; Roger Scruton (*Modern Philosophy* 220 and 253) cites Mary Shelley and James Joyce, and Dennett quotes Paul Valéry, Canon Doyle, Tom Sharpe (413), and David Lodge (410-11). Most references are to comments made by writers on aspects of special interest to

8 Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, see especially his chapter "What Does Matter", pp. 281-306; here p. 281.

9 In the light of the huge variety of cognitive models and the complexity of studies of mind (both philosophy of mind and the more recent interdisciplinary study of cognition, based on linguistics and psychology) I must limit myself to a few significant theories and to aspects I consider particularly relevant to the study of poetic consciousness.

10 Upon finishing this paper I got hold of Peter Stockwell's recent study *Cognitive Poetics*. By dealing with areas such as conceptual metaphor, cognitive deixis, mental spaces and text worlds, Stockwell's introduction demonstrates impressively how cognitive psychology and linguistic models may be applied to the study of poetry, especially with regard to the process of reading. For the purpose of this paper I shall focus on philosophical concepts rather than on the linguistic schemata proposed in his book. Brief reference, however, will be made to Stockwell's chapter on text worlds, which relates to recent developments in phenomenology.

cognitive philosophy: Hughes's description of the way in which we form first impressions of people (Hughes 121, Glover 114), Larkin's refusal to become 'poet in residence' on the grounds that "I did not want to go around pretending to be me" (Glover 134 and 148), Sartre's idea of difference between the self in silent soliloquy and the self we present to others (Sartre 57f., Glover 148), Keats's doubt as to whether anything he ever utters "can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of [his] identical nature" (Gittings 158, Glover 148), processes of mental life in Joyce's *Ulysses*, the relationship between baron Frankenstein to his monster in respect of functionalist concepts of consciousness (Scruton 253 and 220), Proust's tremendous sense of backward-looking happiness (Parfit 514 and 97) and Valéry's transformation of the Cartesian dictum *cogito, ergo sum* into "sometimes I am, sometimes I think" (Dennett 423). In A.J. Ayer's *The Concept of a Person*, Robinson Crusoe serves a thought experiment about the origin, acquisition and function of language (Ayer 44-49); Dickens and Scott provide examples for demonstrating the distinction between names and descriptions, between identification and reference (Ayer 141-2). In his essay "Tradition and Self in a Mediated World" John B. Thompson (105) refers to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* to illustrate the conflict of cultural traditions. In *A History of the Mind*, which is particularly rich in references to literature and especially poetry (John Donne, Milan Kundera, Lord Byron, William Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wordsworth and Henry Thoreau, and so on), Nicholas Humphrey expounds on a phrase from Shakespeare's *Richard II* ("bare imagination")[11] to support his argument that "'unsensed ideas' (memories, thoughts, images, etc.) [...] are severely deficient in the qualitative density that sensation typically provides" (Humphrey, *History* 75). In a different context he contrasts Blake's notion that "[m]ental things alone are real" with his own hypothesis of the nexus between sensory activity and the "actual body surface" (Humphrey, *History* 156-9); Gray's "Elegy" is referred to for the purpose of establishing the difference between philosophical statements and the poet's sentimental notion of "a world that passes unrepresented by a mind to be a world whose destiny is sadly unfulfilled" (Humphrey, *History* 218-19); *Alice in Wonderland*, a favourite with philosophers,[12] serves to demonstrate the possibility of a pathological dissociation of perception and sensation (Humphrey, *History* 62). On the whole, poets are quoted either as thinkers or as writers whose work happens to express ideas relating to a particular philosophical issue, but the tenor is: poetry and philosophy are worlds apart.

Cognitive philosophy has tended to put the way literature deals with persons – with motivation, relationships and emotional life – down to "'common-sense' explanations used by detectives [...], historians, juries, and by all of us when thinking about our friends", as Glover (111) argues. "[S]uch simple folk as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Proust, and Henry James",[13] it has been suggested, employ a common-sense framework which "explains what

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11 The phrase is taken from Bolingbroke's speech in 1.3: "O! who can hold a fire in his hand / By thinking on the frosty Caucasus? / Or cloy the hungry edge of appetite / By bare imagination of a feast? / Or wallow naked in December snow / By thinking on fantastic summer's heat?" (ll. 294-9). *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 417.

12 See e.g. Hertzberg 148; Holmes, "The Philosopher's *Alice in Wonderland*" (1959).

13 Cf. P.F. Strawson talking about the attack on folk psychology in *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (Oxford, 1984), quoted in Glover 113.

people do in terms of what they believe, what they want, what they hope for and are afraid of, their moods, what they are like, who they love or hate, their ambition, their jealousy, their embarrassment, and so on" (Glover 111). Conceived of as folk psychology, according to which beliefs and desires are put forward as causes of people's behaviour, literature received little attention in cognitive circles calling for an alternative, *scientific* set of concepts to comprehend how we think about the world, about other people and about ourselves.[14]

While this denigration of writers and poets as 'folk psychologists' presupposes a correspondence of the psychological processes (and modes of behaviour) operating in literature and those operating in everyday life, the far greater difficulty for a cognitive theory of the voice speaking in the poem lies in the obvious fact that poetic utterances, more often than not, fail to comply with such common-sense assumptions about who we are. As George Miller (42) suggests when asking: "If a poet believes that a river is conscious because it perceives a path downhill, because it remembers how to reach the sea, because it becomes angry during the spring floods and thinks long, solemn, majestic thoughts in summer, do you see any argument to dissuade him?" Poetic 'beliefs' obviously elude both psychological belief-desire models of action and philosophical tools of logic and persuasion. By citing Kafka's *Metamorphosis* in his essay "Imagination and the Sense of Identity" Hertzberg addresses this problem:

> It might be thought, perhaps, that the sharing of concepts that is presupposed by our ability to use language in communicating with one another should show itself in our agreeing on what our concepts do and do not allow for in specific cases. But in fact the language we use is not circumscribed in this way. After all, it belongs to the life of our language that we tell and listen to stories in which men turn into animals or trees, and statues or wooden dolls turn human, etc. Understanding these stories requires no special preparation: no special sense of the word 'human being' has to be introduced, for instance. In fact, I do not understand a story unless I understand most of the words in it outside the story. [...]
> Does this mean that these fantastic possibilities are already in some sense provided for in the way these words are used in other contexts, or are we to say that a different way of using these words is involved here? Where does 'one use' end and 'another use' begin? [...]
> An alternative view might be that what limits our ability to regard something as an imaginable event, rather than logical coherence, are simply our beliefs about the way things are. Thus, if in the context, say, of a forensic or scientific investigation someone put forward the suggestion that a person had turned into an insect, we obviously could not understand his words as a serious attempt to tell us something, but would take him either to be joking or to be insane. On the other hand, it might be suggested that the reason we regard a story like *Metamorphosis* as intelligible is that it is understood from the outset to be fantastic. In other words, it is not even taken to depict something that might actually happen. (Hertzberg 146-7)

[14] See Stich, *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science* and Greenwood, ed, *The Future of Folk Psychology*. On the differences between "folk-psychology" ("people's everyday understanding of one another in psychological, or mental, terms") and cognitive science, see also Honderich 283; 572-4, and Glover 115.

Hertzberg's speculations about how to account for fantasy in respect of a person's sense of identity are familiar in debates about the poetic self and the aesthetics of subjectivity.[15] What is interesting about Hertzberg's essay, though, is his comment on the inevitable failure of philosophical enquiry to furnish an answer. The fantasy of a man's metamorphosis into an insect cannot be taken as a philosophical thought experiment from which any conclusions about the nature of our concept of identity under *real* conditions may be made. Objecting to absolute notions of possibility and imaginability he suggests: "The task of philosophical discussion [...] can hardly be anything other than trying to make clear what may be meant, in various contexts, in saying that something is or is not imaginable" (Hertzberg 151). The indeterminacy in dealing with fantasy is not

> that concerning the facts of the situation we are supposed to be describing; the indeterminacy concerns the very question of what we are doing in trying to reach a verdict about the case.[...] What relation is the verdict we might make on one of these people who are taken to be in those situations? (Hertzberg 154)

Even though Hertzberg acknowledges the significance of "aesthetic considerations" to the ways in which fantastic identities make sense, he makes it clear that these do not fall within the scope of philosophy. Logical enquiry has no tools for exploring questions of identity under conditions of fantasy. Yet this is precisely what happens in poetry all the time: "Last night I was a crow", says the voice in Anna Gordon Keown's poem of the same title (*Collected Poems* 59), "I am the nightingale in the carrion world", says Kathleen Nott's "The Bat" (*Landscapes and Departures* 39), a bloodthirsty vampire who turns the reader into a victim of its despotic rule, and Stevie Smith's voice embarks on an amazing masquerade, adopting, often within a single poem, the roles of god and man, fairy-tale princess and sad heart, injured plant, muse, and murderer.

Pitter's poem "The Weed" is a humorous example of how the poetic imagination ventures into realms alien to the human situation. The poem is a daughter's tribute to her mother in a broad Cockney accent, as she pleads for the weed's right to live:

> Don't pull me up! I got to live,
> The same as what you got to do,
> And uman people never give
> A thought to what a weed goes through –
> Unted and acked and oed to death
> We ardly dror a peaceful breath. (st. 1, *The Rude Potato* 17)

An equally subversive process is at work in Phoebe Hesketh's "Skeleton Bride", where the decayed body tempts its fleshly lover in a grim travesty:

> I come to you now to woo your mind
> [...]

15 See e.g. Hamburger, *Logik der Dichtung*.

See how my ribs let the moonlight in!
Feel the sockets of my eyes –
[...]
O, won't you test my rigid wrist
And fingers pencil-fine?
Explore the mouth where once you kissed
Your soul away in mine? (*Netting the Sun* 52)

Each poem presents identity under fantastic conditions. Rather than upholding the problematic division into biographical self and Aristotelian character, which has haunted critical debates about the nature of the poetic self and which a view like Hertzberg's strengthens, we had better ask what it is that prevents us from judging these speech acts as absurd, and how communication is made possible under these circumstances. Cognitive linguistics has shed light on such shifts from actual to imaginary experience by drawing our attention to so-called *conceptual metaphors* and showing how these operate in everyday speech[16] and how "human psychological processes all derive at some fundamental level from the embodied human condition." (Stockwell 109) In other words, all mental processes (fantasy included) operate in man's (physical) situation. The idea that our "philosophical view of life itself [is ...] founded not on an objective world but on a set of metaphorical representations" (Stockwell 109) constitutes an intriguing alternative to the idea of *extrapolation*, which is implied whenever we move from the actual to an imaginary situation, whenever the locus of a metaphorical shift is the self. For even though one may interpret each of the poems quoted in terms of a metaphorical treatment of human concerns, such as maternity and filial love, sexual attraction, grief, and the instinct of survival, the very position of self involves an extrapolation from our human situation to plant life, skeleton 'life', crow or bat life. Such imaginative extrapolation has constituted a fundamental problem in philosophical debates about identity, because it contravenes both the idea of the interpersonal incomparability of consciousness (consciousness is subjective and therefore unique) and its inaccessibility to a third person (we cannot enter another person's mind) (Honderich 577).

It is well to recall in this context Thomas Nagel's seminal essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (1974). Emphasising the irreducible, subjective character of experience, Nagel argues that no available method of philosophical investigation will permit us to "extrapolate to the inner life of the bat from our own case" (Nagel 438): "The reason is that every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view ..." (Nagel 437). In the light of the inadequacy of existing methods, he calls for a new method to furnish an *objective description* of the subjective point of view:

> At present we are completely unequipped to think about the subjective character of experience without relying on the imagination – without taking up the point of view of the experiential subject. This should be regarded as a challenge to form new concepts and devise a new method – an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination. (Nagel 449)

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16 See e.g. Lakoff/Turner, *More than Cool Reason.*

According to Nagel, we cannot describe what it is like to be a bat, precisely because our point of view is *subjective*. By implication, the imaginative accounts of identity furnished by poets are no fit territory for philosophical enquiry.

Revisioning the Imagination: Vicarious Experience and 'Fiction'

The problem about both Nagel's and Hertzberg's positions for relating the poetic voice to any concept of identity under real conditions lies in the fact that their inquiry stops at psychological questions such as the relevance of imaginative role play and vicarious experience in people's *ordinary* lives. Given the excessive offer in contemporary culture of virtual worlds and fantastic encounters due to technological developments in the film, leisure and entertainment industries, one may legitimately assume that a great deal of people's sense of self is bound up with fantasy and that extrapolations from one's own position to another creature's life do not constitute a realm *beyond* normal experience, but are intimately connected with our everyday sense of identity and the ways in which we shape and experience ourselves. Poetry seems to be the prime genre for addressing these issues: the structural autonomy of the poetic voice (as distinct from the voice in drama or fiction), whether involving a first-person subject or not, invariably raises questions of subjectivity, identity and consciousness. Rather than upholding the gap theory of distinguishing between the poet speaking in his or her identical voice and the poet speaking through another creature, which runs from Aristotle via Keats and Eliot to Northrop Frye,[17] had we not better integrate imaginative role-switching into a concept of the self and acknowledge the social, psychological, and cognitive significance of forms of speech which take the imagination as their rationale. Should we not, against the (post-)modern emphasis on the autonomy of the text, (re-)establish the systematic examination of the mental *context*, i.e. the "world according to ... " (Dennett 83), as a field of research from which vital answers are to be expected as to the status of poetry in relation to individual experience, culture and other texts. This seems to me all the more important because words and gestures constitute our sole access to another person's existential reality,[18] and because readers have no difficulty in making sense of the irrational speeches of bats, crows, or skeletons. In other words, the crux in approaching poetic consciousness is not the question of an *absolute* imaginability but the question of a *shared* imaginability. Focusing on the roles adopted by a poet and vicariously shared by the reader means drawing attention to the very processes by which we make sense of speech acts and construct identities from words.

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17 Aristotle's *Poetics*, chap. 24, esp. p. 53; T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, pp. 89-102; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 52-4.

18 By concentrating on "the triangle of 'author-text-reader'", Stockwell's introduction to cognitive poetics proceeds from similar assumptions: "In short, cognitive poetics takes *context* seriously. [...] Concerned with literary reading, and with both a psychological and a linguistic dimension, cognitive poetics offers a means of discussing interpretation whether it is an *authorly version of the world* or a readerly account and how those interpretations are made manifest in textuality" (5; my italics).

Hesketh's skeleton possesses an awareness and intentionality which make it impossible to read the morbid offer of her decayed body without inferring from it a centre of consciousness. The same applies to Keown's poem, which relates a metamorphic experience similar to that of Kafka's Gregor Samsa:

> Last night I was a crow, and flew
> Languid, in moonlit meadows, where
> Thin songs of hurrying waters were,
> And massy odorous weeds. I knew
> No song! No song! But all night through
> Swinging upon a notchy bough
> I dreamed crow-dreams, and noticed how
> All the world creaked when the wind blew. (st. 1, Collected Poems 59)

From a literary-cognitive perspective, the point at issue is not whether the poet assumes what it is like to be a crow (by way of empathy, negative capability, or inseeing) or attempts to recreate crow experience, but the liberty she takes in presenting a form of speech that invites the reader to attribute to it a thinking, feeling, experiencing human being. The concept of a person (self, identity) is inherent in the poem. According to Dennett, this is all there is to be said about the self in real life. The poem is a speech act that encourages the reader to extrapolate from his or her own case to a different context of beliefs, values, and properties. When we read poems where animals and plants speak, we *imaginatively* share another creature's mental world – something we constantly do in normal life, even though such sharing may be limited by our own situation. The fact that in poetry we extrapolate not only to remote, past or hypothetical worlds but also to impossible and fantastic worlds (soaring, flying, descending into the grave, adopting a bird's eye view) is the privilege of poetry. Whether a reader can effect the trajectory or not is not a question of the quality of this mental world, but whether it is a mental world at all, i.e. built on categories of time, space, characters, and objects,[19] which are crucial to our self-awareness (memory, I-thoughts, sensations, beliefs, desires, etc.).

A perceptive study of the relation between actual and vicarious experience has been offered by the psychologist Nicholas Humphrey. In his chapter "Other People's Dreams" from *The Inner Eye*, Humphrey compares the effect of dream journeys afforded by litera-

19. Cognitive-linguistic accounts of how text worlds are built ("world-builders"), i.e. Time, Location, Characters, Objects, imply a similar presence of such mental categories in the text (see Stockwell 138-9). The application of mental categories to the study of literature, without formulating a linguistic model, has of course a long tradition in phenomenological criticism (content categories). See in this context Rogers's *The Three Genres and the Interpretation of Lyric*, esp. his comments on Staiger's *Poetik*. By applying Kant's relational categories – categorical, hypothetical, and disjunctive judgments – to Emil Staiger's notion of lyric as recollecting, of epic as presenting, and of dramatic as projecting (Rogers 38f.), Rogers reformulates the gist of Staiger's theory and postulates that "generic differences depend on the particular relation between mind and world" (57). Consequently he defines the three genres as "*of relation between the mind of the work and the world of their work*" (57). For a discussion of Rogers's theory and its implications for the mapping of poetry see *Revolution in Poetic Consciousness*, Vol 1, 119f.

ture in Western culture to the role attributed in many other cultures to shamanic initiation and insight:

> [...] unlike the Yanamamo shaman, you have, let's say, travelled with Defoe, loved with Shakespeare, sung along with Verdi, laughed with Bunyan, and seen the world through the eyes of Rembrandt or van Gogh. From earliest youth you have been party to a culture which in effect, and maybe by design, drums into every one of us the accumulated experience of a multitude of other people's lives. (*Inner Eye* 132)

This passage is an important statement about how the imagination informs our sense of self and how it is, in turn, informed by culture. Proceeding from the example of the wise seer Tiresias in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Humphrey's focus on the obsessive experience-gathering in the Western world in the form of "public games, circuses, cinema, fairgrounds, concert halls, art galleries, theatres, libraries, newspapers, romantic magazines" (133) is more relevant to the study of poetic consciousness, as regards both the production and the reception of poetry, than the objective phenomenology called for by Nagel. For contrary to the latter, Humphrey acknowledges the power of fantasy and the importance of "surrendering ourselves to a make-believe world" (*Inner Eye* 138) – comparable to the shamanic dream journey ("a crash course in personal experience", *Inner Eye* 130) – for our conception of ourselves under real conditions: "How is it that the illusion can be so effective?" (*Inner Eye* 136) The "shared dream" and the idea that the spectator or reader "himself has the right or even the duty to feel himself involved" (*Inner Eye* 138) are seen as inseparable from the commitment of Western culture to the enlargement of the individual's experiential range in the service of knowledge. The myth of "a man who is empowered by his own powerful experience to understand everything from the inside [...] present in almost every human culture" (*Inner Eye* 127) not only points to the positive value of having "access to other people's dreams" (*Inner Eye* 147) but suggests that poetic world-shifting and role-switching need to be integrated into debates about identity, because this is what people under *normal* conditions of life do all the time.[20]

Dennett's *heterophenomenological* concept of the self represents a further step in this direction. In *Consciousness Explained* Dennett suggests that "[w]e can compare the heterophenomenologist's task of interpreting subjects' behavior to the reader's task of interpreting a work of fiction" (79) and that "the tactic of letting a text constitute a world need not be restricted to literary works *intended* as fiction by their authors ..." (81). As he argues for treating heterophenomenological worlds in the same manner as we treat fictional worlds (poetry is never at issue in Dennett's book, but he makes it clear that the level of linguistic representation is secondary in his theory, as it was in 'classical' phenomenological criticism), Dennett goes so far as to compare his own approach to consciousness to David Lodge's parody of postructuralist axioms in his novel *Nice Work*.

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20 To account for such shifts in linguistic terms, cognitive text-world theory distinguishes between deictic, attitudinal and epistemic subworlds (Stockwell 135-149).

> According to Robyn (or, more precisely, according to the writers who have influenced her thinking on these matters), there is no such thing as the 'self' on which capitalism and the classic novel are founded – that is to say, a finite, unique soul or essence that constitutes a person's identity; there is only a subject position in an infinite web of discourses – the discourses of power, sex, family, science, religion, poetry, etc. And by the same token, there is no such thing as an author, that is to say, one who originates a work of fiction *ab nihilo*. Every text is a product of intertextuality, a tissue of allusions to and citations of other texts; and, in the famous words of Jacques Derrida (famous to people like Robyn, anyway), '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*', there is nothing outside the text. There are no origins, there is only production, and we produce our 'selves' in language. Not '*you are what you eat*' but '*you are what you speak*' or, rather '*you are what speaks you*' is the axiomatic basis of Robyn's philosophy, which she would call, if required to give it a name, 'semiotic materialism'.[21]

Though conceding that this is an exaggeration and that he "wouldn't say there is nothing outside the text (there are, for instance, all the bookcases, buildings, bodies, bacteria ...)", Dennett concludes: "Robyn and I are alike – and of course we are both, by our own accounts, fictional characters of a sort, though of a slightly different sort" (411). The point Dennett is making is that, from a heterophenomenological perspective, consciousness and fiction are alike. The self in fiction is as fictional (or constructed) as the self outside fiction.

It is surprising that literary theory has not yet followed up the implications of this shift from an autonomous to a narrative consciousness, which is particularly relevant to the question of poetic consciousness.

Intentionality, Self-Creation and Narrative Selfhood: Towards a Theory of Poetic Consciousness

Contrary to poststructuralist premises, Dennett does not disprove the validity of the author: "one can learn a great deal about a novel, about its text, about the point, about the author, even about the real world, by learning about the *world portrayed* in the novel" (79). By treating fiction and heterophenomenological world on the same level, the heterophenomenologist's task is to describe the subjective view, the "world according to ..." (Dennett 83): "The phenomenological method neither challenges nor accepts as entirely true the assertions of subjects, but rather maintains a constructive and sympathetic neutrality, in the hopes of compiling a *definitive* description of the world according to the subjects" (Dennett 83). Significantly the text is not an end in itself: "We must move beyond the text; we must interpret it as a record of *speech acts*; not mere pronunciations or recitations but assertions, questions, answers, promises, comments, requests for clarification, out-loud musings, self-admonitions" (Dennett 76). In order to take this step we must adopt what Dennett, in an earlier study, called the *intentional stance*:

> ... we must treat the noise-emitter as an agent, indeed a rational agent, who harbors beliefs and desires and other mental states and exhibits *intentionality* or "aboutness," and whose actions can be explained

[21] Dennett only quotes extracts from this passage. Lodge 40.

> (or predicted) on the basis of the content of these states. Thus the uttered noises are to be interpreted as things the subjects *wanted to say*, of *propositions* they meant to *assert*, for instance, for various reasons. (Dennett 76)

Dennett's *intentional stance* has important implications for a theory of poetic consciousness. Intentionality is first and foremost a mental or contextual, not a linguistic, category. As a *speech act*, the poem – like any other speech act – refers us to a mind, a consciousness. To argue that this centre exists outside, beyond or independent of the poet's mind would be as absurd as arguing that consciousness is solely the product of sense perceptions external to it.

Another intriguing impulse for approaching the mental context of poetry comes from concepts of self-creation and self-representation. Charles Taylor has described man as a "self-interpreting animal",[22] and according to Dennett man is constantly engaged in presenting himself in language and gesture: "Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is [...] telling stories, and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others – and ourselves – about who we are".[23] Arguing that consciousness is "gappy" and that "selves are not independently existing soul-pearls, but artifacts of the social processes that create us", Dennett goes on to suggest that the "only 'momentum' that accrues to the trajectory of a self [...] is the stability imparted to it by the web of beliefs that constitute it, and when those beliefs lapse, it lapses, either permanently or temporarily" (423). The resulting concept is that of a *narrative* selfhood, a (persistent) "center of narrative gravity" (Dennett 418):

> A self [...] is not any old mathematical point, but an abstraction defined by the myriads of attributions and interpretations (including self-attributions and self-interpretations) that have composed the biography of the living body whose Center of Narrative Gravity it is. (Dennett 426-7)

According to Dennett, we obtain self-knowledge by building up practices "for keeping track of both [our] bodily and 'mental' circumstances". These practices "mainly involve incessant bouts of storytelling and story-checking, some of it factual and some of it fictional" (Dennett 428). Dennett's idea that centres of gravity are "*magnificent* fictions" (Dennett 428-9) corresponds with both Kendall Walton's and Nicholas Humphrey's emphasis on the importance of make-believe, i.e. on "drama, storytelling, and the more fundamental phenomenon of make-believe in providing practice for human beings who are novice self-spinners" (Dennett 428).

Dennett's concept of the self as a centre of narrative gravity is attractive precisely because it accounts for a variety of "streams of narrative" and points to the constructedness of our stories. 'Story' here is not to be understood in the literary critical sense, but means any speech act which invites us to attribute to it an intentional stance. Bus tickets, tax returns and legal contracts do not. Applying Dennett's postulates to poetic subjectivity, we may

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22 Charles Taylor, "Self-interpreting Animals" in *Human Agency and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985, quoted in Glover 152.

23 See especially Dennett's chapter "The Reality of Selves", pp. 412-430; here p. 418.

look at the poem as a way of "concocting and controlling the story we tell others – and ourselves – about who we are". In other words, poetry, like any other speech act, contributes to the "defining story about ourselves, organized around a sort of basic blip of self-representation" (Dennett 428-9). For according to Dennett, our selfhood *is* narrative, which is not the same as fictional (in the conventional sense), since the self is not accessible without narrative or in ways other than narrative. There is no non-narrative alternative to poetry. This has important consequences for resituating the poetic voice in the complex web of 'narratives' or speech acts that constitute consciousness. Poetry is one of these narratives, not a narrative apart. It does not point to a different ontology. By arguing that we are always interpreters in real life, very much in the way that we read works of literature, Dennett postpones the "knotty problems about what the relation might be between that (fictional) world and the real world": "The subject's heterophenomenological world will be a stable, intersubjectively confirmable theoretical posit, having the same metaphysical status as, say, Sherlock Holmes's London or the world according to Garp" (Dennett 81). From this it follows that imaginative role play, conceptual world shifts and metaphoric transpositions, characteristic of poetry, form part of a dynamic which enables us, in *normal* conditions, to look upon ourselves and others as centres of being. To put it more radically, our mental world is a poetic world.

Whether transcendental, empirical, fantastic or meditative, poems have precisely the effect Dennett ascribes to 'streams of narrative', i.e. to intentional speech acts:

> These strings or streams of narrative issue forth *as if* from a single source – not just in the obvious physical sense of flowing from just one mouth, or one pencil or pen, but in a more subtle sense: their effect on any audience is to encourage them to (try to) posit a unified agent whose words they are, about whom they are: in short, to posit a *center of narrative gravity*. (Dennett 418)

Poetry represents the site where the speaking voice is posited as a self and acquires identity. Whether naming or implicating bats, skeletons, or ghosts as speakers, it encourages the reader "to (try to) posit a unified agent whose words they are, about whom they are: in short, to posit a center of narrative gravity". What applies to the most plausible of speaking voices also holds true for the most grotesque of voices: the poems posit an inner story – a *mental* world. In analogy to Miller's question: "If a poet believes that a river is conscious [...] do you see any argument to dissuade him?" (Dennett 42), we may ask: do you see any argument to dissuade a poet who perceives the self as a dilapidated ruin, a worm-eaten skeleton bride, a blood-sucking vampire, an alabaster-coloured sea-goddess, or a spiteful Mother-Earth who feeds on the carcasses of thousands of soldiers?

The impossible stance plays a crucial role in extending the scope of our experiential life, as Humphrey has illustrated, and if we adopt Dennett's emphasis on speech acts as our sole access to consciousness, poetry gives us privileged access to imaginary positions of self. We do not normally speak as insects, killer bats, or rebel weeds. In the light of Dennett's model of the self as a centre of narrative gravity, we may see instances of such speech not solely in terms of *Einfühlung*, empathy, or negative capability (Nagel's idea of extrapolation), but as intrinsically related to processes of self-representation and self-creation. The

components constituting identity,[24] such as gender or one's name, become infinitely extensive in poetry. Hence, from a heterophenomenological perspective, the question whether the poetic self is a fictional persona or the poet speaking in his or her own nature is a flawed question. The text constitutes our sole access to the world according to the subject (Stockwell's "belief world") and there is no autonomous consciousness infallibly accessible to the subject.[25] Even where there are conspicuous correspondences in a poem with the poet's life and background, as in Stevie Smith's "The Sad Heart", all that can be meant by referring to the voice as the 'poet speaking in her own nature' is whether she endorsed the ideas enshrined in the poem outside the poem:

> I never learnt to attract, you see,
> And so I might as well not be,
> A dreary future I see before me,
> Tis pity that ever my mother bore me. (*Collected Poems* 184)

The same applies to Frances Cornford's "Autumn Blitz", written during the Second World War:

> Unshaken world! Another day of light
> After the human chaos of the night;
> Although a heart in mendless horror grieves,
> What calmly yellow, gently falling leaves! (Selected Poems 37)

On the other hand, the use of an imaginary speaker or 'persona' (in the modernist, New Critical sense) as in Hesketh's "Skeleton Bride", does not justify a division into empirical and fictional voices either. Given the narrative cônstitution of the self, we are not dealing with a different ontology, as implied in objectivist notions of escape or freedom from self, but with different mental dispositions, aesthetic modes and cultural preconditions. In accordance with these assumptions my model of poetic consciousness rests on the categories of *ethos* – mode – voice.

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24 According to Baumeister such components constitute "the basic units of self-definition" (18).

25 Significantly, Stockwell suggests that the text world (as distinct from the discourse world, which involves "face-to-face participants" such as two speakers or author and reader 136) in a poem like Keats's "When I have fears that I may cease to be" is difficult to ascertain: "This is further complicated by the first-person presentation, creating a counterpart relationship between the discourse world participant, John Keats, and the poetic persona, 'John Keats'. The identification is also supported by the function-advancing predicates which are all to do with writing literature. [...] In short, over eleven and a half lines we never flash out to a text world, because we were never built one in the first place" (146).

Ethos – Mode – Voice: Methodological Consequences

In the final section of this paper I shall address the relevance of this model to critical practice. In order to account for the fundamental tactics of self-creation, self-preservation and self-representation, for the cultural context in which these occur and the specific manner in which they interact in one or several poems, I approach the mental context of poetry via a scale of typologies operating at three levels and leading from voice to mode and *ethos*.

Ethos denotes beliefs and attitudes (those beliefs which Dennett considers responsible for our sense of self), mental dispositions which the recipient or reader infers from one or a range of speech acts. It largely corresponds to the phenomenological idea of 'experiential pattern' or self-world relation. *Mode* means the intersection of these beliefs with a particular cultural environment, and *voice* denotes the individual manifestation of an intentional stance (Dennett's "world according to").

Ethos

(the existential projection, mental dispositions)

|

Mode

(the intersection of these dispositions and a particular historical, socio-cultural context)

|

Voice

(the concrete enactment of an *ethos*)

Focussing both on mental dispositions and on the modes of appearance and surface configurations (linguistic structures, images) through which these are actualised, this model provides the categories for reading and mapping a large corpus of poems. The most abstract level is constituted by four types of *ethos*: the *ethos* of Interiority (the relation of the self to itself), the *ethos* of the Numinous (the relation between the self and god), the *ethos* of Fantasy (the relation between the self and that which has no existence and cannot exist), and the *ethos* of Anonymity (the relation of the self to the existing world).

the *Ethos* of the Numinous

the *Ethos* of Interiority——— | ———the *Ethos* of Anonymity

the *Ethos* of Fantasy

Each type of *ethos* allows for an indefinite number of modes, which vary according to the corpus and period examined and which take into account particular socio-historical and cultural constellations. Hesketh's "Skeleton Bride", for example, constitutes a prime example of the entropic mode, characteristic of many women poets writing from the perspective of death; "The Bat" is an example of the apocalyptic mode particularly prominent in wartime poetry, and the mode of Cornford's "Autumn Blitz" is pastoral, equally conspicuous in the poetry of the period, contrasting peaceful nature against **man's** aggressive interference with it. Each mode is divided into a variety of voices to show how a particular *ethos* is actualised in a particular poet's work and what is specific to it.

THE ETHOS OF INTERIORITY	the Pastoral Mode	the Voices of Eros and Empathy
		the Voice of Nostalgia
		the Voice of Spatial Retreat
	the Autobiographical Mode	the Self-Analytical Voice (Frances Bellerby)
THE ETHOS OF THE NUMINOUS	the Archetypal Mode	the Sphingian Voice (Dorothy Wellesley)
		the Uranian Voice (Ruth Pitter)
		the Perennial Voice (Kathleen Raine)
	the Christian Mode	the Metaphysical Voice (Anne Ridler)
		the Mystic Voice (Elizabeth Jennings)
	the Epiphanic Mode	the *Ekstatic* Voice (E.J. Scovell)
THE ETHOS OF FANTASY	the Apocalyptic Mode	the Surrealist Voice (Edith Sitwell)
		the Infernal Voice (Lilian Bowes Lyon)
		the Voice of Incubus (Kathleen Nott)
	the Menippean Mode	the Carnivalesque Voice (Stevie Smith)
		the Displaced Voice (Phoebe Hesketh)
	the Entropic Mode	the Voice from the Grave
THE ETHOS OF ANONYMITY	the Objectivist Mode	the Factual Voice (Sheila Wingfield)

This scale of typologies allows for greater flexibility in establishing a poet's status in relation to currents of thought, cultural beliefs and aesthetic conventions than is offered by current methods of periodisation and grouping poets, and constitutes an extension of the