

GEORGES POULET "THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF READING" (1969)
(PUBLISHED AS "CRITICISM AND THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERIORITY" IN 1970)

Georges Poulet is particularly influenced by the views of Edmund Husserl. For Poulet, the literary work is thought to originate in the intentional acts of consciousness of its author (what Poulet terms, *pace* Descartes, the *cogito*). Each work is a fictive work created out of the lived experiences of the author whose unique consciousness it embodies. The *cogito* or distinctive modes of thinking and feeling of the author (not to be confused with the author's real self) necessarily pervades his/her literary work. That is, the contents of a work (imagery, plot, characters, verbal style, etc.) are the imaginative projection or correlate of the author's characteristic patterns of awareness of the world. These intentional acts may then be re-experienced and assimilated by the reader in his/her own consciousness via the medium of the literary work. The goal of criticism / interpretation is to 'bracket' one's own predispositions and inclinations in order to experience in pure and undistorted form the consciousness of a work's author. Indeed, the reading process reaches its apogee when the reader is able to suppress his own conscious awareness totally identify with the author's consciousness. (The debt to the Romantics and their expressive model of literature ought to be obvious, to wit, the view that literature expresses the personality of the author, an awareness of this personality being the goal of criticism.)

For Poulet, in the course of reading, the reader becomes the subject of thoughts not his own: "My consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another" (59). A presence, alien yet located within, takes possession of the reader's mind. The upshot of this is that whenever "I read, I mentally pronounce an I . . . which . . . is not myself" (60). The reader becomes the subject of thoughts not his own: "My consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another" (59). A presence, alien yet located within, takes possession of the reader's mind. The upshot of this is that whenever "I read, I mentally pronounce an I . . . which . . . is not myself" (60). The book acquires a new form of existence within the reader's inmost self, blurring the boundaries between self and work, subject and object. The book becomes a subjectified object, as it were: "You are inside it; it is inside you" (57).

For Poulet, the source of this second self is the author who "impregnates" (61) his work with his mind and "awakens in us the analogue of what he thought or felt" (61). To "understand a literary work . . . is to let the individual who wrote it reveal himself to us in us" (61). For Poulet, the objective organisation of the work is given its distinctive shape by the writer's "organising power" (70). Behind every web, as he puts it, there is a spider. The work, qua formal objectification of the author's consciousness, becomes a "sort of human being . . . a mind conscious of itself and constituting itself in me as the subject of its own objects" (62), in the process suspending the reader's internal life and taking over his/her mind. Poulet uses tropes of haunting, possession and enforced seizure and occupation to underscore the process of identification which occurs between reader and author: "Another's thought inhabits me or haunts me . . . I lose myself into that alien world" (67). The result is the formation of a shared "common consciousness" or "community of feeling" (63) that is tantamount to what he describes as an "identification within difference" (63).