Theorizing the Gendered Space of Auto/Biographical Performance via Samuel Beckett and Hans Bellmer

The "slash" placed between "auto" and "biography" indicates a contemporary awareness, as Sherrill Grace has pointed out, of the chasmus between autobiography and biography: in other words, notions of authorial self-presence and biographical command are undermined by giving all forms of life-story equal epistemological status (Grace 2005). With performative auto/biographies, Grace also notes that the concept of a "version" of a life story detaches it from prior notions of the auto/biographical performance perceived as a secondary event, i.e., these notions are deconstructed. In relation to the diverse relatively new theories of performative auto/biographies, there are two main questions that I will explore and attempt to answer: first, in the wake of numerous theories of the divided subject, and in some ways the subject's self-inaccessibility, which element or component of autos is performed? Second, while we may read the English "auto" as autos, do we also hear the sound "auto" which is commonly used as shorthand for that other Greek word, automatos, acting independently, spontaneous, and self-moving; in other words, the automatic? Is it possible that life writing can be translated as "automatic writing," and, furthermore, that auto/biographical performance can be translated as "automatic


The Conjectural Order: Metaphysics in Abeyance (meta-textual commentary)

Benjamin I – Signs (films)
In Walter Benjamin's "Theory of knowledge" truth and true being are elusive and just beyond human grasp: "The truth of a given circumstance is a function of the constellation of the true being of all other circumstances". Unfortunately the "true being" as "part and parcel of the infinite task" is "naturally unknowable". The key word here is "function". True being appears as a constellation, a schema or organization, that is to say, a pattern, an arrangement, a conjunction of attributes generated through "circumstances"; this constellation, once formed, is the truth of a given circumstance. This is not quite Wittgenstein, even if it sounds remarkably similar once a further translation is performed. Are "all other circumstances" in their totality "the perfected state of the world"? If the constellation of all other circumstances were made manifest in the present time, the now, then the bringing forward of "the perfected state of the world", the introjection of this state into now-time (or our time) would be explosive, the catastrophic shift from perfection to ultimate disruption and manifestation in the profane. Thus Benjamin's statement that "Truth resides in the now of knowability" reveals that the truth is highly destructive and catastrophic for the profane. Profane illumination, as Benjamin sometimes termed this process, exceeds the profane. Benjamin is not running an argument here that ignores the
medium—he commands us to "ask about the medium in which truth and true being are conjoined."[iii] There is also a question following the command: "What is this neutral medium?" Marcel Duchamp, in A l'infini/it in the infinitive imagines: "...a kind of writing, which no longer has an alphabet or words but signs (films) already emancipated from all the important grammatical rules from the "baby talk" of all ordinary languages."[iv] Elsewhere I have argued that "the formula 'signs (films)' ... expresses the Benjaminian concept of language after 'On Language as Such' and 'The Work of Art' essays are juxtaposed and interpenetrated."[v] The description of the medium with the phrase "signs (films)" could be used as shorthand for locating theoretical studies in the humanities: not only the long registered shift or systemic acceptance of the Saussurian arbitrary sign, but, the transition in a wider sense from text to image. Home is now a screen. Even with Hitchcock's Vertigo, the notion that a second real trauma could fix the protagonist's neurosis is rejected; instead, the protagonist's jouissance is simply intensified through his cathartic acknowledgement of the hyperreal (accepting the simulation in all its full force provides a cure). Benjamin argues in "Theory of knowledge" that two "things" need overcoming, and that two "tasks" face or confront the theory of knowledge:

1. The false disjunction: knowledge is either in the consciousness of a knowing subject or else in the object (alternatively, identical with it).

2. The appearance of the knowing man (for example, Leibniz, Kant).

The two tasks facing the theory of knowledge are:
1. The constitution of things in the now of knowability;
2. The limitation of knowledge in the symbol.[vi]

The medium, for Benjamin, is not a seamless continuum; language is articulated in "Theory of Knowledge" as ciphers in Karl Jaspers' sense. The "knowing man [person]" cannot demand or command "now" since to attain "authentic existence in the perfected state of the world"[vii] would also be to disconnect entirely from the medium. Profane illumination, then, creates an experience which is symbolic, but it is only "truth" which for Benjamin can exist "in the perfected state of the world" and "in the now of knowability"[viii]. Even with my artificial insertion here of a key phrase from Duchamp, suggesting that Benjamin at his most metaphysical is also Benjamin aware of the ramifications of the copy, there is still an ongoing unreadability for many contemporary theorists; even the title of Benjamin's essay is problematic, and the second word of the first sentence—truth—ruins things from the start. While the metaphysical and theological ramifications of the phrases "perfected state of the world" and "das Jetzt der Erkenntbarkeit" are thoroughly rejected by most poststructuralist theorists, there is no doubt that a utopian impulse is still in existence, driving much recent thought. In other words, there remains an impulse to conjecture, to create or throw together an assemblage, one which is perhaps at odds
with the world, but which has an ethical imperative, if not anticipation. While this is not an attempt to blur otherwise marked boundaries, I argue that literature and theory share an *anticipatory impulse* which I call the Conjectural Order.

**Conjectural Order**

One way of thinking the Conjectural Order is via the performative reconstruction of the auto/biographical subject. The reconstruction is that of a subject via the theory of the "assemblage" while not accepting the radical Deleuzian-Guattarian conclusions of the latter position (that there is no such thing as "a subject" or a person). In other words, the desire to perform being (say, the desire to perform the Canadian modernist painter Emily Carr's being) is present in the Conjectural Order, without abandoning progress made with theories of the performative *per se* (e.g., the work of Judith Butler). I call this performative reconstruction the Conjectural Order because in part it is a schema which enables recovery and projection; repetition and difference; subjectivity and assemblage. Even in the etymology of the word "conjecture" this impossible schema holds, where the fourteenth-century root "conjectūra" is an "assembling of facts, from *conjicere* to throw together, from *jacere* to throw." (Collins) Thus the well-known definition of: "the formation of conclusions from incomplete evidence; [a] guess" requires linking with the now obsolete "interpretation of occult signs." (ibid) In other words the Conjectural Order is a schema which produces an assemblage that also can engage with the occult signs of Benjamin’s Profane Illumination. Yet, if some process always

exceeds the Profane Illumination, surely this "exceeding" becomes a synonym for "transcendence"? In a poststructuralist universe, such transcendence will always "...be expressly denied" as Karl Jaspers puts it: "but as Existenz finds transcendence incessantly thrust upon it as a concomitant possibility, this denial must be actively reiterated and thus maintained as negative conduct toward transcendence." Rather than utilize any number of "post" terms (poststructuralist, postmodernist, post-theory, etc. (or even Manfred Frank's excellently insulting phrase 'neostructuralism')) I will suggest here that "negative conduct toward transcendence" is a better descriptor, revealing that metaphysics, in the contemporary western humanities, is in abeyance. The Conjectural Order is a schema which enables exploration of this strange state of affairs.

**Benjamin II – Anticipation (Signs and Marks)**

Benjamin argues that in contrast to the sign, which is "printed on something", the mark appears or "emerges" from the primarily living medium of beings: "Christ's stigmata, blushes, perhaps leprosy and birthmarks". As a prophesy or warning sign of guilt, the mark *coincides* with the sign. The example given by Benjamin is Belshazzar's Feast where "...the awful nature of the apparition is based in large part on uniting these two phenomena, something of which only God is capable." Benjamin separates the spatiality of the "absolute sign" from the temporality of the "absolute mark"; in their coincidence in Belshazzar's Feast, however, there is still the necessary delay between the *writing-manifestation* of the sign-mark and its interpretation. This
delay is one of the generators of narrative, whereas the coincidence of sign and mark is a cipher of transcendence. Further, the writing-manifestation is the emergence of the fragment: first the partial hand, and second the division of the Kingdom:

In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. (Daniel 5:5)

And this is the writing that was written. MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.

This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it.

TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.

PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians. (Daniel 5:25-28)

While the sign involves being, the (impersonal) mark emerges via subjects as expression of a cipher pointing towards or "gaping" transcendence; the numerical list is interpreted by Daniel as the formula of analysis, judgement, and death: "In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain." (Daniel 5:30). Belshazzar's Feast anticipates death via the decoding of writing, yet the participants who have transgressed, appear to do so via arrogance and proceed via forgetfulness. The Queen (mother) reminds Belshazzar of a "man in thy kingdom" who was "made master of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers." (Daniel 5:11) The king now remembers Daniel, after he had already utilized all of the "wise men" in the land: "I have heard of thee." (Daniel 5:16) Daniel accuses the king of not learning from history, adding that the fragmentary sign-mark was sent. What should have been an act of remembrance and memorialization (the lesson or example of the father), becomes instead a repetition of the same (sacriligious use of the temple vessels). In fact the sacrilegious is the eternal repetition, but also a triggering of the rupture that leads to the coincidence of sign and mark (which in turn needs interpretation). The rupture of spatial signs via the intersection of temporality could be called "...the fall into time that introduces Opening into human experience." Belshazzar surely anticipates death, but not the cipher of transcendence as Opening. Daniel condemns the repetition of the same, but admits a retributive justice. Are sign and mark ever to result in a reconciliation? Or is this retributive justice always to be the result of their coincidence?

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.


5. Richard J. Lane, Reading Walter Benjamin: Writing Through The Catastrophe, chapter eight.


7. Ibid., p.277.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. See Lane, "Theorizing the Gendered Space of Auto/Biographical Performance via Samuel Beckett and Hans Bellmer".

11. Grace, Sherrill, "From Emily Carr To Joy Coghill... And Back: Writing the Self in Song of This Place," BC Studies, 137 (Spring 2003): 109-130.
