



Imaginary Biographies: Misreading the Lives of the Poets (Continuum Literary Studies)

Geoff Klock

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In 1946 French film critic Nino Frank, having just seen *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *Laura*, and *Murder, My Sweet* linked them all with the term "film noir." No one working on these projects knew they were making film noirs; Frank invented a label that connected them after the fact, and it is because of his label that the genre became famous. *Imaginary Biographies: Misreading the Lives of the Poets* aims to do for poetry what Frank did for film: to gather together previously unrelated works in order to better understand and appreciate them as a new, unrecognized literary genre.

In *Imaginary Biographies* Geoff Klock argues that the bizarre portrayal of historical writers in post-Enlightenment English poetry constitutes a genre, a battleground for two central conflicts: the confrontation of the self-sufficient Romantic imagination with the brute fact of external precursors (in the nineteenth century); and the participation in, and simultaneous deflation of, Romantic idealism (in the twentieth). In William Blake's *Milton*, the author of *Paradise Lost* returns to earth to redeem his female half, confront Satan and herald the apocalypse. Percy Bysshe Shelley's Jean-Jacques Rousseau has been physically deformed and mentally ruined by a hellish chariot in *The Triumph of Life*. Algernon Charles Swinburne, in his *Anactoria*, hijacks the ancient Greek poetess Sappho and turns her into his anti-Christian Sadistic lesbian vampire cannibal Muse. In *The Changing Light at Sandover* James Merrill contacts W.H. Auden and William Butler Yeats with a Ouija board and discovers their part in an insane cosmic hierarchy. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey abandoned their youthful plans to establish a utopian community in America; Paul Muldoon's *Madoc* imagines they went through with it and describes the ensuing disaster. John Ashbery's *Sleepers Awake* gages the work of Miguel de Cervantes, James Joyce and Homer in terms of how much they slept while writing. In *TV Men* Anne Carson portrays Thucydides, Sappho, and Antonin Artaud anachronistically preparing, or being prepared for, television adaptations.

Klock makes the audacious and fascinating case that the imaginary biography is in continuity with literary criticism. He concentrates on how one poet misreads another by explicitly naming the earlier poet in the latter poem. This "misreading" forms a new genre, creating a new kind of character and a new kind of poem. The result is a dazzling work of literary scholarship that will stimulate debate for years to come.

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