

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### The vicissitudes of the authentic self: a literary mapping of the authentic self from John Milton's Paradise lost to Bret Easton Ellis' Glamorama

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Abstract of thesis entitled

**The Vicissitudes of the Authentic Self: A Literary Mapping of the Authentic Self from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* to Bret Easton Ellis' *Glamorama***

Submitted by

**Mark Wallbanks**

Since the rise of individualism in the seventeenth century there has been increasing pressure on individuals to define themselves in the public eye. This has led to the recent phenomena of identity politics and self-branding. Yet how is one's true identity – if such a thing exists – ever expressed externally? How do individuals deal with the inner and outer aspects of identity? These are some of the issues which impinge upon the ethics of authenticity. This thesis investigates the development of the concept of the authentic self from its inception in the modern period to the postmodern. Through an analysis of the various tropes of literary texts, I shall illustrate how the concept of authenticity has travelled and transformed between cultural and temporal contexts.

The body of the thesis contains five central chapters. Chapter 1 represents *Paradise Lost* (1667) as the end of one world and the beginning of another. The “Satanic” trope introduces the contingency of transgression and displacement in regard to authentic self-definition. With the birth of the modern epoch, I argue that the collapse of the epic totality instigated the liberation of self through the process of individuation, yet the corresponding loss of “place” in the social order evoked existential angst. In the second chapter I argue that Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

(1719) is an apposite inclusion in the tradition of St. Augustine's and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. Through analysis of the "island" trope I assert that, even given the most perfect conditions of solipsism, the individual remains an inherently social being that retains a primordial compulsion for dialogical inscription of the self. In chapter 3, an analysis of the trope of "voice" as a metonym for ideology in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) portrays Kurtz and Marlow as opposing sides of the authenticity struggle against the ideological allure of collective and absolute power. Chapter 4 associates Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) with the anarchic egocentrism and intense individualism of Max Stirner's philosophy as a means of rebelling against the demands of social collectivism. In this chapter I analyse the "dream" trope in terms of Miller's trademark use of surreal metaphor which, I argue, provides a means of escape from the influence of collective identities. Finally, the fifth chapter will discuss the trope of "image terrorism" in reference to *Glamorama* (1998). This trope addresses the problemata of the globally destabilising influences of celebrity and terrorism, the tyranny of consumerism, and the Debordian *Society of the Spectacle*. The chapter raises the question of how, indeed if, in a globalized postmodern world with ever reducing horizons of differentiation, travel remains the last viable option in the pursuit of the authentic self.

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