

Title	Allegories of lying : Arendt, de Man and McCarthy
Sub Title	
Author	巽, 孝之(Tatsumi, Takayuki)
Publisher	慶應義塾大学藝文学会
Publication year	2017
Jtitle	藝文研究 (The geibun-kenkyu : journal of arts and letters). Vol.113, No.2 (2017. 12) ,p.95- 107
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	The decay of lying? : essays in honour of professor Keiko Kawachi
Genre	Journal Article
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-01130002-0095

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Allegories of Lying: Arendt, de Man and McCarthy

Takayuki TATSUMI

1. Somewhere between Anti-Semitism and Deconstructionism

The place to start is with a chiasmus between a couple of refugee scholars, Hannah Arendt (1906-75) and Paul de Man (1919-83): the former is a Jewish German philosopher, while the latter is an allegedly anti-Semitic Belgian literary critic. However, it is also true that a comparative study of their lives and writings will illuminate their commonalities. First, emigrating from Europe to the United States, both made friends with the feminist writer Mary McCarthy (1912-89), the one-time wife of the distinguished literary critic Edmund Wilson, and became involved with Bard College in New York. Second, both radically criticized the idea of totalitarianism, be it political or rhetorical. Third, both of their writings stirred up serious controversy over the status of the Jews, whether during their lifetime or posthumously.

Chronologically speaking, after 1941, when Arendt emigrated from Nazi-Germany to the United States, she became familiar with the cultural milieu of the New York Intellectuals, the major contributors to *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*. Thus, this new community very naturally invited Arendt to see Mary McCarthy at the Murray Hill Bar in 1944. Alfred Kazin notes: “Hannah Arendt was [Mary McCarthy’s] first real love. ... I always knew Mary as a harsh, sort of pointy person, but with Hannah she was almost humble, deferential” (qtd. in Brightman 299). In 1945, Mary McCarthy was offered her first regular job, teaching literature at Bard College, which would later establish the Hannah Arendt Center.

Meanwhile, Paul de Man emigrated from Belgium to the United States in 1948, concealing his wartime career of anti-Semitic journalism. Getting a job in a Doubleday

Bookshop in Grand Central Station in New York City, de Man came to know a number of New York Intellectuals, especially Mary McCarthy. Impressing many of them with a vast knowledge of Euro-American literature and culture, de Man was very easily initiated into their community. Despite his surname that had been made famous and even notorious by his uncle Henri (Hendrik) de Man throughout the international socialist political circles in Europe and his own commitment to a major newspaper like *Le Soir* that was published under Nazi censorship and widely distrusted, de Man could take full advantage of New York intellectuals' ignorance of Belgium during the World War II and the American cult of whatever is European (Barish 238). Thus, McCarthy composed a recommendation letter on behalf of this young genius, which helped de Man get his first teaching job at Bard College (Lehman 152).

In the very year of his emigration, de Man ambitiously contacted William Philips, editor of *Partisan Review*, the then cutting-edge journal of the New York Intellectuals. He asked if Philips might be interested in publishing his article on contemporary French literature, but his effort was in vain. Although he had wanted to serve as agent for setting up the distribution of *Partisan Review* in Europe and disguised as such a skillful literary agent for Georges Bataille as to receive a 20 dollars check from Dwight McDonald, the editor of the *Critique* magazine (Barrish 225-26), de Man, unlike Hannah Arendt, was not accepted easily in late-1940s American journalism (Lindsay Waters xii). In the meanwhile, Arendt had been active in American journalism since the 1940s.

Despite their differences, I find a comparative study of Arendt and de Man to be timely and significant now for several reasons. First, while Arendt's magnum opus, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), argues that anti-Semitic discourse in the 19th century was responsible for the rise of Nazism and Stalinism that caused the motiveless, thoughtless, and mechanistic Holocaust, which she famously described as "the banality of evil" in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), de Man's *Allegories of Reading* (1979) displaces human subjectivity to reveal the treachery of language, where the violence of writing can only be experienced as a "dismemberment, a beheading or a castration" (296). While Arendt attacks the anti-humanistic notion of totalitarianism ontologically, de Man cautions us against the post-humanistic mechanics of allegory disrupting the totalitarianism of symbols. Third, while Harold Bloom once designated de Man as the boa-deconstructor of the Yale School, which

was sometimes nicknamed as a “male” school in the 1970s, it is in fact through the female interpretive community represented by Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy in the 1940s and 50s that de Man got some inspiration for transfiguring their radical politics into his own literary theory. Indeed, de Man taught a number of distinguished feminist deconstructionists such as Gayatri Spivak, Barbara Johnson, Carol Jacobs, Cynthia Chase and Cathy Caruth, but it was the postwar and proto-feminist cultural milieu created by Arendt and McCarthy that initiated de Man into the frontier of criticism. A comparative perspective allows us to create a bridge of understanding between Arendt’s post-existentialism and de Man’s post-structuralism.

2. The Year of 1963: or, McCarthy’s Fiction and Arendt’s Theory

Let me begin by meditating upon a coincidence in 1963 between Mary McCarthy’s novel *The Group* and Hannah Arendt’s book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. You might be amazed at this coupling, but if you are knowledgeable enough about their intimate friendship, rereading them will allow us to redefine these texts as companion pieces.

Speaking from a literary historical perspective, from the time it was published in August 1963, Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*, which at first appears to be a pornographic chronicle of eight Vassar girls from 1933 through 1940, not only caused a heated controversy but also shot to the top of the best-seller lists, where it would remain for nearly two years. This novel sold nearly three hundred thousand copies by the end of 1964 in the United States and Europe, especially in Germany, where sales of over a quarter of a million copies supplied Mary and her husband with a steady infusion of income until 1987.

Despite her great success, immediately on its publication the novel received serious attacks. For instance, in *The New York Review of Books* Norman Mailer wrote: “The real interplay of the novel exists between the characters and then objects which surround them, ... until the faces are swimming in a cold lava of anality, which becomes the truest part of her group, her glop, her impacted mass.” By the same token, he also points out her failure to write anything more than “the best novel the editors of the women’s magazines ever conceived in their secret ambitions” (qtd in Brightman 483-84). Reading this passage, Mary McCarthy’s biographer Carol Brightman states: “She was condemned for writing a novel of

manners from a woman's point of view. ... The 'lady-book' epithet stuck like a burr to negative reviews of *The Group*, including a few written by women" (484). Even female reviewer Eleanor Widmer dismissed the novel as a "major triumph---a 'ladies' novel,'" agreeing with Mailer that McCarthy had "failed out of vanity, the accumulated vanity of being overpraised for too little, and so being pleased with herself for too little" (Brightman 484). However, given that it is McCarthy's intention to write a novel without male consciousness, these attacks do not make sense. To me *The Group* is primarily a perfect prototype of such contemporary feminist romances as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), and *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004), for it focuses upon a number of sensational episodes about eight members of the group, that is, Kay Strong, Mary Prothero (Pokey), Dottie Renfrew, Elinor Eastlake (Lakey), Polly Andrews, Priss Hartshorn, Helena Davison and Norine Schmittlapp. This sexual Bildungsroman uncovers the apocalyptic period of their "seven years" between 1933 and 1940, beginning with Kay's marriage with a "Yale man" Harald Peterson, who was to have numerous extramarital affairs, and closing with Kay's mysterious death and her funeral conducted by the very group as the chief mourners, whose members all regarded Harald as a bad fairy or Death.

Nevertheless, let us note that even the mysterious death of Kay could well be conceived as the effect not only of her personal friction with her husband Harald but also of her political struggle with him. Mrs Davison considers Kay as "the first American war casualty" because she was so deeply interested in becoming an air-raid warden as to believe that "Hitler would not wait for Roosevelt to arm and declare war on him." Kay "had been airplane-sporting, it seemed, from her window at the Vassar Club when somehow she lost her balance and fell" (*The Group* 417). However, Kay's military interest is not incompatible with her complicated relationship with Harald: "What had saddened her friends was that her interest in what she called Hitler's timetable was so obviously a rounding on Harald, who had become a fanatical America Firster and was getting quite a name for himself speaking at their rallies. If only Kay could have forgotten him, instead of enlisting in a rival campaign. Still, her zeal of preparedness had given her something to live for. What a cruel irony that it should have caused her death!" (*The Group* 418-19). It is clear that this novel invites us to enjoy its double narratives simultaneously: the sensational near-pornographic plot on the surface and the anti-totalitarian political plot in the depth of the text.

Chapter 12 features Polly Andrews's father who recently converted to Trotskyism, making complaints about his divorced wife Julia's prejudices: "But Julia has been convinced by what she reads in the papers that we Trotskyites are counter-revolutionary agents bent on destroying the Soviet Union. ... The Trotskyites, I assured her, are the only effective force fighting Stalin. Roosevelt is playing right into his hands. And Hitler has his own axe to grind" (*The Group* 336-37). Considering this father is suffering from "manic-depressive psychosis"(322), we find here the author critiquing the discourse of ideology itself, probably inspired by the last section of Arendt's earlier masterpiece *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) consisting of three books: "Antisemitism," "Imperialism," and "Totalitarianism" :

The fiction of the Protocols [of the Elders of Zion] was as adequate as the fiction of a Trotskyite conspiracy, for both contained an element of plausibility — the nonpublic influence of the Jews in the past; the struggle for power between Trotsky and Stalin — which not even the fictitious world of totalitarianism can safely do without. Their art consists in using, and at the same time transcending, the elements of reality, of verifiable experiences, in the chosen fiction, and in generalizing them into regions which then are definitely removed from all possible control by individual experience. With such generalizations, totalitarian propaganda establishes a world fit to compete with the real one, whose main handicap is that it is not logical, consistent, and organized. (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 362)

This passage convinces us that in 1951 Arendt re-interprets totalitarianism not as a political ideology but as a well-wrought fiction. Developing and reorganizing this vision in 1963, she goes so far as to reconsider Eichmann not as a terrific incarnation of evil but as a banal "law-abiding citizen" only doing his duty and obeying orders just like a cog in the machine of a totalitarian society (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 135). Now that the very law of Nazism turned out to be a well-wrought fiction, we see an analogy between Polly's Trotskyite father and Eichmann, both of whom just wanted to be faithful to the political tenets they believed in, not as a charismatic leader but simply as an inhuman devotee unable to distinguish

between religious fanaticism and political mechanism.

Thus, McCarthy's novel subverted traditional patriarchy by attacking not only adulterous men like Harald and Dick Brown to whom Dottie lost her virginity, but also the literal patriarch of Polly's family, foregrounding a feminist and even lesbian group of Vassar graduates. Likewise, Arendt's theory reconsidered the political role of the fearful totalitarian patriarchs as always undermined by their literary role as fictionists and even supposed a totalitarian conspiracy between the Nazis and the Jewish leadership (the so-called *Judenrat*, imposed by Nazi Germany): "Thus, the gravest omission from the 'general picture' was that of a witness to testify to the cooperation between the Nazi rulers and the Jewish authorities, and hence of an opportunity to raise the question: 'Why did you cooperate in the destruction of your own people and, eventually, in your own ruin?' ... I have dwelt on this chapter of the story, which the Jerusalem trial failed to put before the eyes of the world in its true dimensions, because it offers the most striking insight into the totality of the moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society — not only in Germany but in almost all countries, not only among the persecutors but also among the victims" (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 124-26).

This is the reason why both of their 1963 books, *The Group* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, ignited a clamorous censure. Arendt examines totalitarian politics as a fiction — or a beautiful lie — paralyzing human ethics, while McCarthy deconstructs the boundary between politics and literature, with the title "The Group" allegorizing the very discourse of political partisanship that will survive the upheaval of consensus and dissensus. On one hand, Hannah Arendt speculates on the Judaic tenet of "the chosen people" as a crypto-archetype of fascism and discloses what we might call the pornography of ideology. Mary McCarthy, on the other hand, radically criticizes totalitarianism and creates a crypto-feminist anti-war fiction disguised as a near-pornographic campus novel.

3. Allegories of Lying: from Eichmann to de Man

What has long puzzled me most is that although biographers of Paul de Man have never failed to mention the role Mary McCarthy played in introducing him into American academia, the scholars of McCarthy rarely mention de Man. However, it is true that without

Mary McCarthy's letter of recommendation dated June 9, 1949, which introduced Paul de Man as perfect for the vacant post at Bard College, located in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, where she had taught between 1946 and 47, the future bo-a-deconstructor could not have started his academic life in North America. In this letter Mary applauds de Man as follows: "He is a Belgian intellectual, very much au courant in literature and also in politics, sensitive, intelligent, cultivated, modest [and] straightforward" (qtd in Barish 250). Nonetheless, while ordering in 1948 his wife Anne (Anide Baraghian) and their three children to wait for him in Buenos Aires where Anne's parents were living, only a couple of years later de Man committed bigamy by marrying Patricia Lightfoot Kelley, one of his students at Bard College, in Yonkers, New York, in June 1950. Thus, Mary McCarthy started refiguring him as a guy who habitually used up one friend after another, given to "lying, evasion, fantasy, greed, possibly even theft" (qtd in Barish 277). As a distinguished teacher Paul de Man was endowed with the gift of storytelling which could instantly excite his audiences, make them share his ideas and passions, and accept him as their leader (Barish 266). By the same token, however, his remarkable storytelling very naturally seduced him to keep telling lies in order to conceal the dark side of his pro-Nazi years in Europe during wartime and refashion himself as a young, promising European intellectual. It is the brilliant side of de Man as a young scholar-critic that fascinated Mary very much. Once his bigamy was revealed, Mary became so terribly upset as to hate her former disciple. Since then Mary, until the end of her life in 1989, either remained silent about him or merely criticized his personality. When one of de Man's disciples Richard Rand asked Mary what she thought of his mentor, she said: "Oh, yes, Paul de Man He always reminded me of a poor little Dutch boy without shoes" (Barish 278). Once his collaborationist articles were disclosed in 1987, Mary also suggested that de Man's books should be burned. It is clear that Mary McCarthy could not allow for his personality as such. Evelyn Barish explores this problem with the help of Richard Rand and de Man's second wife Patricia, concluding that de Man and McCarthy had an affair and that Mary had even hoped for marriage" (Barish 279-81). It is highly plausible that Mary incorporated part of de Man's personality into her characterization of misogynistic characters in *The Group*, that is, guys like Harald and Dick: especially the way Harald's affair ended up by making Kay angry and even suicidal. However, we should not forget that eleven years earlier than *The Group*, Mary McCarthy had published the first-ever academic novel

in American literary history, *The Groves of Academe* (1952), which narrates the excuse of the fake-communist professor Henry MulCahy who was to be fired by Jocelyn College, apparently modeled after Bard College:

What interested him [Henry MulCahy] retrospectively, and just precisely, he thought, as an onlooker, was the question of how and when the risky inspiration had come to him. That Maynard considered him a Communist must have been a strong factor from the outset, yet as he had paused in the hall outside Domna's door, listening thoughtfully to her and her student, he had not yet (he was certain) felt the metonymic urge that would prompt him, once in her office, to substitute the effect for the cause, the sign for the thing signified, the container for the thing contained. It was the artist in him, he presumed, that had taken control and fashioned from newspaper stories and the usual disjunct fragments of personal experience a persuasive whole which had a figurative truth more impressive than the data of reality, and hence, he thought, with satisfaction, truer in the final analysis, more universal in Aristotle's sense. Evidently so, to judge by first results; there could be no doubt that Domna, just now, had experienced an instant *recognition*: of himself as the embodiment of a universal, the *eidos*, as it were, of the Communist, Lazarus to their Dives, the underground man appointed to rise from the mold and confront society in his cerements. That he had never, as it happened, chanced to join the Communist Party organizationally did not diminish the truth of this revelation. (Mary McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe* 97, underline mine)

Mary McCarthy's insight into the "metonymic urge" of Henry MulCahy cannot help but remind us of de Man's deconstructive reading of Rousseau in "Excuses (Confession)," the last chapter of *Allegories of Reading* (1979) originally entitled "The Purloined Ribbon" (1976-77), a close reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions* (1782-89), which uncovers Rousseau's own metonymic urge to lie when his theft of a ribbon for his beloved Marion was exposed. Unbelievably, Rousseau told a lie by accusing Marion herself of having purloined the very ribbon. De Man explains: "Once it is removed from its legitimate

owner, the ribbon, being in itself devoid of meaning and function, can circulate symbolically as a pure signifier and become the articulating hinge in a chain of exchanges and possessions. ... The deconstruction of the figural dimension is a process that takes place independently of any desire; as such it is not unconscious but mechanical, systematic in its performance but arbitrary in its principle, like a grammar. This threatens the autobiographical subject not as the loss of something that once was present and that it once possessed, but as a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text” (de Man, *Allegories of Reading* 283 & 298). By unveiling the rhetorical structure of Rousseau’s excuse the scholar-critic de Man seems to perform his own autobiography as defacement and rationalize the failures of his own early years. Paul de Man’s theory clearly owes much to Mary McCarthy’s fiction, not *vice versa*.

4. Conclusion: Between the Ideology of Totalitarianism and the Aesthetics of Totality

Now let me take this opportunity to consider the possibility of Paul de Man’s theoretical indebtedness to the feminist interpretive community constructed by Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt, without whose influence he could not have educated female deconstructionists at Cornell, Johns Hopkins, and Yale. Although it is impossible to present any testimony about the relationship between de Man and Arendt, or de Man’s reference to Arendt, there is no doubt that it was *Partisan Review* that bound them together, if indirectly, permitting them to share political discussions. Indeed, while de Man was so attracted by existentialism as to write essays on Martin Heidegger, another Nazi collaborationist, Arendt, the former disciple and ex-lover of Heidegger, fled Hitler and parted with her mentor (Barish 370). While de Man was called a “literary philosopher” for making use of opaque concepts such as unreadability, Arendt was considered not abstract but richly conceptual (Barish 407). While in her introduction to Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations* Arendt explained the historical background of Benjamin’s suicide on September 26, 1940, when he could find no way to escape Nazi Europe, de Man, who was to succeed in his own emigration, omitted any reference to the historical background and remained consistent in “refusing to introduce pathos, biography, and social history into his disclosure” (Lehman 190). Despite this sharp contrast, I find it not impossible but even desirable to link these figures in their critique of totality. While Arendt

completed a comprehensive historical survey of conspiracy between Judaism and fascism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, de Man attacked the tyranny of the symbol in literary history and displaced it with allegory in his cornerstone essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality” (1969), unveiling the scandal of language.

In this monumental essay de Man redefines symbol and allegory as follows: “Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference” (“The Rhetoric of Temporality” 191). This hypothesis about temporality is endorsed by a reconsideration of another figure, that of “irony”: “The act of irony, as we now understand it, reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality” (“The Rhetoric of Temporality” 203). Now grasping the possibility of irony as liberated from any form of teleology or totality,” de Man goes so far as to redefine allegory and irony as a kind of set of Siamese twins: “Irony is a synchronic structure, while allegory appears as a successive mode capable of engendering duration as the illusion of a continuity that it knows to be illusionary. Yet the two modes, for all their profound distinctions in mood and structure, are the two faces of the same fundamental experience of time” (“The Rhetoric of Temporality” 207). By reorganizing the rhetorical army of allegory and irony, here de Man wants to question the atemporal, transcendental and even totalitarian tyranny of the symbol. Just as Jacques Derrida subverted the hierarchy between logos and writing, so de Man displaced the hierarchy between symbol and allegory, unveiling such literary and linguistic scandals as the unreadability of literature and the catachrestic nature of language. The subsequent revolutionary movement in literary criticism called “deconstruction” is, as they say, now history.

Now I would like to conclude my paper with a brief reconsideration of the very concept of revolution as closely annotated and radically redefined by Hannah Arendt in her other book published in 1963, the very year that saw *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*. Although de Man himself considers his essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality” as a kind of “change” and “turn” in his academic career, between existentialism and deconstructionism, that has proven to be “productive” (Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* xii), the symptom could well be found in Arendt’s own philological re-interpretation

of the term “revolution” spelled out in 1963. Rethinking the word “revolution” originally as an astronomical term implying “a recurring, cyclical movement,” Arendt states:

The fact that the word “revolution” meant originally restoration, hence something which to us is its very opposite, is not a mere oddity of semantics. The revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which to us appear to show all evidence of a new spirit, the spirit of the modern age, were intended to be restorations. ...

For our present purpose and especially for our ultimate effort to understand the most elusive and yet the most impressive facet of modern revolutions, namely, the revolutionary spirit, it is of importance to remember that the whole notion of novelty and newness as such existed prior to the revolutions, and yet was essentially absent from their beginnings.

We know, or believe we know, the exact date when the word ‘revolution’ was used for the first time with an exclusive emphasis on irresistibility and without any connotation of a backward revolving movement; ...

The date was the night of the fourteenth of July 1789, in Paris, when Louis XVI heard from the Duc de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt of the fall of the Bastille, the liberation of a few prisoners, and the defection of the royal troops before a popular attack. The famous dialogue that took place between the king and his messenger is very short and very revealing. The king, we are told, exclaimed, “C’est une revolte” (It’s revolt), and Liancourt corrected him: “Non, Sire, c’est une revolution” (No, sir, it’s revolution) ... here, for the first time perhaps, the emphasis has entirely shifted from the lawfulness of a rotating, cyclical movement to its irresistibility” (Arendt, *On Revolution* 32-38)

Here Arendt performs a rhetorical and even pre-deconstructive reading of “revolution” without resorting to such technical terms as “dead metaphor” or “catachresis.” Insofar as what Arendt and McCarthy wanted to achieve from the 1950s through the 1960s is not only political intervention but also feminist revolution that started by questioning the very origin of revolution, it is impossible for de Man not to have been exposed himself to the

trend of the times through the feminist revolutionary interpretive community emergent from *Partisan Review*. It is not that de Man discovered the frontier of literary criticism at the turning point of 1969, when he published “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” but rather that McCarthy and Arendt, both representing the postwar New York Intellectuals, had paved the way for deconstruction, especially in the year of 1963, almost more than a decade before de Man and Derrida came to be nicknamed as the leaders of the “Yale Mafia.” It is notable that while Hannah Arendt’s bosom friend Mary McCarthy published *The Group* in 1963, a book on the fate of totalitarianism disguised as a near-pornographic campus novel, McCarthy’s own discovery, her would-be prodigy Paul de Man published his first book, *Blindness and Insight*, in 1971 and started unveiling what could well be called the pornography of rhetoric disguised as a theoretical critique of the very concept of symbolic totality, without which the ideology of totalitarianism could not have been constructed. With this hidden agenda of their texts in mind, it is safe to redefine Paul de Man’s concept of “allegories of reading” as an effect of allegories of lying — that is to say, cheating and outwitting one another among the so-called New York intellectuals.

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* The original version of this article, "Lessons of New York Intellectuals: Arendt, de Man and Mary McCarthy," was first delivered at a panel, "Hannah Arendt Re-historicized," at the 2014 annual meeting of PAMLA (Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association) held on November 2nd, 2014 at Riverside Convention Center in Riverside, California. Without the discussion with my fellow panelists Prof. Michiko Shimokobe (Seikei University), Prof. Dan O'Neale (University of California, Berkeley), and especially our moderator Prof. Fuhito Endo (Seikei University) I could not have kept meditating upon the interpretive community of the New York Intellectuals.