A Thesis

entitled

Textual Relationships and the Problem of Authority

by

David R. Parks

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in Philosophy

Dr. Ammon Allred, Committee Chair

Dr. Benjamin Grazzini, Committee Member

Dr. Benjamin Pryor, Committee Member

Dr. Patricia R. Komuniecki, Dean
College of Graduate Studies

The University of Toledo

May 2012
Copyright 2012, David Richard Parks

This document is copyrighted material. Under copyright law, no parts of this document may be reproduced without the expressed permission of the author.
An Abstract of

Textual Relationships and the Problem of Authority

by

David R. Parks

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in Philosophy

The University of Toledo

May 2012

The ‘Death of the Author’ and subsequent ‘Birth of the Reader’ notes a turning point in post-structural literary criticism that is marked by a struggle for authorial sovereignty. This essay argues that the traditional models thus far offered are inadequate in explaining why one source is preferable to another. Through an ontological exploration of the relationships that exist in literature, this essay hopes to offer a more sound and complete explanation for the reasons surrounding this struggle and what potential solutions free us from the traditional stagnation that has occurred in literary theory.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my fellow graduate students in the philosophy department at The University of Toledo for the countless conversations we have had in the dungeon that have helped me more than any of you may realized. To the faculty of the philosophy department, I would like to thank everyone for their guidance and wisdom during my journey.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iii

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... iv

Table of Contents ................................................................................................................. v

1 Introduction.......................................................................................................................... 1

2 The Writer........................................................................................................................... 16

  2.1 Deceitfulness .................................................................................................................. 20

  2.2 Violence .......................................................................................................................... 23

  2.3 The Possibility of Writing ............................................................................................... 26

  2.4 Enslavement .................................................................................................................. 29

3 The Work............................................................................................................................ 32

  3.1 Ante Litterae .................................................................................................................... 33

  3.2 Meaning .......................................................................................................................... 37

  3.3 Mistakes .......................................................................................................................... 46

4 The Author.......................................................................................................................... 53

  4.1 On Barthes ....................................................................................................................... 54

  4.2 Writerly and Readerly Texts ............................................................................................ 56

  4.3 Foucault’s Question ......................................................................................................... 59

  4.4 Writer as Author .............................................................................................................. 62

  4.5 Reader as Author and the Struggle for Sovereignty ......................................................... 64
References

68
Chapter 1

Introduction

The task of writing is daunting. One cannot imagine the infinite things that can be said of a thing yet such impossibility still leads the writer to write. For every sentence that is calculated and controlled there are also those instances where the words seem to spring forth upon the page without forethought—as if what was written before naturally led to what has been written now and what will be written in the future. How does one say what has yet to be said when the words take over as such? For as an infinitum of possibilities lay beyond the writer so too does the writer proceed forth from the infinitum of the said. The writer exhausts what at that moment can be said but must always begin again, exhausting the words as if they not only do not belong to the writer but as if they themselves are ridden with some reproachable infection.

Writing announces itself through the past it now occupies with an active voice. The voice that calls is one that contains the shell of the writer and a becoming of the reader that begs the continuation of a conversation. This continuation is marked by a releasing of temporal bounds that brings the writer to the reader in a dialectic modality that transcends the conventions of spoken language. Deleuze tells us that “writing is a question of becoming,” a becoming that involves a relationship of writing to language; a
relationship that makes language foreign (Deleuze 1997a, 1). The dialectic that transcends language, that makes language foreign, is precisely found in writing trying to speak when speech seems the most difficult or impossible. This difficulty may have prompted Deleuze in the same passage to see this becoming as one which is always incomplete. This incompleteness, and thus the pending difficulty faced, is due to the absence of presence in becoming; of having the characteristic of being ‘elusive to the present’; an elusiveness that has no need of distinguishing between past and future but pulls in both directions simultaneously (Deleuze 1997b, 1). It is with this in mind that we now consider the temporality of writing in its relation to language, the writer, and itself.

In saying that writing is a question of becoming is to immediately and mistakenly conjure up thoughts of a lurking deficiency within writing. The historicity of such a mistaken deficiency has riddled the works of many who have championed writing as secondary, incomplete, and imitative. Socrates informed us that writing bestows a danger upon the soul in its being a deceptively attractive semblance of wisdom (Plato 1989, 520; 275a-c). Writing is simply viewed here as a notational reminder of what men already knew and in serving as a substitute for memory would only lead to forgetfulness and a fallacious sense of knowledge within the one who maintains such a device. Writing is further presented as being analogous to painting in its ability to seem alive while retaining a “majestic silence” when any seek to learn further from it (Plato 1989, 521; 275d-e). It is unable to defend itself when questioned or say anything beyond what it repeats forever and thus relies upon its creator to provide its defense. Such a defense can

---

1 Where possible, I have included any applicable paginations that would direct the reader to the specific passages regardless of translator, edition, or publisher: in the above reference to Plato, I have included the Stephanus numbers associated with the passage I am drawing upon from the work cited.
be found within a ‘living’ vocalization. It is in the presence of spoken discourse that writing appears as an incomplete imitation. This claim of superiority given to vocalization will serve to sediment the historical debasement of writing; an inferiority that will resonate through generations of astute thinkers within the tradition of western philosophy. And although Platonic metaphysics may not hold the same weight as it once did, are we surprised that the residual effects of a primacy granted by confining written discourse to the sensible realm of appearance and incompleteness while elevating spoken discourse to the intelligible realm of truth and reason, have not also been abandoned or that such a mainstay lacked any serious considerations well into the late 19th and early 20th centuries? What we find is a revival towards a critical thinking on language in general, i.e. in its broadest form [la langue] encompassing both speech [parole] and writing [écriture] and the relational values of each to one another. This revival can be seen coming out of the phenomenological traditions of Husserl and Heidegger and their French respondents: Derrida, Blanchot, and Deleuze.

In the *Origin of Geometry*, Husserl raises the question as to how “ideal objects,” such as those found in geometry, proceed from their primary origins within the “conscious space of their inventor’s soul” to an ideal objectivity (Husserl 1989, 161). What he is attempting to work through is the question of how ideas are able to transcend their origins to become accessible to anyone at anytime. This reminds us of our Platonic passage from earlier, though it does not exempt us from danger announced by Socrates; speech may be enough to guarantee retention and memory within one’s *living community* (to borrow a Husserlean term) but this is incomplete for Husserl because it does not
guarantee any historical continuity. Husserl turns to writing to find completeness in this
transcendence of ideal objectivity,

The important function of written expression is that it makes
communications possible without immediate or mediate personal address;
it is, so to speak, communication become virtual. Written signs are …
sensibly experienceable; and it is always possible that they be
intersubjectively experienceable in common (Husserl 1989, 164).

The possibility of writing, Derrida notes in the *Introduction*, assures the absolute
traditionalization of an ideal objectivity and its freedom from a subjective field of
speaking subjects. The *virtuality* for Derrida marks the moment of writing as a moment
of *crisis*, one that is both necessary and dangerous (Derrida 1989, 80n, 87).2 Returning to
the dilemma advanced in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates, in declaring that writing always appears
as a majestic silence that must rely on its writer to defend its words, shows us the danger
of ambiguity the words face once their writer has passed. By the same account, however,
we must ask of the Socratic objection to writing how such problems are avoided in
spoken discourse. Undoubtedly, Socrates is hinting towards the notion of a *living
community* where memory serves as the parchment of the continuity of ideas. If we were
to challenge this by questioning what would become of such ideas should their owner
pass, we may rely on Socrates to fall back upon the metaphysical Forms from which one

2 The “crisis” refers to Husserl’s viewpoint that Europe was in the grips of a social and cultural crisis, a
“sickness” that had rendered passivity to sense in the form of a unifying accretion of meaning such that a
“reactivation” of meaning within the unified components themselves becomes incapable. Cf. Husserl’s
“Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity” and *Origin of Geometry* (op.cit.) 164.
could recollect such knowledge once more. For those of us who wish a stronger answer however, returning to that which is experiencable, the sensible utterances of a discourse which does not rely upon personal address offers us a *reactivation* of the meaning made sediment and self-evident through its words. But have we as yet shown that such self-evidence is possible, a self-evidence that allows us to escape the dangers of ambiguity and misinterpretation forewarned by Socrates? Such an answer relies on the ability of written words to reactivate for us their meaning, for writing in general to be able to announce itself, to make itself present within the field of transcendental subjectively that it has necessitated in order for ideal objectivity to break its primordial shackles.

In order to determine if it has any spatiotemporal meaning for us, we must first return to our considerations on ‘writing as a question of becoming’ by asking ourselves what we mean by writing being a question and what sort of thing writing is that has as one of its possibilities the possibility of being a question. We begin with a rather crude interpretation that writing is the inscription of language upon a surface—in the same light we may say that speech is the vocalization of language carried off upon the wind. Such a narrowly conceived description however excludes any derivable meaning and reduces both writing and speech to its superficial function or event. A more precise examination however involves two considerable approaches: the first taking us through Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* and into Derrida’s *Grammatology*, while the second approaches writing through the works of Blanchot.

Such an examination into modern linguistics befits the mentioning of Saussure and a brief elaboration of his structuralist theory of language. With Saussure, we cannot think of language [*langue*] solely in terms of its functionality alone, but rather as a
Saussure’s semiotics proposed a new understanding of signs, i.e. linguistic signs are not simply words or symbols (signifiers) but are also concepts (signified) (Saussure 1966, 67). This binary relation of signifier/signified is covered under the whole of the term “sign” for Saussure. Thus a sign is one among many in a system of language [langue]. In his examination of language, Saussure is privileging spoken language over written (Saussure 1966, 70)—written discourse amounting to a secondary expression of speech [parole]. Whereas language [langue] contains elements or symbols of a language (English, French, etc.), the speaking of that language in determinate context is speech [parole]. Though the signifiers are arbitrary (tree or arbor) they nonetheless remained fixed within the linguistic community in which they are used. This is problematic for us in that we recognize language as something that changes over time. This problem was also apparent to Saussure who attempted to reconcile this by attributing characteristics of immutability and mutability to language. This appears contradictory at first until one gathers that Saussure is claiming that language is immutable insofar as the speaker’s ability to change it, while its mutability lies in the fact that time discloses to us a relational shift between the signified and its signifier (Saussure 1966, 74). Though avoiding contradiction, this notion of change coupled with stability is still problematic in how we are to reconcile language as both arbitrary and yet historically situated by its preceding period.

For Derrida, such a problem is avoidable once one comes to realize the relation that created the problem cannot itself hold. By Saussure’s account, writing existed for the purpose of expressing language. Derrida sets out to show that no such linguistic sign

---

3 Cf. the introduction of the same piece where Saussure says, “Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first.” (op.cit.) 23
precedes writing while also pointing out that the division between speech and writing that Saussure is working from is one that takes writing as restricted to phonetic models and the language of words (in the Aristotelian tradition that spoken words are symbols of thought while written word are symbols of speech) (Derrida 1997, 14, 30). This is not to say that phonetic writing plays only a minor part in communicative functions but rather the ideal that drives such a functioning is never completely phonetic. If for Saussure, spoken word alone constitutes the object, the ideality, then it follows that the written word can be nothing but external, phonetic, and operating out of a pre-constituted signification. To say that writing is external is to say nothing beyond the traditional Saussure was working from and directs us back to the Phaedrus where Plato confirms this exteriority when he say that writing bestows a danger upon the soul, as if it were an exterior mechanism or utensil that could directly influence the internal soul. This sort of upheaval or intrusion denotes the violence that Derrida will continually come back to his essays. This breaching of the interiority of the soul reminds us of the philosophically problematic binary relation of the soul and body, which here is once more seen through the binary of speech and writing. Derrida will question such a relation and deem it unwarranted by means of utilizing the movement between signifier and signified when we introduce writing into the relation. For Saussure, we saw the algorithmic movement from signifier to signified as constituted within speech. Derrida picks up on the problem of introducing time into the movement from signifier to signified and claims that writing is a much more suited to constitute a unity of language through time (Derrida 1997, 36). This movement from signifier to signified within writing constitutes not a binary relation of arbitrary concepts to determinate context, but rather a reactivation of contexts which
reveal through interpretation the concepts present in written discourse. The notion of continuity through time made possible by writing is in itself a possibility because of its historicity. Writing is an event and what is written contains within it a *trace* (here used in the Derridian sense) to other writing, of signs to other signs and signifiers to other signifiers. Signification is thus a referral (and deferral) to other signs. This reference to other signs—including the absence of itself, a notion that requires of us further examination—is already and always contained with the sign. This deferment however is crucial for us because it implies an appearance of a spatial and temporal absence marking the differentiation. Unlike what is found in the living community of speech, whose meaning is contained within the expressed utterance, in writing we have a deferred sense of meaning that makes possible writing’s transcendence through time but at the cost of never fully becoming present.

So we have come full circle in some respect from our initial question of how writing can announce itself, make itself present, only to find that such a presence is found in its absence. We moved from the traditional consideration of writing as an imitative art to Husserl reminding us that writing is a necessary component within the complete system of language; though we were still faced with the dilemma of misinterpretation. Saussure brought us back to tradition though incorporated writing [*écriture*] as solely the expression of speech [*parole*]; an external sign that is secondary to speech [*parole*] and language [*langue*]. Derrida frees writing from its subservient position by deconstructing the traditional relation of speech to writing in order for us to recognize the possibility of a transcendental objectivity. In recognizing writing as the most suitable way for language to maintain continuity over time so creates an absence about writing that will necessarily
fail to announce its presence. But this is not the end of the story. In thinking that writing was the type of thing that could announce its presence, we failed to see that we were caught within the same metaphysical context that Derrida points out befell Husserl. What we took for granted was writing as an existent, as a substance, as a thing that had a voice that could announce itself, that carried presence as a possibility. The question that asks “what is writing” appears as one that is violently circular and impossible to answer. What is much more interesting for us here is the questioning of the writing, i.e. what is writing such that it can be questioned. To approach writing is to see that we are already working from inside writing and thus come to understand that writing begins the moment it becomes a question.

When Blanchot addresses the question, “What is Literature,” he discovers an emptiness about it that mimics the absence we have disclosed within writing (Blanchot 1995, 302). The relation of writing [écriture] to literature [littérature] is one that is already constituted by literature’s participation within writing, not as secondary but as relational. Literature appears as a constructive repetition of writing that assumes a structure through the revealing of a trace that is tacitly active. This structure, however, is without substance or “seriousness.” Literature for us is a question that, like writing, we find possible only through its absence; what Blanchot will refer to as literature’s negation or nullity. The becoming of a question for literature begins in the act of writing in which the pen of the writer moves through a void and writes what has not written—the question is present on the page once writing has taken place (Blanchot 1995, 300). If we grant the continuity present in writing for our earlier discussions, then this continuity reveals within literature its own existence as a continual becoming of sorts. In extending this
becoming to the writer we find the same incompleteness Deleuze admits of writing. Blanchot refers us to Hegel, who says in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “an individual cannot know what he [really] is until he has made himself a reality through action”—in order to write one must have the talent to write, yet he does not know if he has the talent until he has written (Blanchot 1995, 303). This reminds us of the difficulty Meno raised to Socrates concerning knowledge: one does not seek or inquire into knowledge already possessed, but also cannot seek that which is unknown for how would one ever know it even if they were to come face to face with it (Plato 1989, 363; 80d). In the same passage from earlier, Hegel tells us that one can only break this cyclical argument if they begin writing without concerns about its beginning or end or for any concern that it may yield any justification for proceeding to action. Our Deleuzean incompleteness is still with us however if we concede that once the writing has finished any tie the writer may have had to it becomes lost. If such disconnect transpires, then the writer is hopelessly destined to always begin anew. We can grant that the writer remains tied in some respect, e.g. the Socratic understanding of the writer needing to provide a defense of the writing against those who may misinterpret the words, but this certainly is not always the case. If the reader approaches the work in such a way that the words convey to the reader what the writer conceived in them, then the writer remains in the shadow of the words which no longer require a defense. This is not the end. If the writer wished to preserve what was conceived *as it was conceived* in the writing, there would be to reason to risk it by extending it to others. But then one might ask why such a work was written in the first place if not as an extension toward something that is foreign to the writer. Blanchot tells

---

us that the reader is the real author in this case; “as he reads it, he creates it … he is the consciousness and the living substance of the written thing” (Blanchot 1995, 306). What is written is thus extended out from its writer, created not for but by a public that does not want to hear its own voice but “someone else’s voice, a voice that is real, profound, troubling like the truth” (Blanchot 1995, 307). This means however that such a work becomes lost as much as its writer becomes lost within it. What is written becomes absorbed, transformed, and situated within a history that has no beginning or end—the work disappears at the moment it comes to be realized in a force of creative negation—with every meaning and no meaning, containing its writer and its reader in silence and nothingness. Earlier we claimed that the notion of continuity through time of writing is itself a possibility because of its historicity. This historicity we now see is possible only from the writing extending out from the writer into what is foreign, what both contains and consumes the writer, a contradiction of becoming and annihilating.

There appears to be no escape from the contradiction the writer faces both in approaching the writing and after it has been written. The negation or nullity in literature seems to be bound up in this annihilation. What this negation points to is the loss of the subjective connection to the writing itself. If so then to understand this negation is to bring us exactly to the heart of the question which asks “what is literature.” In removing the subjectivity of the written, we have relegated it to a form of objectivity; but we can do nothing with an object that has no name (Blanchot 1995, 322). Blanchot reminds us here from Hegel that “Adam’s first act, which made him the master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them in their existence” (Blanchot 1995, 323). The necessity of naming thus presupposes an objectivity that brings about the subjective for
us, by instantiating it in the flesh of reality through language that marks both its creation and its annihilation. This annihilation that exists within words is precisely what allows them to have meaning. In the same passage, Blanchot tells us that language begins with this void, the silence lost somewhere between beginning and end where nothing finds its being in speech and the being of speech is nothing. What is spoken through this narrative voice (the neuter) is for us a signification of language itself as something that is meaningful (Blanchot 1993, 379-387). Within language we find the recapturing of this negation without which there can be no meaning. What we conclude from this is the manifestation of an ambiguity that lies somewhere between nothingness and the living community that allows for the possibility of a transcendental movement between objectivity and subjectivity which reveals to us its signification through its majestic silence. To understand then the question of “What is Literature” is to recognize its nothingness, its annihilation, of all that is recognizable that allows it to be a meaningful question for us while also allowing us to see writing as the alienation of language (as making language foreign) in its (writing’s) attempt to speak from the void, that is, precisely from the place where language is impossible.

What makes writing meaningful for us then lies in the contradiction that the voice that announces it presence is through the aphonic annihilation of language. Thus when we speak of the annihilation of language, what we are referring to is its familiarity. This familiarity is what allowed us within the living community to expose its meaning within speech [parole]. Thus we are not destroying language in general but have separated the traditional biases that subordinated writing to speech. What we must now turn our attention toward is the possibility of language such that we may find our branches
between writing and speech that will give us our sense of presence in writing i.e. what will allow us to draw some conclusions in our examining of the temporality of writing.

For Deleuze, events make language possible (Deleuze 1997b, 181). In the beginning of our essay we noted the elusiveness of presence, that is, as something that pulls in both the direction of the past and the direction of the future simultaneously. This would suggest that the present is either the nexus of the past and future or that the past is the “once present” and the future is “what will be present” or, to put it differently, that the present is already always contained within the past and the future. To make language possible then means something for Deleuze like a willing of the event—to “will now not exactly what occurs, but something in that which occurs, something yet to come which would be consistent with what occurs” (Deleuze 1997b, 149)—or to put it simply: the event is that which just happened, that which will happen, but never that which is happening. It has no presence save the instance which is found in the struggle between what was and what will be, as the “already-past” and the “still-future.” This ambiguity Deleuze sees in the event as containing both something that has been realized and accomplished and also something that cannot realize its accomplishments—what Deleuze calls actualization and counteractualization—and this ambiguity leads to a double meaning for the same singular event (Deleuze 1997b, 152). For Deleuze, the event results from bodies but differs in nature from that in which it is the result, i.e. not as a physical quality but rather as an incorporeal entity (Deleuze 1997b, 182). What this means for us is that the event amounts to something like the becoming of becoming. It is that which realizes what can realize the actual. Language then becomes possible because it is realizable as a possibility of actualizing. *Writing for us was something that was*
incomplete because the only thing it could become was itself existent only as a possibility. Thus when Deleuze claimed that writing is a question of becoming and that becoming was always incomplete, what he failed to see was the transitive relationship that existed as a possibility for writing to become present for us.

The dialectic then that transcends language is found when writing attempts to speak when speech is impossible. It is impossible only because the immediate utterances of speech mark the actualization of the voice of writing while paradoxically also marking its annihilation. The event for us is the becoming of becoming, or in the context of our survey, the event can be seen as writing becoming language becoming speech. Writing, like language, remains for us as type of bridging between ideal objectivity and actualized subjectivity. The death of speech as realized by the immediacy in which its utterances pass as quickly as they arrive allows us a glimpse into the ideality of language that is itself present as a primordial trace within speech. What writing accomplishes is its ability to preserve itself throughout time as that which is caught between past and future, immediately realizable through actualization, cyclically being born and dying within the extension that is created from the writer who disappeared within its words. Blanchot once said that “to write is to surrender to the fascination of time’s absence” (Blanchot 1982, 33). Writing for us assumes two-fold presence, both in its actualization and annihilation through it announcement in speech as well as its being a narrative voice (the neuter) that speaks through its majestic silence. What the writer writes becomes written, becomes an archive of what was once unknown and thus we see writing as situated within the past. Yet, it is also contained within the writer as something that is but is also yet to be. Writing in this context is situated for us in the unknown of the future. What we can say
then of writing is that it remains for us a question of becoming, though through the fascination of our coming to realize that such a becoming transcends the facets of time and for that we are fortunate.

What proceeds then from this investigation subsequently addresses two different lines of thought: on one hand, the thesis represents an attempted ontological investigation into the literary space, its participants, and the relationships between those participating; on the other hand, the necessity of a parallel line of thought emerges as to the phenomenological importance of what these literary relationships reveal to be the concerns regarding the death of philosophy as understood in Derrida and Blanchot, among others, and how the relationship of literature to philosophy can offer us new insights that turn us away from this annihilation.
Chapter 2

The Writer

The writer takes up the world as it is, totally raw, stinking, and quotidian, presents it to free people on a foundation of freedom…. It is not enough to grant the writer the freedom to say whatever he pleases! He must address a public that has the freedom to change everything, which implies, beyond the suppression of social classes, the abolition of all dictatorship, the perpetual renewal of categories, and the continual reversal of every order as soon as it starts to ossify. In a word, literature is essentially the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution. – Sartre, *What is Literature*

In rejecting the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964, Sartre stated in an interview shortly after that “a writer must not accept official awards, because to do so would add the influence of the institution that honored his work to the power of his pen [which] is not fair to the reader” (Sartre 1964). Sartre had published his essay *What is Literature* nearly 27 years before his rejecting of the Nobel Prize. In calling for the “abolition of all dictatorships” and the “reversal of every order,” one finds little difficulty in seeing that the added influence of the institution mentioned in his rejection statement is in direct conflict with his earlier comments. The idea of literature as something revolutionary is commonplace among academic and literary conversations and critiques; but while many use the term as a ‘catch phrase’ to draw our attention to the next great work produced, at the base of the statement lies something rather interesting. One tends to view the term

---

5 Excerpted from Deleuze, Gilles. (2004) 78
‘revolutionary’ as denoting a change within or to a current modality, as a difference in action that means to bring about a difference in state. ‘Revolutionary’ can also mean something that revolves, i.e. something that is cyclical or returns and departs from itself in rhythmic movements. To say that literature is revolutionary thus points out the contradictory notion contained within literature as that which both represents change and recurrence. Though specific occurrences in literature are categorized as revolutionary the empty institution that is Literature is remarkably static. Thus a particular poem, or particular novel, receives our attention but the question surrounding the revolution of literature itself is mentioned only as an after effect and never with much seriousness. Blanchot was the first to call our attention to this event.

“People can and do ask, “What is poetry?” “What is art?” and even “What is the novel?” But the literature which is both poem and novel seems to be the element of emptiness present in all these serious things, and to which reflection, with its own gravity, cannot direct itself without losing its seriousness” (Blanchot 1995, 302).

What we come to see is the revolutionary gravity a particular text has in influencing or changing the way genres or sub-genres of literature are created henceforth while in itself it is molded into the vacuum of the institution of literature as if it were a refugee seeking asylum for the freedoms that lie within its passages. In saying that it is “not enough to grant the writer the freedom to say as he pleases,” Sartre is essentially advocating this literary asylum, not for the writer per se, but rather for what the writer writes, what is and
will become written that denotes the static subjectivity for a “society in permanent revolution.”

What are we to say further then about the writer? In this contradiction of notions, is the writer situated in the static background of the institution of literature or a member of the revolutionary aspect of what he or she has written? Is the writer merely a scribe for the public or a member of that public as well, as a reader who belongs to the society in permanent revolution? These questions lead us into our ontological investigation of the writer in the hopes that such an examination may tell us something about the writer’s relationship with literature and the reader and from there perhaps we may be able to say something further in regards to authority and authorship and the relational constitutions therein; but first, we must say a bit more about the problems surrounding the writer (beginning with the writer’s relationship to literature), before moving on to questions concerning relationships with the text itself, the reader, and authority.

The complication between literature and the writer exists due to (3) reasons: the constitution of the writer (what makes a writer), the creative processes that guide the writing (how the text comes to be written), and the level of importance or connection of the writer to the completed text. At the genesis of these issues lies the question, “What is Literature?” The differing answers yielded have led to differing conclusions positing the relationship of the text to the writer. In regards to fiction, one could say that literature is imaginative. That answer though is too limiting and thus will not suffice. [We would be excluding non-fiction literature and at minimum literary works where the line between fact and fiction is unknown. Also we can point to examples of fiction (comics or fantasy blogging) that generally are not referred to as literature.]
We could consider the structure of literature as determinant (formalism). Things like structure and texture, rhythm and resonance, would aid in the ability to distinguish what counts as literature. This doesn’t seem to suffice either for it turns literature into an analyzable structure, something critics of this stance would claim detracts from the meaning or force of the words themselves. It would also seem to call for some type of “structure experts” that we would then have to refer to whenever we attempted to enter into cross-cultural discussion where linguistic structures differ. Idioms, metaphors, and ambiguities would also seem to go lost.

We might consider literature as something which has lasting value. We add a value to *The Brothers Karamazov* that we don’t add to the road sign, the news article, or the 140 character or less tweet. We would need to qualify ‘lasting value’; it cannot be subject to individual opinion (the problem of you valuing Ayn Rand, where I do not), nor could it be based on majority consensus (then things like religious texts might make it ‘in’ whereas stories such as *Huckleberry Finn*, due to its racial overtones, might be excluded). To qualify value by saying that at least a small number must find lasting value in the work allows for a number of things (blogs, comics, etc.) to be classified as literature that currently are excluded from such a classification. This also has the consequence of annihilating the notion that literature is counted objectively, as something that stands beyond public opinion or reproach, as something immutably classified as ‘literature’.

From this we say that literature has a deceitful nature about it in that it has yielded so many different opinions included the few briefly mentioned here and countless more that have appeared throughout history. It is mysterious in that it eludes nominative and
valuative classifications that satisfy its breadth, but it perhaps is more fitting to use the word deceitful or deceptive precisely because of the static nature imposed upon it while it conceals a volatile movement of change and revolution beneath its surface.

Deceitfulness

There is an underlying deceitfulness in literature but this deceit which demands negation and is negation itself exhibits its negation passively in its existence and through its failure in being. The power of negation is such that the intimate nothingness of negation is itself without being yet remains a nothingness that is not dormant; it is a movement that exists only as the undoing of something that possesses the being nothingness itself fails to possess, i.e. the actual which it means to negate. A powerlessness in being is noticed when being turns towards the nothing; its helplessness shines upon the infinite night looking for the one thing that will connect it with this nothingness, as if being truly believed the seas upon the horizon were anything but violent. The deceptively gentle crests that rise and fall in the distance seduces as a siren’s song, eliciting a sense of empowerment as if one needed only to take a step or two into the surf to gain mastery over the whole of its force. To gaze upon this horizon has already condemned being to death. The ground beneath one’s feet begins to feel familiar, ordinary, insubstantial, incapable of satisfaction. It is out upon the horizon, what the horizon hides, that becomes desire itself. Death is not the one of tranquility and silence, but a different kind of death—as Blanchot will remind us—it is the other death, a death without end, the “ordeal of the end’s absence” (Blanchot 1982, 171). It is this otherness
that is deceptive in literature: an otherness that is itself a freedom from the familiar and
an invitation of sovereignty over the unknown.

The writer is the one who abandons the footing of the ordinary to seek, to grasp, the
distant crests upon literature’s horizon. Being ventures forth into the unknown
looking for itself; the one who desires to write seeks the writer in the night. In “Literature
and the Right to Death,” Blanchot cites the writer paradox adapted from the Hegelian
lectures on aesthetics—in order to write the writer must first have the talent to write, but
in order to have talent to write the writer must have first already written—to which
Blanchot responds with a simple answer but not a simple thought: the writer writes
(Blanchot 1995, 303-4). In many ways it reminds us of the perils faced by many film
adventurers who have approached a seemingly bottomless ravine with a rickety rope and
plank bridge representing their only way across. Our heroes do not know if the bridge
will support them or if they will plummet into the abyss. They imagine the bridge as
having supported many who have gone before them but are wretched with the possibility
that the last success has passed. The writer sees the works of others and knows that
bridge is crossable, has been crossed, may be crossed again. Uncertainty gives way to
courage, gives way to faith that the bridge will support the weight, that it will carry the
writer to the other side—what a weight it is to write, the greatest weight. To step onto the
bridge is to die. The writer must step onto the bridge. The writer must write.

The deception of literature calls out from the other side. “Others have made it to
me, have found me, have made me into what they wanted, what I wanted, to be flesh like
you, to be. Give up your ground, die for me, your death is endless in me for I am without
time, I will make you what you desire most, what that other death cannot do, I can. You
will know me in ways others have but we will create something for which you will be its first witness, the emancipation of a never-ending desire born from the embryo of our union, I will give you what you want, if you return to me the gift I seek, suum cuique.""

For what does the writer risk everything in submitting to this call? For Blanchot it was Orpheus’ decent into the Underworld towards Eurydice, not Eurydice herself, but the idea of Eurydice as the unknown, as the shadow of existence within the night. It is what lies at the limits. There is a teleological moment, not to reach something that is known but rather to find something that is unknown and make it known, something that is just out of sight, out of reach, hidden from the world. To descend as Orpheus into the night is to cast oneself into an epistemological journey into the unknown itself. With each step I gain mastery over the last, I give it a name, I annihilate the unknown. But what is this ‘I’ that does such violence, for upon the first step, the first glance towards the horizon, death has taken over the ‘I’. “Orpheus’s gaze is Orpheus’s ultimate gift to the work. It is a gift whereby he refuses, whereby he sacrifices the work, bearing himself toward the origin according to desire’s measureless movement” (Blanchot 1982, 174). The ‘I’ continues to exist as it moves towards the unknown, towards what is desired to be known. For Orpheus to say ‘I will press on’, ‘I will know’, is to give the ‘I’ a force of existence, an empowerment of himself; with each step into the night Orpheus reaffirms this force. The ‘I’ takes a step and in so becomes the master of all prior steps, annihilating itself as it moves, signifying its death is without end.

---

6. To each their own.
7. Here the reference is to Blanchot in “Literature and the Right to Death” cited in the introduction of this essay when discussing the process by which God granted Adam the power to name the creatures of the world, thereby granted man mastery over all it names.
The writer writes. Blanchot reminds us that this is true for each new work, “because everything begins again from nothing” (Blanchot 1995, 303). Every new work begins from the calling of the horizon; the writer once again stands in the surf, drawn by the undertow, naked with desire. The finished work is said to be that of the writer’s, but it is as absent from that presence as it was as a crest upon the horizon. To have been to the limits and returned to the familiar, the ordinary, is to release what was into what is not. Orpheus could not resist gazing back towards the shade of Eurydice. Similarly, the writer having regained the ground looks upon the finished work hoping to see what was at that horizon. Blanchot’s Orpheus ruined the work with his turning back towards the night. What was pure at the limit now seems drab as if it had taken on the ordinary ubiquitously upon reaching the light. This is not what the writer desired any more than Orpheus desired Eurydice in her flesh and warmth. The call of the horizon reminds the writer that everything must yet again begin from nothing. What was taken was not what was sought, the writer deceived into thinking the limits had been mastered stands empty handed in the surf facing out upon an unknown sea.

Violence

Blanchot tells us that “writing is nothing if it does not involve the writer in a movement full of risks that will change him in one way or another” (Blanchot 1995, 244). To set upon reaching the limit, the crests that rise and fall on the horizon, is to commit oneself already to shipwreck. The risk here is in realizing that the death of the writer, the one who foregoes the security of the shore and steps into the sea, has announced with this
movement the end of an existence. “The writer, his biography: he died; lived and died” (Blanchot 1986, 36). With each footstep Orpheus reclaimed the ‘I’ but with this proclamation brought an end to himself. There is a violence that transpires in this reclamation of the self, a justifiable homicide in the eyes of the writer, who sees nothing but necessity in ending the life once known in the prior step. This complexity in death bears with it the violent struggles of the self: one part fighting to remain, another part pulled by the desire of becoming:

“Stay where it is safe.”

“There are dangers everywhere.”

“There is nothingness on the horizon.”

“Out there is all there is.”

“Do not risk yourself, do not risk me.”

“Give up yourself, become yourself.”

In saying that one part fights another we must be careful to not lend ourselves so willingly to a pluralistic conception of the struggles of the self as part versus part. The struggle is the whole of the self pulling against itself in a moral act of self-destruction and self-preservation. It is and is not the self; it is the other self. “The other is always someone else, and this someone is always other than himself; he is relieved of all property, all proper sense, and thus beyond every mark of truth and light” (Blanchot 1986, 41). This sublation (aufheben) of identity is one of creative and destructive annihilation in that the consummation of the other self lifts the self beyond its own
abolition. Sublation, for Hegel, was that which transcended the ‘either/or’ distinction by moving towards a double meaning with the negation of the former conflicts representing both the current tensions of the present and the becoming (Brincat 2009, 456). The writer represents not one self or the other but the singularity of both and such a struggle and negation towards the becoming, the writer becoming a writer, leads us to consider the multiplicities within the subject who is at war with themselves.

In seeking the limits of literature, the writer seeks to regain the intimacy literature offers, to satisfy the multiplicities within—the depersonalization of the writer’s death towards the literary horizon has as its goal the personalization of a work in which the writer’s subjectivity is reclaimed. The polyvocal presence at war contributes to a notion of multiplicity present within the writer and allows us to understand both the struggle for subjectivity and also the desire for unification. For Blanchot, this struggle is due to the writer being “several people in one” (Blanchot 1995, 312). This dissociative identity however is not the product of a symbiotic morbidity struggling for dominance, but rather exists as the extension of the multiplicities of possibilities that lie before the subject. As Lingis notes, this extension has the effect of producing inaction (Lingis 2007, 113). This inaction is reinforced by the indecisiveness of what lies on the horizon of the unknown. Doubts about reaching the possibilities within the unknown conflicts with the ordinary, familiar ground of the nothingness that is the writer before writing has begun. For as much as the writer before writing sees the failings that lie ahead, and the failings that continue to lie ahead even as the writer writes, the possibility of grasping the horizon exudes a desire from within the writer to give up the familiar. The writer writes, pushes towards the limits of writing, seeing every wave that crashes the bow as a potential
undoing, a shipwreck in the making, a loss. The possibilities of successes and failures and the potentiality of their coming to fruition represent the multiplicities of identity struggling against one another within the writer. All the possibilities belong to the writer as a singular plurality of paths that mark the continual sublation of the other self of the writer and a death that comes again and again.

*The possibility of writing*

“The desire to write,” Blanchot says, “which writing carries off and which carries writing along, does not persist as a phenomenon to which the general term “desire” could be applied but refracts into a multitude of hidden or deceptively manifest desires” (Blanchot 1986, 136). To desire the possibilities that lay at the limits of literature is the bane of the writer, and certainly a key aspect in writing, but alone, mere desire appears inadequate to explain why one would ever move beyond such a desire and step into the unknown. There are those who desire specific possibilities but commit nothing to achieving them: the person who wants to win the lottery but never buys a ticket; the one who wants to run in a marathon but never bothers to enter into one. There are also those who desire certain possibilities and have committed through action to achieve them but realize these possibilities rely on factors beyond their complete control: an applicant who desires employment but is left waiting for a return call from a prospective employer; the student seeking matriculation into a doctoral program but must hope the panel reviewing the materials finds them favorable and make an offer. Then there are those who desire certain possibilities but are powerless to act upon their fulfillment: the terminal cancer
patient who lies in a morphine-induced delusion wondering when they’ll be cured, when an end to their suffering will be met; one who has lost a loved one and wants just one more conversation with them, one more picnic, one more night spent together in silence in front of the television.

To which category are we to ascribe the writer? The writer who never puts pen to paper, finger to key, certainly falls in the first category and doesn’t even deserve to be called a writer any more than the person who doesn’t buy a ticket deserves to be called a lottery winner or the marathon runner who never manages to enter a race. There is the writer who maybe takes a few classes, buys a nice computer or in a moment of nostalgia a refurbished Remington portable, but only to sit and stare at the blank screen, the empty page, waiting for the inspiration to come. The backspace button becomes the most worn key in their arsenal. The few sentences that manage to escape erasure seem incomplete, unsatisfying, amateurish. The work is put to the side; a call back for a second interview is no guarantee, failure to matriculate is debilitating. The writer knows they have the power to act but something keeps them from reifying their desire. There is either abandonment or beginning anew with further applications, further interviews, from the nothingness of the blank page. Supposing the work is completed, the results are bittersweet. The applicant no longer is an applicant, the prospective student is replaced by the doctoral candidate, but what remains of the writer after the text is written? Like the applicant and the prospect, the writer is sublated into the negation of the nothingness that marks the writer’s death. The writer becomes the reader, was the reader all along, will be the reader to come, even if beginning from nothingness again.
The third category is an interesting comparison to the writer for it first gives the same appearance as the first type of desire mentioned by offering a possible scapegoat for the inability to proceed to action. The writer desires to produce a text but for some reason the situation appears as without hope or as an act of futility that renders the writer powerless to produce the work. The would-be lottery winner never buys the ticket because the odds are so steep, the chance of winning so bleak, that to make an attempt to win by purchasing a ticket amounts to a waste of money. The would-be marathon runner sees the expense in training and equipment, along with energy and time, and thinks such expense could be better utilized elsewhere. The writer in this event has the necessary provisions to begin writing but instead produces any number of reasons why they cannot begin; from laxidascicalness, to the expense of time, energy, or finance being better served on other projects, to ones of degradation or the view of inferiority in comparison to others that have come before. The writer condemns the project but holds on to the hope of one day becoming a writer. The reason we don’t simply classify this in the first example is because the holding out of hope carries with it the recognition that at some point action will be needed to become a writer as opposed to the simple proclamation of one day become a writer that holds as much weight as the answers given in elementary school to the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” There is another way however to approach this relation of desire to writer under the third model. The desire for the return of a lost love reminds us of the writer who has written in the past and longs for the chance to write once more. The writer pines to once again embrace the anticipation of beginning anew much as the lover desires the returned embrace of longed flesh. The writer is overcome with the powerlessness in reclaiming inspiration at will but holds onto
the hope that one day it will return to provide a cure. Writing is the one true love of the writer. The possibilities that lie not in completing the work, but rather in writing itself drives the writer to write, drives the desire for the possibilities that lie upon the horizon, drives the longing to write and write again.

Enslavement

The desire for the possibilities in writing transcends mere desire—desire in Blanchotian terms—by incorporating the element of allure that draws the writer to write with the seduction inherent in literature, such that not only does the writer seek the unknown of literature but literature itself seduces the writer to seek it out. The seduction of literature lies in the pull, the control it has over the writer. It pulls the writer towards it as much as the writer, through desire, moves willingly into it. To say that seduction is within literature is not to confine it to the narrative of fiction, the arguments of a discipline, the plotline, or the genre the work is classified within, nor does it say that to be within literature does not resemble these things; rather, to be within literature is to be compelled by its very essence. One is drawn into it; one wants to uncover and discover it, it is infecting, affecting. Literature compels in so far as it controls the marionettes of the writer who cannot see the strings. The desire of the writer is blinded to this fact and actually believes some freedom is to be had in writing. The few moments of freedom the writer achieves are spent in writing and for Blanchot manifest when creativity unfetters the writer from the enslavement of the actual; thereby, obtaining freedom by denying everything that is for everything that is not (Blanchot 1995, 315). This freedom though is
deceptive, as Blanchot continues in the same section, for it has a self-destructive negating effect from which it sought its freedom. In the writer’s annihilation of the actual self in pursuing the limits of literature, one has already given up what was what no longer satisfying, freedom here comes in the death of the writer. In doing so, the negation of the actual in this case negates the freedom sought; for to enter the textual space is to die over and over again, to gain freedom by losing everything; thus, in aiming at freedom from the actual, from the ordinary, from the plain, the writer enters willingly into servitude of the work.

There is more in the idea of the possible than there is in the idea of the real. It is this notion that blinds the writer to their servitude. The shoreline is familiar and known but confining and asphyxiating like a world that suddenly lost all its air. The real has become banal in comparison to the allure of the unknown. “If I could just reach a little further, grasp the horizon, I will have freed myself from this trite existence; it looks so close and I am already so far from where I stand.” The freedom Blanchot writes on is the glamour of the possible, where everything that is real is contained, but far much more than that! The real takes on a finitude for the writer that appears already conquered—as a collection of works once unknown, discovered by others. The writer begins to think of the possible as containing their own contribution. What is known remains a wasteland of other attempts to extend the limits of the real. The unknown though, for the writer, represents the absence of limitations. Those moments in writing that free us from our wasteland also deceive us into thinking that this freedom that lay on the horizon is attainable, as if all one had to do was proceed outward to assure its achievement; much
like a fisherman believing that by simply casting his line out into a lake of innumerable fish is enough to guarantee him to never go hungry again.
Chapter 3

The Work

The movement beginning from the desire of the writer to write, to the process of writing, to the completion of the work, only satisfies part of what is meant in broaching the question, “What is Literature?” We are not concerned here with what counts as literature and what does not—insofar as the establishment of criterion and subsequent categorization—the primary focus at this moment is the relationship of the writer to literature not in classification but rather as the ontological subject being addressed. To ask “What is Literature?” thus for us is not one concerned with fiction or form, style or substance, language or length, but the being of literature itself. In all the questions that have surrounded literary relationships, few have approached the relationship of literature to the writer and reader from the perspective of literature itself. Forasmuch as is borne from the writer’s imagination, or the reader’s interpretation, or from the words as presented, literature remains this dormant activity that is acted upon but never active in its own right. Literature is created; by the writer, the author, the reader, but always from the perspective of the actual imposing itself upon the virtual, upon the absence that would not exist save the interactional imposition onto literature of a subject outside itself. So goes the basic tenet that has ruled the approach to literature. We may ask though, does
not literature itself play any role in its coming to be? Is the desire of the writer to know the unknown not reciprocal, which is to ask, does literature not also desire something unknown to it? The writer abandons the actual, the familiar the ordinary, dies the familiar death over and over again, but can we also not imagine that literature resides within a virtual space gazing upon the horizon of the actual, waiting to die in order to realize its own flesh? Do we not add another level of deceitfulness between the writer and literature in this reversal of desire? The interplay of this relationship and the process or movement towards the limits for the writer and literature itself is what we turn to next.

**Ante Litterae**

The *ante litterae* is what I call the movement beginning from the writer’s abandonment of the familiar and culminating in the birth of the author. The Latin usage here is crucial in a number of ways that signify why its implementation is fitting to our discussion. The prefix *ante-* here is used in the sense of that which is “before” something else, both in a spatial and temporal relation. Temporally, we are familiar with some of the various uses, including *antediluvian, antebellum,* and *antedate,* and spatially as in *antecede* and *anterior,* among a host of others. *Litterae* is the plural form for the Latin *littera* which means ‘letter’ (in the sense of an alphabetical symbol) that when assuming a plural ending means ‘letter’ (as in a note), ‘epistle’, and ‘literature’. Suffix endings vary in Latin due to its case system. The –*ae* suffix represents the plural ending the nominative and vocative cases. In employing this term, I am intending it to be within the vocative usage. As a noun, literature in the nominative case would refer us to a subject which is
being modified by a verb. In the sense we are using it here, however, no verb exists to modify our subject. The vocative case has largely been eliminated in the English language and is most notably found in limited usages through the designation *O’*, as in *O’ Brother, Where Art Thou*. The implementing of the vocative sense for our purposes gets us closer to what is meant in the *ante litterae*. The vocative case directs us to the subject as being addressed (not as being modified by a verb). What the *ante litterae* moment adds the question, “What is Literature?” that has been working in the background of this examination, is another element of complexity. From the moment prior to the birth of literature stands the *ante litterae* as that which is addressing the subject, Literature. We may ask “What is Literature?” and mean something along the lines of “What is this thing before us that bears the names ‘Literature’?” Thinkers such as Blanchot and others have approached literature in this manner, as the nominative subject, empty and lacking seriousness, awaiting interaction and modification. The *ante litterae* addresses the question of literature from the perspective of the ontological genesis of what it is to become the subject ‘Literature’ that stands before us to question.

In saying that the *ante litterae* is a ‘movement’ is to highlight the becoming of literature as a process of becoming. This process which demands a relationship with the text itself, the writer, and the writer as reader, is not one that is linear in movement; meaning the process of becoming literature is not one that progressively builds until its eventual culmination in the birth of literature. To say ‘eventual’ is even misleading, for the movement within the *ante litterae* does not presuppose success in moving from the textual space of the virtual to the actual space of the subject. In this way movement within the *ante litterae* takes on a modality similar to a retrograde effect wherein the
writer is consumed in the apparent movement of progress in writing with digressions and erasures constituted as some level of failure or setback to the writer. This process of erasure was important to Derrida’s interpretation of the structure of writing. “Writing,” he said, “structurally carries within itself the process of its own erasure and annulation, all the while marking what remains of this erasure” (Derrida 1972, 68). Erasure (sous rature) in Derrida’s Grammatology is used primarily to call our attention to the inaccuracy of something while also positing the necessity for its retainment. This is not to say that writing itself is fallacious or by entering into the movement of the ante litterae the writer has proceeded into error. Derrida is pointing at the annihilative quality of writing to destroy itself as it progresses. It undermines itself through itself. The work that is completed marks the annulment of writing such that all that remains is no longer writing but only what has been written. Writing contains its own erasure within itself. Within the ante litterae, erasure marks that which is discarded yet retains its importance to the process of writing by marking the unnecessary, the error. Thus, the degradation that is the plight of the writer is the manifestation of the erasure in writing that marks both a regression in the writing and a progression in writing. In going ‘backwards’ the writer moves ‘forward’.

Earlier we had mentioned that there is more in the idea of the possible than in the idea of the real (p. 30). Within the movement of the ante litterae, the writer transcends into the textual space, the virtual literality of all that is possible. This writer dies over and over again in moving between the world of the actual and the virtual. Transcendence here is not to say that the writer is wholly ever beyond one realm or the other but that in drawing the literary space closer towards that which it desires, the writer is always
accompanied by part of the actual, i.e. his or her own historicity, into the textual space and subsequently returns to the world of the actual with not the purity he or she had hoped for but rather a contaminated sample of what lies just beyond the night. When Orpheus gazed back towards the Underworld, it was not Eurydice he wished to see but rather the shade, the night that he truly sought to bring back in his accent. In producing the work, it is not the work that the writer wishes to actualize, but rather that moment within the *ante litterae*, what was sacrificed over and over again to reach, the literary possibilities of the virtual that both exceeds and deceeds the subject borne from the virtual. This excess represents the difficulties in and tenability of intentionalist positions of authority while also exposing the plight of the writer who believes in producing a work, he or she has actualized the purity of the possibilities witnessed within the *ante litterae*.

As the subject that desires to be addressed, the becoming of literature in the *ante litterae* represents the desire of literature to become actualized, to become flesh, to exist in its being. In the textual space, the possibility in the actualization of literature exists as the possibility of its being. The relationship of the writer to literature within the *ante litterae* thus involves the writer movement towards the horizon of literature and the possibilities within the unknown. Literature, as the subject addressed, the existent as possibility that seeks its own impossibility, seeks the possibilities of actualization within the writer. The relationship of the writer and literature is one constituted on the desire for that which is unknown to the other. Both the writer and literature desire to make what is unreal, real. The actual seeks to make actual what is virtual; the virtual seeks its own actualization as its ownmost impossible possibility. The *ante litterae* thus is a movement
in annihilation, a relationship of dying and death within the actual and virtual, the
sublation of the writer and of literary possibility into the contaminated synthesis of what
is called ‘Literature’. The ante litterae thus begins with that first desirous step of the
writer toward the horizon. To say that the ante litterae culminates in the birth of
Literature is to call attention to that which has become flesh, made actual by the unity of
its possibilities into the singular plurality, of which we call ‘meaning’.

Meaning

What constitutes the meaning of a text? It is one thing to say that in
writing the writer expresses meaning through the language of the text and quite another
thing to say that the writer produces meaning through the language of the text. To have a
meaning opens up the investigatory possibilities of discovery for those who aim at such a
founding of meaning. In voicing one’s interpretation as such, the reader is announcing
what has been discovered: this twofold announcement coming as both an affirmation of
comprehension and in an issue of challenge to the audience of those who would affirm or
deny the interpretation. For the reader need not only issue challenge to the ideas or claims
made within or out of the text but in doing so must also compare it with and contrast it
against the polysemious world of the reader. The possibility of such a world should
cautions us against those theses advancing a singular meaning. Hirsch asked, “How can a
consensus be reached with regards to a text’s meaning, when every known interpretation
of every text has always been different in some respect from every other interpretation of
the text” (Hirsch 1967, 130-131). The standard answer, he cites later in the same passage,
is that there exists no single interpretation that exhausts the meanings of a text. While Hirsch doesn’t disagree with this, he does go on to concede that while there may indeed exist a number of interpretations of a particular text, and those variations depending on the strategies employed by each interpreter, the confusion that leads to the frustration of identifying the meaning of a text has less to do with interpretation and more so relies on whether or not the text has been properly understood. For each interpretation can in itself provide partial understanding, through either reinforcement of the overall understanding of the text, or by bringing about counter-interpretations that call the current understanding into question or are designed to alter the prevailing conception of the text. This leads us to ask, “What constitutes understanding a text?” Such an overwhelmingly difficult question would require a much closer consideration than is intended here. Within literary tradition however, we can point to at least one answer advocated by critics, including Hirsch. The common sense approach to broaching the question of understanding, and thus meaning, for those who would champion intentionalism would lead us to conclude that the text means exactly what it says and what its writer intended it to mean. The reasoning behind this is simple enough given the possible number of different interpretations a text could yield: since each reader enters into a text with different strategies of engaging the material, it stands that what is capture and what is lost yield a slightly different interpretation or analysis from the reader. The writer, however, also employs a number of strategies and techniques into the composition of the work in order to present his or her ideas with clarity and consilience. Thus, of anyone, the writer has the most intimate relation with the meaning of the text such that any interpretation offered or understanding advanced must reference itself against the meaning of the
writer’s intention. The attraction of this theory is evident and has drawn continued support despite the rash of criticism directed its way.8

In an essay entitled “Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Question of Authorial Intent,” David Weberman wonderfully reconstructs the role of the author—‘author’ here denoting the historical author, i.e. the writer—from a non-intentionalist position as found in Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*. It is important to understand how a non-intentionalist position is not synonymous to an anti-intentionalist position, as seen in the works addressed later in this essay from Barthes and Foucault. The anti-intentionalist denies that the meaning of the text is solely constituted within the writer’s intention. To take such an opinion however is to deny any intentionality as present. The non-intentionalist will also deny that meaning rest solely with the writer but, unlike the anti-intentionalist, does not completely negate the writer, that is, the possibility is left open that writerly intentions do appear within the text, in some capacity though not as its sole provider of meaning, and can be informative. The differentiation of the historical author (the writer) and the ‘author’ (the social construct) is a common point made by the anti-intentionalist as a reason for denying intentionalism all together. The non-intentionalist position Gadamer offers however leads us to take into account that the writer is imbedded within his or her own history, much like every reader who reads a work from the background of their own history, and we should not be so quick to dismiss authorial intent because to do say attaches prestige to the background of the reader while denying the historicity of the writer. Weberman highlights (6) points found in Gadamer for rejecting the identification

of textual meaning with authorial intention while putting us into a better position to understand the interaction at work between the historical writer and the historical reader and how this “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 1975, 273) opens up the possibility for a multiplicity of interpretive meanings that both ignore and embrace intention.

The (6) reasons Weberman finds in Gadamer are: “(1) There is less in the text than the author had in mind; (2) there is more in the text than the author had in mind; (3) the text, like all language, has the character of “ideality”; (4) the text is relationally constituted; (5) the text is not about the author’s mind, but about the truth of the subject matter; and (6) our interest typically is and typically should be directed not at the author’s intention, but at the text itself” (Weberman 2002, 47-48). The first five reasons here clearly are meant to separate authorial intention from textual meaning, with the sixth reason asserting that any exegetical interpretation into the meaning of a text should be addressed at the text itself and not what may (or may not) have been the intention of the author. In saying that there is less in a text than the (historical) author may have intended is to point out the irretrievability of capturing historical moment of inspiration as the writer had imagined or experienced it. It is not uncommon to find highly detailed settings, especially in fictional works, but such a description in all its details still is not enough to guarantee that future readers will ‘see the scene’ the same way as had the writer. To some extent such an endeavor is futile and extraneous. If what is written fails to convey the (historical) author’s intention, what we are left with is only what is written. Hirsch suggested that meaning and intention reside in what is sharable with others (Hirsch 1967, 218). The irony of this lies in the ability of the words on the page to convey this sharable mental state of the author, but if the words themselves convey such meaning, why would
we need to go beyond the text and posit that such meaning was intentional or claim to have seen things exactly as the writer had saw them. As Weberman adds, if the words fail in sharing what was intended, it is always the words that win out in the end (Weberman 2002, 49).

The reverse, that there is more in the text than the author intended, also holds according to Gadamer when he said, “What expression expresses is not merely what is supposed to be expressed in it—what is meant by it—but primarily what is also expressed by the words without its being intended—that is, what the expression, as it were, ‘betrays’” (Gadamer, Weberman 1975/2002, 49). Weberman will tie this to the ability of language itself to open up more than what is presented through citing as an example the process of Constitutional interpretation. Phrases like “freedom of speech” and “due process” lack a clear and distinct meaning for interpretation; furthermore, it is highly unlikely that the drafters of the Constitution had anticipated every possible application of these Rights (Weberman 2002, 50). This is only compounded with further examples relating to possible unconscious repressions of the author that slip out onto the page, “betraying” the intentions of the (historical) author, or that manifest out of the vagueness or indeterminate construct of the text.

The third reason marks a move toward ideality—a term Gadamer borrowed from Husserl—that takes into account the results from first two reasons: if the meaning of a text is always possibly more or less than what the writer intended, then meaning must reside apart from the (historical) author. Far from the instantiation of a meaning as interpreted by the writer or the reader, the text itself has an ideal nature about it that contains far more than any particular occurrence. Meaning, for Gadamer, is not reducible
to the particular; rather, the ideality of language, as open-ended, while suggesting not that a word can mean anything, recognizes that it always means or refers to something more than a particular instance (Weberman 2002, 51).

To say that the text is ‘relationally constituted’ is to understand that it always refers to something outside itself. Thus we can take into account the historicity of the work, of the writer and reader as well, along with referential events and so on to begin to understand the open-endedness of Gadamer’s conception of language as something that is without closure in so far as it remains accessible. We should be cautious in the usage of ‘closure’. Aside from future editing, addition, and subtraction, when a writer has finished the work we do mark a type of closure to this event. To be open-ended is to be without closure insofar as what is remains. But is interpretation and meaning something without end, without closure? Is there not a limit to interpretation, in going beyond the meaning, in misinterpretation, that is not indicative of a failure? More importantly, doesn’t misinterpretation denote a limit to the open-endedness of meaning? If we accept that language is itself an organic entity that is subject to manipulation and redefinition, we are forced to address whether or not a completed work is locked in historically or subject to the same redefinition as the words it contains. An ambiguity of sorts arises in the text from the redefining of its words, likewise as an ambiguity can also appear in an initial or original presentation, as in our constitutional interpretation example above. Words like “freedom” and “justice” and “rights” are a small fraction of the many, possibly infinite, open-ended words that have appeared and continue to appear before us. Taking this into account, it is plausible to see why Gadamer would advocate a constant redefinition of the text in relation to the constantly changing or developing relationships that emerge.
“Objects and events, generally, are what they are not merely in virtue of their intrinsic properties, but also in virtue of their extrinsic or relational properties … it is what it is in virtue of its relationship to earlier, later, and contemporaneous events of various kinds” (Weberman 2002, 52). The intentionalist mistake this point means to expose is the attribution of the (historical) author’s intention as locking in a particular meaning not only now but rigidly into the future. Given not only the relational constitutions of the text but also its relationship to time, we may be forced to say that presence is what constitutes the closure of meaning but such as the existence within the text, the open-endedness of language, we are forced to also adopt that at any moment, at any event, the limits of meaning may once again be redefined. Thus the closure of the work as indicative of the unity contained within, the “unity of the book” as Derrida would say (Derrida 1981, 3), gives rises to an endless reinterpretation of meaning as defined by the limits of misinterpretation and invalidation of the all meanings therein.

Of the fifth reason, that the text contains the truth about some subject matter, Weberman is quick to point out the possible confusion that may arise that this is somehow in keeping with intentionalism. The argument from the intentionalist he says goes as follows: “Of course the text is about something or other and the meaning of the text is simply what the author intended to say about something” (Weberman 2002, 53). Gadamer however is directing us toward the truth in meaning as making a claim about something in the world—weltbezogen, relative to the world—that is to say, the claims offered in the text point not to the mind of the (historical) author but rather to something in the world. This correlates with the third reason offered above that texts are relationally constituted. To accept this at face value however would be mistaken. It is one thing to
claim that texts are related to the world such that the truth therein contained is a truth solely about the world. If we grant that texts are relational to the world and relational to the historicity of the writer and the reader and events surrounding its inception, why would we deny that the writer’s relational input to the text is somehow absent or negated by a truer relation with objects or events in the world? One must remember that a relation is never one-sided unless only considered from a single vantage point. This is not to deny that truth within the text is truth about some subject matter in the world, but we should not deny that truth is also predicated on further relationships beyond that of the text and the world. The writer and reader are not passive observers within the realm of meaning or truth as conveyed in the text about the world. The text for all that can only refer to something in the world as predicated on the understanding of that thing situated in the world by the reader or the writer. Weberman notes that were the world “altogether different, a text would have to mean something else as well or perhaps lose its meaning altogether” (Weberman 2002, 53). It is because of the relationships between the writer and reader, respectively, to the world that allows us to understand the relation of the text to the world in order to derive meaning from the text and subsequently evaluate the truth of the word. Finally, what this fifth point fails to address is the role imagination or fictional narrative plays in the world as relative to truth. We read, and can further imagine, a number of scenarios that correspond with nothing directly or actually present within the historicity of the world, but appear to us only through the relation of the fictitious to the actual. Thus we can imagine “a very old man with enormous wings” because we understand the truth of the existence of men and the existence of winged creatures and can combine the two, but that relation is only constituted partially in the
world by the truths of these existents yet fails to exist as identical. Perhaps then we should limit this fifth reason by prefacing that the concern for truth about some subject matter need not be concerned with whole truths but must only relate in part and those parts must be identifiable through the relationship of the text to the writer and reader.

What these first five reasons do succeed in is directing our attention toward the separation of a text’s meaning from the (historical) author as a relationship of intentional exclusivity. The sixth reason offered in Weberman’s analysis of Gadamer’s theory has to do with the intentionality of the reader when approaching a text. For Hirsch this amounts to what he calls “significance” in that once a reader responds to a text and offers a potential meaning, that response becomes an object of consideration, concerned with a meaning that is “potentially as determinate and reproducible as verbal meaning itself…the fact that [the reader] can discuss, remember, describe, and even write about [his or her] response proves this point without a doubt” (Hirsch 1967, 38-39). Because meaning is offered up by the reader only as a potentiality, there must be a standard by which to judge whether or not that interpretation of meaning is valid. For Hirsch, obviously, this should refer the reader back to authorial intent, i.e. the writer’s intended meaning, as the single source for providing the only way to achieve certainty when critiquing the truth in meaning of an interpretation, otherwise the reader, in offering his or her interpretation, is abiding by the very process of intentionality he or she denies. The two mistakes Weberman attributes to this line of thought involves (1) the notion of a “single source” of meaning in a text, and (2) that intent of the writer is a “more worthy” pursuit or aim for the reader who desires to know the meaning of a text (Weberman 2002, 54). For Gadamer, to “study the psychology and intention behind the text is either
separate from or only subordinate to the deeper motivations we have in reading texts, namely, to discover truths about the world and ourselves” (Weberman 2002, 54). It is not clear in Gadamer or Weberman or Hirsch why we should (or do) completely ignore one for the other. In assigning preference or privilege, we lose the potentiality of the discounted; that is, any possible insight made accessible in the consideration of the non-privileged source of meaning is thought separate or subservient to the “true meaning” of the work and the consequences of such may be detrimental to anyone seeking a greater understanding or clarity in meaning from a text. This is not to advocate that every text or any text has a single meaning or a meaning that is truer in the sense that it is more complete. What we are left to conclude is that meaning as drawn from the text itself is constituted in part by the history of the reader. The writer also stands in historical relation to the text and thus should also constitute the text in part. The volatility of language points to the evolutionary quality of the text as appears in consideration of its relation with the world that is constantly under alteration through time. If meanings are to be discovered, one must take into account all of these relationships and the potential influence they may have on meaning and interpretation without limiting oneself to the trappings that come when focusing on a single source of authority.

*Mistakes*

---

9 Gadamer make little to no direct mention of this, Hirsch is strictly one-sided, and Weberman briefly mentions that the study of authorial intent is generally limited to scholars and bibliographers, and as far as “Readers” go, the practice of studying intent goes largely ignored. (Weberman 2002, 54).
The limit to which an interpretation is viable gives rise to the mistakenness of those interpretations which fall short of the horizon. This implies that the interpretation lies outside the realm of accepted possibilities contained within the meaning of a text; that it has lost its resemblance to meaning. The realm of accepted possibilities though does not suggest that such interpretations which lie outside it are impossible as a possibility in themselves, but rather that such interpretations fail in their relationship to the meanings of a text. Call it the Other, the impossible-possible, the horizon beyond the horizon, what is meant is that such mistakes while being connected to the work in an contradictory, opposing, or antithetical way remains wholly other from the meanings available in the work. To be wholly other is to lack an authoritative voice: not a failing in total authorship—for interpretation itself is authorial in a productive sense prior to any valuation to its relation—but rather as a deficiency of authority in relation to the work addressed. This is what is meant to be mistaken.

What do we mean when we say of something as being mistaken? Is it not the case that when a claim to be ‘mistaken’ is announced, the first inclination that follows is one of investigating the moral deficiency within the one who is said to be mistaken? One looks for the clues that yield the ‘aha!’ moment: “This is where you have erred,” or in other settings, “I have information that challenges your claims.” Such a back-and-forth could lead to a countless regression, but adjudicating the justification of that regression remains in the deviation of relation between interpretation and meaning. Such a deviation in interpretation is made possible by the polysemy of the work, as a work constituted by the multiplicities of historicity brought to it from its interpreters along with the polyvocal singularity of the work itself as the unity of the writer and literary possibility. The
deficiency in a mistake occurs when an interpretation is offered that fails in its relationship to either of these relationships mention—though the failing of the connection does not necessarily lie in the subjective error of the interpreter. This is the common mistake of intentionalism. Authorial intention addresses the interpretation of the text as the derivative of what the writer intended and as such bases further interpretations against that of the writer. The reader’s interpretation is scrutinized in its relation to the writer’s interpretation and only secondarily scrutinized against the work itself. What is forgotten in this however is that the writer is also a reader and as such subject to the same misinterpretative fate as subsequent readers. If the text always exceeds and falls short of the writer’s intention then such intention should not preclude a higher valuation of meaning from emerging within further interpretations from later readers. Later interpretations have the misfortune of being addressed according to their relation to earlier interpretations, in addition to their relationship with the text itself, and since the writer is also the first reader of the text, the first interpreter, intentionalist posit the highest value of authority in this first interpretation. It remains, however, that interpretations need not stand in absolute opposition or deficiency, or amount to nothing but an affirmation of the writer’s interpretation. Therein lies the untenability of taking up an intentionalist position. What the intentionalist assumes is that the writer’s intention, i.e. the writer’s interpretation, is synonymous, holistically, with the polysemous possibilities of the text. Interpretations however need not challenge the writer’s interpretation but rather can also serve to enhance it beyond its current state. The difficulty of the intentionalist is to subsequently show that the writer’s interpretation was complete and incapable of being furthered, enhanced, or improved. If we are not willing
to concede to this position of immutability, then we must reject intentionalism as a viable criticism when evaluating the relationship between interpretation and meaning.

To say that something is ‘mistaken’ is to imply that an error has occurred, either in the text itself or the in interpretation, but we should not conclude that error is the only possibility in mistakenness. To be mistaken is to mis-take something. To take something implies that that thing must be graspable such that it remains as something capable of entering into a relationship with flesh or thought. To mis-take therefore carries with it the notion of a failure to grasp. The glass on the table is something I can grasp, that is, I can reach out and make contact with it and secure it in my hand. If in reaching for the glass, I miss it, I have failed to create that bond, that relationship, with the glass. I may succeed in taking up the glass only to find that my grip on it was not as sure as initially believed and so I lost my grasp of it. I failed to grasp it in so far as I let it escape my grasp; I failed to hold onto it. To mistake then also implies to mishandle. In failing to grasp the meaning of a text, one could completely miss the text as one missed the glass. One could also grasp the text but in a loose way such as to lose one’s grip on the text. It becomes mishandled in interpretation and thus the relationship of the interpretation and meaning slips out of hand. To mishandle something is to imply some level of abuse—abuse here in the sense of damaging or destroying or misappropriation. In the case of literature, misappropriation seems the most common. What would it mean to damage or destroy a text? When misappropriation is so gross that any meaning beyond the misappropriation is lost, we can say that a text is destroyed, not in the sense of obliteration, but rather that the text has been identified so strongly with the skewed interpretation, that it becomes difficult, perhaps impossible in many respects, to see any meanings beyond the derelict
appropriation. This is not to say that the text is unsalvageable, but rather the text now requires to be re-grasped, to be re-handled, to be re-taken in such a way as to not be mishandled, to not be misinterpreted. We should be cautious not to assume that a text has been misinterpreted because it carries an appropriation one interprets as flawed, or skewed, or ruinous; for to do so implies that, of the literary possibilities existent within the virtual, these possibilities are limited to virtuous or noble possibilities. One may argue that the union of the writer with these possibilities within the ante litterae yielded such a misappropriation. This will have to be considered more closely at a later time for it requires a more careful examination as to the purity of literary possibilities and the possible affections a writer may have on this purity. Returning to the notion of abuse, we find that to mishandle a text is do something with it beyond the limits of appropriation contained within itself.

To be mistaken carries an additional meaning in relation to textual interpretation. To mis-take something also implies to take something wrongly, as in taking into a different direction. To take something in a different direction is not to say that the new direction is wrong or erroneous, as the untenable intentionalist position holds in claiming a single direction where deviation indicates disfigurement. Rather the direction taken could be an extension or enhancement of the interpretation of the writer that takes into a new direction in that it further expounds the writer’s interpretation or points us towards the polysemy of meaning, enriching the interpretation of the text. The laudable quality of such an implication directs us toward an interpretation of mistakenness that is not only commendable but also carries with it the polysemous organic nature generally attributed to literature that seduces us into a relationship with it.
The final meaning explored here with respect to ‘mistakenness’ is in the ability of one to mis-take in the sense of taking what was not offered or what was not ones to take. In thinking of literature as something that is essentially public, it becomes problematic in trying to consider how literature could be something that is not offered to the public. Blanchot wrote that writer,

“sees others taking an interest in his work, but the interest they take in it is different from the interest that made it a pure expression of himself, and that different interest changes the work, transforms it into something different, something in which he does not recognize the original perfection. For him, the work has disappeared…” (Blanchot 1995, 306).

The regression of the writer into a mode which desires nothing but to protect the purity attached to the work drives the writer to rescind the public’s exposure to the work. We can speculate as to whether or not this was Kafka’s intention in requesting that upon his death his work be burned and the great weight it must have put upon the friend he entrusted to carry out this deed. Describing the exile he attributed to his life, specifically in reference to his family’s disapproval of his literary interests, Kafka said, “I remained seated and leaned towards my family as I had done before, but in fact I had been banished from society with one stroke” (Bataille 1973, 130). Like the work for Blanchot’s writer, Kafka felt that once the purity he experienced in literature was made public he had disappeared. To protect the sanctity the writer has for the work we find one way in which the writer may rescind the public offering of the work, as an attempt to stay the violation
of the purity of the work and violation of the self. The writer who follows this solution sees the reader as the one who has taken something that was not theirs to take. The reader is viewed as a trespasser in the work, seeking not their own voice but “someone else’s voice, a voice that is real, profound, troubling like the truth” (Blanchot 1995, 307). The reader represents that which takes all the writer knows and makes it their own, killing the writer, to make room for the real author of the work to emerge: the reader.
Chapter 4

The Author

From the moment Barthes proclaimed the ‘death of the author’ in 1959 and Foucault a year later rhetorically asked ‘What is an Author?’ a new thread of literary critique sprung forth across the scholastic world—some have sided with this anti-intentionalist position, others have voiced their objections, and still others have sought to ‘save’ the author from annihilation either by showing the claim as untenable or by taking Foucault’s question as a challenge in an attempt to reposition subjectivity not within some author-function but rather as the author. This subjectivity is often granted to the writer, though we are aware that the writer and author are both the same and separate. The writer is nevertheless privileged with authority, as the one who is intimate with the work, as the voice within the silence; the scribe, the interpreter, the one whose understanding is declared and validated in the same breath, the first reader. The author however is anonymous. The author did not write the work, yet in its very essence is its interpretation. The author cannot speak but with a thousand voices. The author represents the utmost understanding yet is constantly gaining new insights, all the while maintaining its sovereignty.
In 1968, Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” (La Mort de l’Author) launched a further criticism aimed against literary intentionalism when it proclaimed the ‘author’ as both unimportant and even a possible hindrance to the interpretation of a work. For Barthes, the author was a social creation of prestigious subjectivity that “attached the greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author” (Barthes 1977, 143). In removing the importance of the author, Barthes freed the text from the sovereignty of the writer as author and had placed it (ultimately) in the hands of the reader. This freedom allowed the text to transcend the limits of the writer, who represented its confinement or closure, such that the idea of a single ultimate meaning (the Author-God) is replaced by “a multi-dimensional space, in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes 1977, 146). What is implied in saying that writing is a composite of non-originality is that meaning gains a freedom in that the reader no longer has to decipher the text, looking for ultimate intent, but now must simply disentangle the multiplicities of meaning that exist apart from any closure or teleological hypostasis (Barthes 1977, 147). The reader thus helps to constitute and condition the meanings of the text, since with differing readers comes different backgrounds, different histories, different assumptions, and different interests. While paving the way towards an anti-intentionalist view, what Barthes misses here is that writer, though perhaps not deserving...
of the prestige socially afford nevertheless should not be completely disregarded when approaching a text.

One of the key points to differentiate here is that the writer and author are two distinct entities. In proclaiming the ‘death of the author’, Barthes of course is not saying that there is not someone who writes. Barthes’s ‘scripter’ represents all the functionality of the writer and, in acknowledging that the writer is a reader, the first reader, and that every reader comes at the text from a different history we must also acknowledge here that every writer as a reader broaches the text with their own history. Although Barthes posits that every author is born “simultaneously” with the text, relegating the author to a function or as a social construction, we also must consider that the writer, or scripter, does not perform the function of writing as a disinterested or disengaged automaton without thought during their writing but actively participates as a reader through the process of writing. The ‘writer’ is often used synonymously, and thus often confusingly, with ‘author’ because the social prestige attached to the ‘author’ resembles the prestige attributed to the ‘writer’. The important distinction however lies in that the prestige of the writer is for the actualization or unification of the work whereas the author’s prestige comes from the unified product itself. For Derrida, this distinction is solely a question of “a unique and differential operation … whose unfinished movement assigns itself no absolute beginning” (Derrida 1981, 3). For this reason, we can attribute a type of closure to the ‘writer’ that cannot be afforded the ‘author’ for the movement from production to produced cannot be said to terminate with the conclusion of the writing process, but is forever continued to be authored by those who interpret its pages. Barthes concluded his famous essay by saying, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the
Author” (Barthes 1977, 148). The birth of the reader however does not mark the death of the author but rather the death of the writer, and if the author is born simultaneously with the unity of the work, then we are left to conclude that the birth of the reader also signifies to us the birth of the author.

*Writerly and Readerly Texts*

We are reminded from earlier of Plato and the claim of inferiority postulated of the written text, that it represented a sort of ‘majestic silence’, incapable of defending itself because it lacked a voice and thus must rely on its author to constantly come to its defense (Plato 1989, 520-521; 275a-e). The dilemma here lies in the fact that if the text cannot stand on its own, then meaning is not inherent to the text (or conveyable in the least) and we are subject to whatever meaning the writer whims; but if it can stand on its own, the writer is reduced to that of an arbitrary “middle-man”. This is further complicated by the ‘presence’ conveyed upon the text via the writer, that is, when we come to accept the historicity of the writer as in relationship to the text. In fictional writing, the historical author is almost always absent from the text, but in non-fictional writing, the author is not only present but seen as the authoritative voice of what is being postulated. To say that the author is almost always absent from the text is to posit no more than the existence of the speculative connections that modern readers and scholars attach to a work based on the historical information available from the writer while attempting to draw connotations or meanings from those potential connections. This is why we criticize Meursault and not Camus for pulling the trigger; but hold Kant
accountable for the vagueness inherent in his Imperative as to the limits of the scope of our universalizable maxims. One may speculate whether or not Camus would himself have pulled the trigger; one hardly doubts that Kant did not himself believe his own words or position himself within his own system. Non-fictional works tend to present themselves as a ‘completed’ work or part of a larger system—though this is not the same as saying each work is in itself complete and lacking the possibility for enhancement or elaboration by further or previous works—while fictional works tend to create a scenario that requires the active participation of the reader—either as a scholastic interpreter attempting to connect the events of narrative with events surrounding the life of the historical writer, or an interpretation of a pseudo-author or ‘character’ that could represent such events or participate in the relation of such events with actuality. For Barthes, a readerly text is one that is whole or complete for the reader, meaning the text allows the reader to passively participate in the text without the need to interpret what is written or the need to infer what is not already given. A writerly text on the other hand is something that is incomplete for the reader. The reader must complete the work, including interpretation, inference, and in some cases to build the structure of the text to arrive nearest to a totality, teleology, or holism of its meanings. The reader in the writerly text must take an active role in order to find any meaning within the text whereas the meaning is already fully integrated by the writer within a readerly text. The dilemma is evident, but only if one sees literature as an either/or decision between whether texts classify as readerly or writerly. If we say literature is only readerly, then the importance of the writer is seen immediately as the one who structures the text according to its meaning (this is still not to say whether or not the writer interprets meaning or creates it).
If we say literature is only writerly, then the importance of the writer amounts to nothing beyond being a collector of words that require a reader to interpret their meaning. In positing the writer as a reader, it seems inaccurate to say that the writer is a mere collector of words, but rather also exists as an interpreter, collecting specific words that in turn yield some meaning to the writer as reader. As a writer and reader, the writer appears as the one who has dipped into the seemingly infinite realm of language and extracted clumps of words that the writer actively works within to presents them as a specific collection representing the meaning gathered from the writer’s own interpretation of the words. Barthes argues that most texts are readerly text, including classic texts, and are products, not productions, that make up the mass of what we typically call ‘literature’ (Barthes 1974, 4-5). The value of a writerly text however, for Barthes, is that its goal is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text (Barthes 1974, 4).

In attempting to blur the line between writer and reader, Barthes is in effect destabilizing the historical social conception of the relationships that exist between the text and the reader and the text and the writer, respectively. The plurality that manifests from this comingling of writer and reader, what Barthes refers to as the “ideal text,” constitutes the “plural networks” that interact with the text, allowing one to “gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (Barthes 1974, 5-6). Working from the confining modality of the writer as nothing more than the writer allows for this demarcation of writerly and readerly texts; however, this differentiation that is eliminated by positing the writer as reader thus, contrary to Barthes, every text becomes a writerly text. Barthes thought very little could be said of writerly texts, asking rhetorically, “First of all, where can we find them? (Barthes 1974,
4). Barthes thought that we could not find them in reading, except by happenstance or accident, and in certain light this seems correct. The writerly text will never appear as a complete work one could find in a bookstore but we should not conclude that the books on the shelves must therefore be readerly texts. We may ask Barthes’s question in reverse: Where can one find a readerly text? In translational work, the writer need not be a reader in the sense of interpreting textual meaning. Even this poses difficulty when exact translations are not possible, i.e. when a word or phrase does not have find an equivalent in the translating language, the translator is forced to use something close to the meaning of the word while taking care not to change the meaning of the sentence conveyed. It is the readerly text that proves difficult to find, especially in trying to locate something that has as a unique quality the ability to be read passively with interpretation either needed or pursued by the reader. At this point though we may question whether or not such a text, if it does exist, still is literature.

_Foucault’s Question_

A year after Barthes published “Death of the Author”, Michel Foucault asked the question; “What is an Author?” Foucault actually begins the piece from a different question borrowed from Samuel Beckett’s _Texts for Nothing_ where it was asked, “what does it matter who is speaking” (Foucault 1979, 141). Similar to Barthes, Foucault finds the ‘author’ as repressive in the sense of limiting the freedom of the reader (Foucault 1979, 142). The author-as-person distracts and detracts from the text itself: it distracts the reader in that the reader is always going back to the construct of the historical author and
it detracts in that the reader, in referencing back to the historical author runs the risk of seeing any other possible meaning in the text. The reader ends up looking for clues that point back to the writer or a previous work instead of discovering the text in itself and allowing it to reveal its meaning to the reader. This idea is evident whenever the reader enters into a text with a pre-conceived notion of the history it its writer and means to find things within the text that highlight these known (or speculative) facts. The reverse of that idea also seems attributable to the way in which some readers approach a text. They enter into a text and extract or interpret some meaning from it then work their way back to the historical author and from there proceed to offer up an account of the findings. In performing from either modality, the reader broaches the text in a limiting fashion, the limits Foucault and Barthes are addressing in their works, respectively. If one were to point to a subject in response to Beckett and say “that is who is speaking and it matters because…” is casting a limit upon the freedom of the reader to explore all the possible meanings that lie buried on the page.

Foucault’s “author function” represents this endeavor of the reader in “finding” the author amongst the pages. For Foucault, this function is a socially-constructed apparatus designed not to point to the subjectivity of the writer but rather to an subject-less entity represented by the social process of grouping together of a “certain number of texts, defining them, differentiating them from and contrasting them to others [while] establishing a relationship among the texts” (Foucault 1979, 147). It is a “mode of being” for Foucault, as opposed to a real individual, which represents the functioning of certain discourses within society. This mode of being is the function of the work, and assumes such a function when it becomes subject to criticism or scrutiny which requires
something to take ownership over the work as the object at which such criticisms are
directed (Foucault 1979, 148). Though Foucault is making this point to show how the
author function comes about, the underlying factor this should cause us pause is the
becoming of the text as an object of criticism and scrutiny. We may ask, “What makes a
text such that it has, as a possibility of its own, the possibility of criticism?” More
acutely, with reference back to our section on Gadamer, if texts are the type of things that
have relationships with objects outside itself, regardless of whether we mean in any
specific instantiation between the text and a particular writer, a particular reader, or a
particular thing or set of things in the world, then we would seem to be right in
concluding that the moment the possibility of criticism is realized, this moment of
actualization occurs when the text enters into or redefines a continual relationship with
something outside itself. Foucault’s criticism can be seen as one where this relationship is
posited through the creation of an author function that “stands-in” for the subjectivity that
fails in definition. For Foucault, this construct of a “certain rational being” that stands in
for the subjectivity of the relationship of the text to something outside of it is what we
call the ‘author’ (Foucault 1979, 150). Against this notion however, we may ask is the
‘author’ as the stand-in for the subjective relationship of the text to something other
necessarily is or should be considered a fictitious creation of a social attempt to posit
ownership to a particular work or set of works? The anti-intentionalist argument Foucault
is positing in this essay is nonetheless important in cautioning us from conceding that the
‘author’ must represent the historical writer as he or she stands in relation to the text. The
‘author’ needs not be an exclusive title reserved for the writer of the text or the
relationship that unquestionably exists between the writer and what was written, but
rather directs us to the subjective relationships entered into with the text by that thing which gives rise to further discourse, criticism, and interpretation without limiting ourselves to a singular or particular relationship as privileged. We are left to consider then how the relationships between the writer and reader, respectively, can yield a position of authority in relation to the text and how such a relationship is itself steeped in a struggle for sovereignty.

Writer as Author

In his essay “Writer, Text, Work, Author,” Alexander Nehamas proposes a distinction between the ‘writer’ and the ‘author’ as essentially one that situates the writer as the historical figure whose function was the production of the text, whereas the author is understood as the construction “situated toward the notional end of interpretation and not at its actual beginning” (Nehamas 2002, 107). That the ‘writer’ can be separated from the work but the ‘author’ cannot is the driving idea of Nehamas’s claim here; the author and text emerge through interpretation and not through simple predication of completion. Standing at this emergence of a completed work is the writer and the text written. The author is separated by interpretation, as opposed to mere expression, and thus bears no influence through a preexisting signification upon the work (Nehamas 2002, 113). The separation of the writer from the work allows the author-construct of Nehamas greater freedom than Foucault has allowed in his author function by severing the historical ties implicit in Foucault of the historical author, i.e. the writer, and the author function itself.
Nehamas goes on to say that the author “is the joint product of writer and text, of critic and interpretation, who is not a person but a character, is everything the work shows it to be and what it can in turn determine what the text shows. The author [thus] has no depth” (Nehamas 2002, 110). Nehamas uses the term ‘character’ here to highlight the ‘author’ as a functional role much like a fictional narrator (though we should be cautious here not to equate the two) guides the plot of story, so too does the author accounts for the features of the text while guiding the interpretation (Nehamas 1981, 145). In this way, the author is inseparable from the meaning of the text. The dilemma arises though just a few pages later in the same work where Nehamas leaves open the possibility for a reconnection of the ‘historical writer’ with the ‘postulated author’.

“The regulative end is to construct, for each text, a complete historically plausible author—a character who may not coincide with the actual writer’s self-understanding, fragmentary and incomplete as it probably is” (Nehamas 1981, 147).

If the goal is to construct a “complete historically possible author” then the question arises: why not simply concede that the historical writer is the historically possible author? The second part of the quote further leads us to make the claim of the possibility that the writer is (or at least could be) the author. Though Nehamas’s author-construct does add greater mobility than Foucault, we are left still within the confines of the historical criticisms Foucault himself advanced. This has led to a number of articles in recent years addressing Nehamas’s critique in an attempt to further clarify the distinction between the writer and the author that would adequately demarcate the two without
falling back into the criticisms of historical privileging or authorial intentionalism with the writer as author.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Reader as Author and the Struggle for Sovereignty}

In turning our attention towards the relationships within literature—text and reader, text and writer, reader and writer—what we find is that the struggles between them have to do with authorial sovereignty. Literary critics and philosophers have touted a number of reasons, of which only a small few have been explored in this essay, as to why we should put our stock in one source of authority rather than another. “What does it matter who is speaking;” attempts in addressing this question have seemed to first try to establish the “who” only then to further make claims as to why it matters that it is their “who” and not a different “who”. The speaking of the “who” is perhaps the most overlooked part of the statement. One takes for granted the singularity of speech but only notices it when difficulties arise from attempting to understand multiple voices at the time. A plurality of speakers therefore seems less fecund and so generally becomes discarded. If we grant however that texts do contains a polysemous characteristic, then are we to conclude that the voice of the text is singular or plural? We can imagine the text carrying a number of meanings, of which all are represented in the singular voice of the writer. This is the view most commonly taken among intentionalists. We can also imagine however the text itself representing its own voice, though a polysemous nature

would be indicative of a plurality of voices rather than the singular of the writer. The text at all times speaks polyvocally, but such clamor is largely drowned out by the acuteness of the reader and is similar to having a conversation in a busy restaurant. At times, all we hear is the person across from us speak, other times we are distracted by the noise around us, even eavesdropping occasionally to the other voices in the room. Some of the voices in the room remain silent; others gather and hold our attention. Is this not similar to reading? The reader follows the conversation of the text, but is constantly aware of the polyvocal aspect of the text and from time to time is drawn away in thought beyond the engagement of the conversation. Then there is the reader itself who approaches the text carrying the weight of their own history. If texts are relationally constituted as Gadamer suggested, then each reader carries away from the text a difference voice. The same reader, it may be added, can approach the text repeatedly and from each engagement hear a different voice. Perhaps we can liken this to visiting the same restaurant repeatedly but sitting in a different section each time thus experiencing the atmosphere from a different vantage point acoustically and aesthetically. Then intentionalist in the restaurant must either conclude that he or she is there all alone with the writer participating in the conversation silently a passive listener, or allow the room to be filled with other voices but attest that such multiplicities are silent save for the writer’s voice alone which marks only those conversations the writer chooses to relay. We are left to question whether or not what is relayed represents every conversation in the room, or merely the ones the writer can hear. The alternative for the intentionalist, if we take the metaphor further, is that the writer hears every voice within the room and relays them all as a singular plurality. This brings us back to the difficulties normally attributed when one is trying to
hear multiple voices or multiple conversations speaking at the same time. It becomes untenable to fully immerse oneself wholly into one conversation, for we are bombarded by everything at once within the singular plurality or simply left to wonder if anything more lies beyond the voice of the writer.

In answering the question of the “who,” it is curious that in one moment we are willing to grant the polysemy of the text while in the next advocating that a single voice should be taken as the sovereignty in its authorship. The problems associated with the writer as author have already been discussed. If we say that the text is the authority then we deny the importance of the relationship the text has with both the reader and the writer as if the latter two were merely fishers in the great sea of the text. We may ask what good is meaning that rests upon the floor of the great sea. The text may respond, “It is contained within my waters, you have just not gone deep enough!” Submersion into the text however is not a passive endeavor; the reader must work to get there, must fight the air within their lungs which means to carry them back to the surface, must not be afraid to disturb the sediment along the bottom, must not be afraid to wonder what lies beyond the bottom, beyond the limits of the sea. The text in this way remains silent and as such represents authority in its emptiness. In addressing the “who,” we find that the common element posited both in the writer as author and the text as author is the active relationship of the reader, who engages both the text as well as the writer within the text. The death of the writer is marked by the birth of the author precisely due to the authority of the reader as the common element within literature. Thus, despite the gravest efforts of those who would discount the reader’s role in literature as a passive subsidiary of a pre-
established institutional dictatorship of the historical writer, what we come to recognize rather is the signification that the birth of the reader is also the birth of the author.

What is at stake for us with this assertion is the gravity it has upon the traditional modality assumed that literature is confined or closed. One might ask, “What is wrong with privileging one source over another within literary critique?” Such a question is as warranted as it is dangerous; for there seems to be no real advantage in not privileging one source over another, if we are to grant varying degrees of completeness in relation to meaning. The danger involves relegating inquiry to a backwards-looking investigation, a philosophic reflection that struggles against the creation of a literary openness in the future. The responsibility of literature to maintain such openness—the ability of which is made possible from the situating of authorship with the reader—is in constant struggle with the closure of philosophy that in choosing one or the other, i.e. philosophic critique or literary openness, we either deny that literature can inform us philosophically or we cut ourselves off from the transformation such an openness allows us. We choose not to privilege one source over the other precisely for this reason—in the hopes that as the reader opens up the future for us within literature so too may literature keep the future open for us philosophically.
References


Nehamas, Alexander. (1981). The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal. Critical Inquiry, 8(1), 133-149. JSTOR


