

INTRODUCTION

Why obscure an invitation?

It seems, for a moment, like a contradiction in terms—the open hand half-withdrawn, the beckoning path perversely shrouded, the appeal hobbled and slowed before it is even properly advanced. This dissonance can be resolved by imagining pragmatic grounds: decorum, or established protocols, or even self-protection. Such considerations will enter, obliquely and intermittently, in the chapters that follow, but I am primarily concerned with two alternative motivations—less immediate, less urgent, one might go so far as to say more willful. The first is a spirit of play, in which obscurity serves to augment the more recondite pleasures, for both inviter and invitee, inhering in a veiled interaction. The second is a process of tutelage, each step in the discernment and pursuit of an invitation changing the seeker in small but finally significant ways. These two rationales are far from mutually exclusive, and they have in common their welcome of the delay obscurity confers, freely distending the interval in which an invitation wholly emerges, or profiting by the lengthy expanse (of time, of text) in which it might fully unfold. Both will factor, in varying combinations and degrees, in each of the works I discuss herein, each embracing the longueurs and divagations of the narrative form to stage a dialogue equally as sustained as it is surreptitious.

The texts are, in many other respects, a relatively heterogeneous grouping: two novels, two memoirs, and two feature films; dating from 1930 to 2000;

ranging from high modernism to a foray into post-postmodernism, from the projection of an airy elitism to that of an earthy populism, and from the thoroughly canonized to the all-but-untouched-by-academic-critique. They are drawn together here by the particularly artful, and broadly consistent, ways in which they both manage and figure the practice of authorship in twentieth-century America. In so doing, they complicate received wisdom regarding the constitution of and distinctions between literary movements and moments, and shepherd us to a fuller understanding of the stakes and strategies of writing throughout the century. The obscure invitation that each text issues is to a self-conscious apprehension of, and perhaps by extension a form of communion with, its author. At its most basic this is no more than a simple structural homology between reader and author, at its most extreme a full-on annexation of Eucharistic ritual. The emotional valence of this convergence is highly malleable; it may constitute a threat to the reader or a reassurance, a promise or a plea, at the limit a mere observation of proximity otherwise unremarked. That is to say, the call to like an author, or to be like an author, is susceptible to considerable tonal variation; the relationship does not rise free of the text, but instead partakes of all the emotional vagaries of any accomplished artwork.

In all cases, the demands made on the reader are less than straightforward (even the most direct-seeming of appeals masking considerable indirection, or indeed misdirection). The key to describing them adequately lies in parsing the varieties of attention we bring to artistic texts, noting the significance in this light of the interplay—so crucial to twentieth-century aesthetics—between the representation of a story-world and consciousness of that representation itself. Modern and postmodern texts have in common their propensity to solicit our participation at two levels: via our experience of characters, which in turn yields emotional investment in plot situations and their resolutions, and via our tracking of rhetorical and conceptual games that highlight our relationships with authors, which may exist at any number of tangents to the more obvious or traditional bonds tying us to characters.¹ Fully attending to a text in this binary fashion places the reader at a lively crossroads, measuring authorial figurations in tandem with those of character and plot, and at the same time understanding that the binary is itself something of a heuristic fiction. That is, that attention to aesthetic experiment and linguistic play—and thus identification of, sometimes with, the author—not only coexists with but subverts investment in mimesis and affective identifications with characters, and

vice versa. Narrative progress and rhetorical digress function conjointly: narrative establishes the stakes of play, while play distinguishes the layers of narrative and often enlarges their number.

Connecting this dynamic with the author, however, has been an uneasy move (at best) in academia for some decades. Beginning with W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's nomination of "the intentional fallacy" in 1946, continuing through Roland Barthes' and Michel Foucault's assaults on the figure of the author in the late 1960s, the reign of deconstruction over the next two decades, and on to the present day, we have been rigorous in our disavowal—frequently our suppression—of any interpretive move that purports to glean an authorial agenda from a close reading of primary text. But as with any zealously voiced protocol—especially one frequently enforced in a spirit of staunch rectitude—a penumbra has long fallen in excess of the actual taboo, leaving us blind to much that goes on within texts themselves, irrespective of any actual appeal to external authority. Of course, the most cursory examination of the arts pages of our newspapers, the profiles in glossy magazines, the discussions abounding online and on the radio and on the road (whether or not graced by the author's presence) indicates that we have never stopped caring about authors as intentional beings, and that we all—lay readers and academics alike, more or less responsibly, exuberantly, fantastically—generate our accounts of them partly based on what we find in their works. This has required of those of us in the business a degree of doublethink, given not only the proscriptions regarding intentionality but also the modernist dicta from which they issued, positing the most successful literature in no small degree as that which is least impinged upon by the biographical persona of its author. With the enormous rise of self-depiction (thinly veiled or otherwise) in postmodernist literature, we have arrived at a literary history that defines the twentieth century as stretched between two opposed constellations of expectation: at its start, the modernist mandate of impersonality, elusiveness, and allusiveness; by its end, celebrity culture's appeals for writing revelatory of authorial personality and biography, writing that signals its accessibility and that cultivates within its readers a sense of intimacy.

I argue, instead, that both horizons of expectation are in play throughout, and that the project of navigating between these opposed demands makes for much of the richness of twentieth-century literature. That neither the ostensible authorial evacuations that we read as the signature of the early part of the

century nor the roiling self-portraiture of its close are as straightforward as they seem, and that they are at base quite similar strategies. Both approaches sensitize readers to the vexed status of the author and engineer related responses—inquisitiveness, investigation, investment—in the reader. Neither technique is transparent, of course; both progress by way of repetitions and revisions, gestures and allusions, elaborations and elisions that I group under the heading of obscure invitations—invitations to the reader not just to seek out the author from whom they spring, but to imagine him or her in a particular fashion and to attend to that imagination as a constitutive element of the reading process. Both approaches reveal, then, that the hermeneutic strategies we have been taught by modernism, and taught as well that they serve to elucidate texts that at the very least strive to be hermetically sealed, instead derive essential energy from the specter of the author standing behind and beyond—whether as aid, arbiter, or prize for the process of interpretation. That this author has been placed intrinsically off-limits by poststructuralist theory and is (I agree) never wholly accessible should not blind us to the fact that she or he is very much in play notionally in texts from every point in the century.

This is not to say that I see a surface-level shift in approaches to self-portraiture as the only way to delineate between representational strategies early and late in the century. Particularly salient for my discussion, too, will be a rising and increasingly explicit self-consciousness regarding the materiality of the text conjoined to the modes of its circulation. And, even more importantly, in the last third of the century a conversance and thoroughly imbricated relationship not just with the history of literature but also with academic literary criticism—most importantly with the notion of the death of the author. An animating conceit of the book as a whole is that, across multiple media, genres, literary movements, and temporal divides, each of the texts I treat here thematizes—in fact enacts, in one way or another—authorial distance, absence, or death, but uniformly with an end of reaffirming authorial presence, and with it a highly particularized and pointed relationship with the reader. In elucidating these less-than-fatal authorial deaths, I begin with dramatic evacuations of authorial voice and responsibility in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), both works that obliquely advertise concerns regarding authorial signature in their very titles. Each book would seem to answer to the demand for an authorless or de-authored text, but each reinstates the author in spectacular and far-reaching fashion in

its final sentence. I turn then to Vladimir Nabokov's inverse strategy of clotting the fictional space with authorial stand-ins and shadows in *Lolita* (1955), which I argue (given the novel's moral quandaries) makes locating a solid, extratextual Nabokov of paramount importance—but also impossible.

While Nabokovian shell games remain the order of the day in a great deal of work over the subsequent decades, my interest in the final chapters is in late-century texts that extend their reflections into a consideration of surrounding cultural formations, and with them the material substrate of textual circulation itself. The project of staging authorial death becomes more pointedly literal here, too, as we move from texts predating Barthes' writing, but amenable to being read according to his postulates, to those created a generation after "The Death of the Author," and palpably in dialogue with it. Dave Eggers' memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), David Fincher's film *Seven*, and Bryan Singer's film *The Usual Suspects* (both films 1995, and both starring Kevin Spacey as an especially pernicious author-figure) all yoke an abiding concern regarding the very media of textual production to a reexamination of Barthes' ideas, affording a fuller imagination of the itineraries of reception and interpretation. Each of these last three texts embraces the undeniable pithiness and melodrama of Barthes' memorable formulation in the service of an ironic script for actual narrative events in which the author is effectively killed off and then resuscitated, which is to say repeatedly demonstrating that resuscitation was not necessary in the first place. Thus, we find a continual rehearsal of Barthes' claims, but never an affirmation of them. These performances help us recognize illustrations of much the same point within the earlier works, whether couched in the modernist language of ostentatious self-effacement or via Nabokov's kaleidoscopic self-portraiture, thus fostering a fresh understanding of authorship throughout the twentieth century.

Indeed, for a long time, I called this project "The Dearth of the Author." The central claim, which continues to inform the current work, was that Roland Barthes' tremendously influential account of complete authorial self-effacement as the sine qua non of modern textual production—while rhetorically prodigious, conceptually dazzling, and endlessly provocative—was (and remains) largely inaccurate. Barthes wrote a polemic for a late-'60s critical and artistic avant-garde, and his prose points toward the barricades. Where he might have spoken of the stylistic liberties increasingly afforded by the twentieth century's many experimental forms, Barthes conjures not an opportunity but

an inexorable “necessity to substitute language itself for the subject hitherto supposed to be its owner” (“Death” 50). He trumpets this development as one that “utterly transforms the modern text” (52), calling the result both “counter-theological” and “properly revolutionary” (54). Indeed, part of the continuing interest of a document that is, at one level, the product of a cultural moment well behind us is its predictive value for any number of anti-institutional literary-critical regimes of the succeeding decades. The brevity and stylistic exuberance of Barthes’ essay count heavily for its enduring appeal, but so too does the fact that it so ably distills the animus not just of much deconstructive criticism but also of the various politically inflected approaches that held sway in deconstruction’s wake, for all that their attention was no longer focused on the linguistic free-play at the heart of Barthes’ endeavor.

Barthes’ extreme formulations—“the author absents himself from [the text] at every level” (52), “every text is written eternally *here and now*” (52, emphasis Barthes’), “the claim to ‘decipher’ a text becomes entirely futile” (53), “writing constantly posits meaning, but always in order to evaporate it” (54)—accurately describe a mere handful of limit texts.² Barthes clearly evokes a sense of possibility, sometimes even an impulse, contributory to a great deal of the last century’s artistic production, but as a blanket description his contentions overshoot the mark. Only the most radically chance-driven works, it seems to me, prove so eager to shed all authorial design; only in describing the content of such works do we fully relinquish euphemisms for, or interpretive circumlocutions taking us back to intimations of, intentionality. Far more often an apparent or incomplete authorial evacuation masks a deeper strategy of self-inscription—a studied self-occlusion that provokes in the reader not liberation or even indifference but rather a desire to find precisely that which initially eludes detection. Thus my revision of “death” to “dearth”: that the ostentatious absence of the authorial hand actually drives us to locate its traces. And, in corollary: that the more hidden the author, the more fixated the reader becomes on finding him or her; and the more fixated the reader, the more subject to being choreographed in that search by the author—precisely the opposite result from the new freedom and self-determination Barthes triumphantly proclaims.

It is in this light that I want to tarry briefly with Michel Foucault’s work in “What Is an Author?” (1969), the essay most often treated in tandem with Barthes’. While my primary engagement—for reasons of style, imagery, and influence, and of my own critical predilections—is with Barthes, Foucault’s more systemic

and dynamic account of what he calls the “author-function” (148) is illuminating here. Foucault paints the death of the author not as a singular occurrence but as, “since Mallarmé, . . . a constantly recurring event” (145)—which immediately raises the question of finality. Indeed, he offers an extremely astute analysis of the ways in which both individual readers and society as a whole continually reconstruct conceptions of authorship in the face of the historical and formal developments he arrays in hopes of supplanting them. A rehearsal of all these recuperative habits and impulses is unnecessary; the point is simply that Foucault’s attempt to demystify them in favor of a “historical analysis of discourse” (158) runs up against precisely the entrenched behaviors that authors draw on as they seem to enact their own disappearance, “assum[ing] the role of the dead man in the game of writing” (143). It is a game, in a sense much more insistent and pervasive than Foucault allows, such that when (echoing Barthes) he predicates his analysis on the claim that “writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression” in favor of “an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier” (142), he is merely playing into the hand of the “dead man.” Foucault’s robust historical analysis of the epistemic shift that produced the modern sense of authorship here gives way to his ideological preference for a subsequent shift. He eagerly anticipates a new critical stance that would take up the kinds of questions he proposes in the late stages of his essay, for example, “How, under what conditions and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse? What place can it occupy in each type of discourse, what functions can it assume, and by obeying what rules?” (158). Foucault presents these queries as “a matter of depriving the subject . . . of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse” (158), but the second protocol does not necessarily entail the first. Foucault’s commitment to an ineluctable textual primacy producing the author as no more than a discursive effect blinds him to the way a canny “originator” might mobilize the discursive thicket stretched between herself and her readers, precisely by grasping its rules and engaging its functions to inscribe it with an occluded but ultimately accessible self-representation or self-expression. The “variability” and “complexity” of this subject would then be revealed as products of readerly assiduousness, more sustained and engaged readings generating fuller realizations of the self-accounting written into the discourse. Steadfast opposition to any invocation of authorial intention thus becomes self-defeating, an obstacle to a full appreciation of a text’s workings.