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# The Author's Place in Contemporary Narratology

Gregory T. Polletta

The last thing we can say, to begin with, is that the author has no place in contemporary criticism. That the author has been effaced, disowned, dispossessed of rank and privilege, banished, or killed off. That the author has disappeared, whatever has happened to him in person, from critical discourse about literary texts.

For as Michel Foucault reminds us in his essay entitled "What is an Author?": "the author's disappearance has been a constantly recurring event", and like the assertion about the Death of God or of Man, "it is not enough to keep repeating the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared." Because, he goes on to argue: "A certain number of notions that are intended to replace the privileged position of the author actually seem to preserve the privilege and suppress the real meaning of his disappearance."

Foucault's view is that we should talk about the subject in terms of author functions, as they pertain to the structure and ideology of discursivity, but I do not intend to engage his notions. I should like simply to remark one of his observations because it identifies, it places, an issue that is very much in the foreground of the present critical scene. "The author", he asserts, "is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning. As a result, we must entirely reverse the traditional idea of the author. We are accustomed ... to saying that the author is the genius creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations ... that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate." The truth Foucault contends, "is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of significations: the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses: in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction."

On this issue, the collusion between the author and authority, Foucault makes common cause with Roland Barthes, his own collusive adversary, for as Barthes said: "the work's ambiguity has nothing to do

with the French New Criticism and does not interest him [Barthes] in itself; it is only a little machine for making war against philological law, the academic tyranny of correct meaning.”

And it is on these grounds, these redoubts, that the battle goes on. Who controls the meaning of a work or a text? Who dictates what can or cannot be said or made of a text? What determines what is or is not a correct reading? And what are an author's rights and functions in the transaction? Who owns the text? To whom does it belong?

Certainly not, except in a strictly legal sense, to the author. There is, to be sure, that map of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha Co., Mississippi, on which are inscribed the words: “William Faulkner, Sole Owner & Proprietor.” But no one would take this seriously as binding, legally or otherwise. It “affirms” nothing. But it isn't a lie either. There is nothing “false” about the claim. Faulkner is having some fun. Or, if we wish to be in earnest, we say that he is employing a metaphor. Calling it such, however, is not appreciably more meaningful than to call it an assertion, or, worse, a pseudostatement, and taking it literally, as we say, as a claim of ownership on the author's part. For there is a sense in which Faulkner is perfectly entitled to the inscription. Perhaps we would do better to call it a figure, and a figure of the type that is particularly prominent in recent critical discourse: a *mise en abyme*. The figure is purely textual in reference. And we should not misconstrue what the inscription actually says. Faulkner isn't “posting” his lands. The author is not enjoining the reader, “Keep Out: Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted.”

Critics are at a disadvantage in this respect, for *mise en abyme* is typically a writer's figure; it belongs to novelists and poets. Critics must make do with metaphors. And the fields of metaphor they draw upon are fairly commonplace, two of which are conspicuous in recent criticism. Authors are treated in economic terms, as “producers”, or in familial terms, as “parents” of a text (both of which are sometimes subsumed, in the French New Criticism, under the buried metaphor or alleged fact of relationships of “power”).

Foucault capitalizes on the former; he treats authors as a kind of *patronat*. And Barthes plies the latter, notably in his summary and influential essay of 1971 on “From Work to Text”, in which he argues the distinction between the two categories of his title precisely in the terms that are at issue in recent debates about the author's place in narratology.

“The work”, Barthes asserts, “is caught up in a process of filiation

... The author is regarded as the father and owner of his work; literary research therefore learns to *respect* the manuscript and the author's declared intentions." "The Text, on the other hand", Barthes declares, "is read without the father's signature ... Therefore, no vital 'respect' is owed to the Text: it can be broken ... The Text can be read without the father's guarantee" – without, so to speak, the author's authorization.

This has assumed a presiding position in the newer varieties of contemporary criticism. It is this view of the author's relation to his writings that commands the greatest respect at the moment. And, as my earlier quotation from Barthes intimates, this position is what he would identify as distinctive to the French New Criticism.

But surely, some of you will protest, there is nothing novel about these notions. The American New Critics Wimsatt and Beardsley expelled authorial intention, and demystified any vital respect for the author's declared intentions, as long ago as 1944 and 1945. True enough. But they did so in order to ensure the correct interpretation of literary works. Barthes, on the other hand, excludes the author's declared intention in order to release the text from any authoritarian control or interpretative circumscription.

A brief look at the bemusing career of American and English arguments about authorial intention will show how far apart, how completely at odds, the two New Criticisms are on the issue.

Wimsatt's and Beardsley's views were vulnerable in theory even before E. D. Hirsch called them sharply into question in his essay of 1960 on "Objective Interpretation" and, at greater length, in his book of 1967 on *Validity in Interpretation*. Lately Fowler and Searle have been scathing in their indictment, and Juhl has picked up where Hirsch left off by undertaking a more elaborate, rigorous, and chastening critique. Many of their objections were anticipated by a number of critics who were closer contemporaries to the American New Critics. But whatever the theoretical weaknesses of their position, Wimsatt and Beardsley carried the day and consolidated what has come to be called "an institutional consensus". Thus, a critic ostensibly as different as could be from their critical persuasion, Wayne Booth, took pains to circumvent the intentional fallacy by inventing an *implied* author for the study of the rhetoric of fiction.

The striking fact is that most of the American and English critics of Wimsatt and Beardsley shared their belief in the ideal of objective interpretation. Hirsch, in particular, warned Wimsatt and Beardsley, and their adherents, that by banishing authorial intention they were paving



the way for the usurpation of the literary work by the reader and critic. By supplanting the author, by taking the author's place as the determiner of meaning, the authoritative, the correct, reading of the work would be undermined, and the way would be open to sheer indeterminacy. Which is exactly what has come to pass.

For as Geoffrey Hartman has declared: "Contemporary criticism," namely, the newer varieties of criticism of the 1970's and 1980's, "aims at a hermeneutics of indeterminacy. It proposes a type of analysis that has renounced the ambition to master or demystify its subject (text, psyche) by technocratic, predictive, or authoritarian formulas." In this view there is no end to what can be read into or said about a text. There is no bringing it under control—rendering it immobile, passive, inert. There is no stabilizing what Frank Kermode calls "the actual turbulence of the literary text." Objective interpretation, the search for a single right reading, is repudiated, not merely because it is so daunting or illusive an ambition, but because it violates the constitutive properties of the literary text.

Clearly, then, this program is closer in its conception of authorial intention to the notions of Roland Barthes than to anything in the received traditions of American and English criticism. In fact, of course, it assimilates, and in some respects derives from directly, the individual criticism of Barthes and Foucault— from contemporary European criticism in general, and from the several forms of the French New Criticism in particular.

Recently, however, the aims of the contemporary criticism described by Hartman have provoked a storm of debate in America and England under the title: *The Limits of Pluralism*. Led by M. H. Abrams, Hirsch, and Booth, an impassioned campaign has been mounted against indeterminacy, pluralism, and the wages thereof: subjectivity, relativism, narcissism, nihilism, to name a few of the charges. And to counter all that, one finds, as in Christopher Ricks's recent diatribe against "in" theory, an appeal to the "principle" of an author's intention as a means of correcting wantonness in critical interpretation.

Indeed, as Ricks's piece shows, there is a seething reaction against contemporary literary theory at large. Not merely objections to this or that aspect of literary theory, but blanket condemnation. And swelling alarm at what are fancied to be its menacing designs and corrupting influence. As if contemporary literary theory were a conspiracy to overthrow "practical" criticism. As if "in" theory, being foreign to English and American traditions but dangerously catching, should be quarantined or quelled.

Well, as far as theory goes, I find nothing to choose between what Barthes calls "the paper author" and what Wayne Booth calls "the implied author". They are both theoretical constructs. Constitutively speaking, they are equally theoretical. They are unequal, one is better than the other, only in terms by which we measure the adequacy of any theory. And as theory, as well as in performance, I find Barthes' notions to be more productive, more liberating, and more satisfying than Booth's. I find Barthes' theory simply more interesting. So what is there to be afraid of, or about, in theory? Enslavement to a system? Losing one's head or sensibility or allegiances or principles? The only way to manumit criticism from bad theory is by better theory.

But my real point would be that just about everybody has made a metaphor, a concept, an arbitrary sign, a functional complex of the author, whether they speak in his behalf or to his undoing. Nobody seems to take real authors, *writers*, seriously any more. By which I mean that theories of literary criticism do not take adequate account of what real writers do: the act of writing.

To ask the question, "What is an Author?" today is to inquire into just about everything but what authors do as writers. In fact, one of the most confounding turns in contemporary critical theory is the apparent attempt to displace what authors do, *writing*, to what critics do, *reading*. The supplanting of writing by reading. Literally.

When Kermode can seem to approve the proposition that reading is a productive activity, "a performance" which "is equivalent to the creation of a text"; when Stanley Fish can assert that the reader "in effect" or actually "creates the literary work"; when Hartman can propose that there is no difference between criticism and creation, that criticism is creative writing in its own right and not subservient to the works of the so-called creative writer . . . theory, contemporary literary theory, must appear to have lost its bearings and gone haywire. Surely the one thing we do not do, that we cannot do, as readers, as critics, is to make, to *write*, the words that constitute the literary text.

Useless to plead that the critics I have named are neither fools nor knaves about the issue. That the theory on which they have taken their separate positions is sounder and more productive than the theory on which those who deride or impugn them cry havoc. But what would be useful, what all of us can make use of, whatever our critical persuasions, is to recognize that these and other contemporary critics are putting into question, making problems of, questions such as "What is an Author?". And they are not sowing or exploiting semantic confusion. The worst

they can be charged with is semantic promiscuity. They are forcing us to take nothing for granted – even if, and here is the place where argument should begin, they themselves take as granted certain notions that are questionable. One of these, I believe, is the blurring or collapsing of the distinct activities of writing and reading, of making and interpreting literary texts. There are others that I shall discuss presently.

But before addressing those, it might well be asked what all this has to do with narratology. Why can't we keep theory out of the discussion? Who cares about the names, factions, and notions I have been dropping besides literary theorists and the followers of critical trends? Who cares about what's in and what's out? Why can't we keep the domains of criticism – hermeneutics, semiotics, rhetoric, narratology, and the rest – apart, and independent of general literary theory? Why should we treat literary theory as if it were the sovereign of all the distinct activities of literary criticism?

The complaints in such rhetorical questions are not unjustified. Contemporary literary theory may well be developing a mystique of its own, and certain theorists convey an impression of arrogating the whole of criticism to their enterprise. One form this may take is to allege that all criticism is an activity of interpretation and then to insinuate that only those critics who have mastered contemporary hermeneutics, with its overbearingly theoretical bias, are worthy of a respectful hearing. The place of theory in criticism is itself an exceedingly problematical question, nettled in polemics, and too tangential to our concerns to dwell upon here, but to be brief about the matter: Contemporary literary theory is deservedly immense in its authority and prestige – but limited in its powers. There is no call to accord it a position of privilege in criticism, let alone the status of supremacy. That would be a ludicrous betrayal of its own distinguishing principles.

As far as narratology is concerned, we may well differ among ourselves about the degree to which narratology is independent of literary theory (and, for that matter, whether narratology as such is an autonomous branch of literary study). We may well differ about the extent or degree to which narratology can or should ignore what is happening now in literary theory. But we should not assume that narratology is innocent of theory. The least that must be conceded is that the issues and problems in contemporary literary theory have direct consequences for the ways any of us conceive and talk about fictional narratives.

Take the topic of narrative voice. Foucault, as it happens, begins his essay by citing Beckett, “What does it matter who is speaking?” and he

ends with the question, "What difference does it make who is speaking?". This is an old question in criticism, older even than what we call narratology, and the great work of Bally on the modes of speech presentation in fictional narrative is still serviceable as an anatomy, a descriptive system, for observing and discoursing upon these features of every text. David Lodge has offered some admirable refinements and contributed some innovations of his own to the typology, although Bally remains a primer, in the full sense of the word, for the study of narrative voice. But once we start thinking about the question in more than taxonomic and descriptive terms, we shall have to grapple with issues in contemporary literary theory. The indeterminacy – not the ambiguity, multiplicity, or plurality: the *indeterminacy* – of the voices of a text will force itself on our attentions. Joyce's narrative voices, for example, are so radically polyphonic that as readers, as critics, we are left with the uneasy feeling that we are only one among all the other voices in the text. That our lines may not be as good as those of Mr. Best, for at least his are funny.

And the problem isn't really all that much simpler in novelists such as Jane Austen or George Eliot. The persistent efforts of critics to locate the so-called authorial voice in their novels, the mounting pile of critical studies of the topic, seem to me to be quite misplaced. Wayne Booth, as instance, sounds so certain in his judgment of when it is Jane Austen speaking, as "implied author" of course, and when it is, say, Emma Woodhouse talking or thinking, and precisely with what note of irony. I find it harder to determine who is speaking, I wonder, "What does it matter who is speaking?" and in the end, "What *difference* does it make who is speaking?". Moreover, I am suspicious of the heavy use that is made of "irony" in discussions of authorial voice. Perhaps we should shelve talk about irony for a spell and attend instead to the ludic, the festive, strains in Jane Austen's writing.

Irony aside, Booth is touching when he avers that "Jane Austen", like "Henry Fielding" (both of whose names are surrounded in inverted comma's to make no mistake that he is talking about the real authors), is a "paragon of wit, wisdom, and virtue", and that *Emma* is "a beautiful case of the dramatized author" serving "as friend and guide" to her readers. This is warmly said, and agreeable to hear, and yet I am left cold by what Booth makes of the novel. Not because his interpretation is wrong, or inadmissible, but because of the way he circumscribes the text. He makes *Emma* sound too tame. He domesticates the novel. He subdues it to an authorial control, which is doubtlessly humane and



uplifting, but a control all the same – and restricting. His dramatized author is a functional principle, to cite Foucault again, by which he “limits, excludes, and chooses” what is in the fiction. For Booth, as for most critics, including those who contrive an author of “regulated hatred”, the name “Jane Austen” designates less the maker of the text than the constructive subject (very like the “ego” in orthodox psychologies of personality) who orders what is written about the fiction and makes it cohere as an intelligible whole. And it is this subject, the author, whose principal job of work it is supposed to be for critics to get inside the skin of, so that we may be able to perceive and judge what is written about correctly.

But Jane Austen the writer – by which I mean, Jane Austen’s writing – is more bracing and ruffling, more irrepressibly exuberant, than anything we attribute to Jane Austen the author, whether implied or direct. I would argue that there are many voices in *Emma*, a polyphony of voices, and not one privileged and presiding authorial voice, speaking behind the backs of her characters or between the lines of what they are saying. There is a marvelously unstabilizing quality to these voices. There is more turbulence to the text than Booth, or any critic who attempts to bring what is written under the control of an authoritative principle, can encompass and restrict. Barthes asserts in “From Work to Text”: “the Text is that social space that leaves no language safe or untouched, that allows no enunciative subject to hold the position of judge, teacher, analyst, or decoder.” Each of these, of course, is precisely what one critic after another has sought to assign to the voices of Jane Austen, *entre guillemets*, the author. What we need, therefore, is a reexamination of the modes of speech presentation in narratology that is informed and tested by the theoretical speculations of contemporary criticism.

If we look to this criticism for models of understanding fiction, however, there is one tendency that is open to question: its propensity to fetichize the text. That may seem to be an odd choice of epithets. While the treatment of a literary work as an object by the American New Criticism might aptly be called “fetichistic”, the term would appear to be erroneous for the newer forms of contemporary criticism – precisely because they conceive of the novel or poem as a certain kind of verbal activity, a verbal performance, rather than as an object: an open form rather than anything closed or determinate in shape or meaning. And these are the properties that constitute a Text. By definition, then, or at least by the definition of Barthes’ essay, the Text militates against any sort of fetichizing.

One might controvert Barthes' oppositions, his posing of work and text as contrastive categories, and dismiss them as specious. I should think that would be pointless, however, for two reasons. First, Barthes is perfectly aware of the discursive motives and reasons for what he would call, quite unabashedly, "the operation". Second, as I have tried to make clear already, his essay offers a more interesting way of conceiving a novel or poem than any present or previous alternative – and a more productive way of beginning a critic's various jobs of work.

Nevertheless, judging by what has followed in contemporary criticism, the consequence of this view of the Text has been the exaltation of interpretation as the supreme and virtually the exclusive activity of criticism. The literary text has become, in practice as well as in theory, whatever a good and interesting critic can *make* of it. The writing that actually constitutes a novel or poem is overshadowed by and absorbed into the interpretative activity and discourse which articulates that activity of reading. And in the process the text which is supposed to be the novel or poem becomes, if not a pretext exactly, at least the occasion for – a kind of foretext or underdrawing of – the critical discourse. This discourse, the more audacious contemporary critics would claim, is itself, a new text, and not only new, but an autonomous text. Not that the critical discourse becomes a surrogate for the novel or poem (as those who are hostile to contemporary criticism would allege), but it does seek to achieve the status of a text in its own right.

The effect is rather like the double focus, the double reference, that obtains in the conventions of sermon literature. When Donne opens a sermon by saying, "This is a text of the resurrection", the reference is not only to the verse of Scripture which is the occasion for the sermon, but equally to the text which is the sermon itself. Similarly, a critic might say, "This", something from *Emma*, "is a text of ..." whatever he wanted to advance as an interpretation, and "This", the critical discourse on *Emma* which follows, is itself a text.

And it is that notion of text-making which I would call fetichistic in contemporary criticism: the making over of novels or poems into occasions for critical "texts" of a hermeneutic kind. As long ago as 1948, R. P. Blackmur admonished the American New Criticism, then in its heyday, for being preoccupied with exegesis. "It elucidates scripture", he remarked; it treats poetry "after much the same fashion as Augustine treated the scriptures in the fifth century." The features of hermeneutics in literary criticism have changed radically since then. We now aim at a hermeneutics of indeterminacy, and critics no longer believe that the



purpose of interpretation is the exegesis of a literary work. But hermeneutics as such is still with us, and stronger than ever. What has happened is a transference from exegesis to text-making: a displacement of "objective" interpretation to freer and more open forms of interpretation. And the odd result is that although the newer forms of contemporary criticism seek after a hermeneutics of indeterminacy, although they have deconstructed any conception of the novel or poem as an object, and devalorized any received idea of the novel or poem as a literary work, they are equally fetichistic, in their own ways, and for their own ends, in making the novel or poem an occasion for interpretation – however new or autonomous the readings may be in intention. Equally fetichistic, in short, in making novels or poems an object of, the subject for, and finally subject to, interpretation.

Edward Said has made an effort to counter this tendency by attending to what he calls the "worldliness of the text". I would propose that one way of doing the same would be to take fuller account of the writing that composes what we read, whether we call it a work or a text. Any good and interesting critic can make a text about what is written – that is, a critical discourse of interpretation that exploits the indeterminacy of the novel or poem which inspires its own status as a text – but not even the best critic can make the writing that actually constitutes the novel or poem of which he is giving a reading. The writing is precisely that which decomposes and deconstructs and baffles any effort we make to fashion a text – however indeterminate that may seem or profess to be. The writing foils as much as it feeds hermeneutics. Contemporary critics are no better than their precursors, and they may well be worse, in minimizing or ignoring altogether, to use Jean Starobinski's words, *that which is written* in favor of *what it is written about*.

A correspondingly problematic set of issues is raised by the canon-formation that accompanies such a preoccupation with textuality. The texts and authors of received literary tradition are re-ordered into a new canon, or if certain authors are left in place, their writings are re-read according to the canonical assumptions of contemporary criticism – with an emphasis, in the case of novels, on those properties of narrative that suit the going literary theories.

Jane Austen ends up looking the same as, say, Henry James. *Emma* is virtually indistinguishable from *The Figure in the Carpet*, because both texts are about textuality. We become engrossed with questions of narrators, narration, and narrativity in Chaucer, to the exclusion of other

and at least equally interesting concerns. Melville's *Pierre*, being better suited to modern critical suasions, gets promoted as a richer and more compelling text than *Moby Dick*. *Pamela* or *Clarissa* are chosen over *Tom Jones*, and *Tristram Shandy* is elevated to a position of towering pre-eminence – indeed, almost made to stand alone as the only true Text of the group. If we wish to save appearances by accenting the intertextuality of *Tom Jones*, which is anything but hard to do, we exclude those aspects of Fielding that provoked and intrigued Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Henry James. And in performing such criticism we employ techniques of blow-up which enlarge details that may be marginal out of all proportion. We distort, deform, and mis-read in order to make the text new.

Remaking a canon, or making up a new canon, occurs, of course, with every major change in critical persuasions. What may seem objectionable about the canon-formation now in progress is its failure to respect the historicity of individual novels or novelists and their relation to what comes before or after them. One may grant the radically polyphonic quality of the voices in *Ulysses*, but balk at granting the same property to *Emma*, on the grounds that such an act of reading backwards violates the actual historical place of each novel – because it fails to respect the fact of succession in literary history. And it is to secure that historical sense that we fashion such classifications as “classic, realist, modernist, post-modernist”. Although we have all been schooled in the arbitrariness and tendentiousness of periodizations, we continue to fall back on them as a method of placing authors, the saving clause being that the terms define only the “norms” of a period. Such mappings may be useful as instruments of discrimination, or even necessary as enabling acts of critical discourse, but the problem comes when we are beguiled into hypostatizing them as the “history” that dictates the correct reading and placing of individual texts. For who is to say what is at the fringes and what is at the heart of *Emma*? How certain can we be as to what is traditional and what is modernist or post-modernist about the text? And what does it matter?

It is hard to tell. These are open questions. And profoundly problematical. There may be nothing wrong with reading Jane Austen as if she were James or Joyce, even if, prima facie, this would seem to deface her fiction of its distinguishing features, for it is a principle, an axiom, with a number of contemporary literary theorists that texts should be treated synchronically. Barthes goes further in suggesting that all texts should be read as Texts, that is, in contemporary terms, and even more

narrowly, in terms of avant-garde literature. This has its own kind of tendentiousness and it doubtless excludes too much of past fiction that is worth reading. I myself see nothing wrong with reading Jane Austen in the company of James or Joyce, and I certainly concur with the view that she is better read as if she were our contemporary rather than placed among her actual contemporaries, precursors, and successors, but I would demur from reading or placing her fiction strictly in terms of textuality, or any of the other canonical assumptions, the aporias, of contemporary literary theory. I would find that intolerably limiting. To read all texts in these terms is not so much illicit or incorrect as repetitious, facile, and finally uninteresting. To measure and place texts by degrees of textuality or self-reflexivity is indiscriminate – not as we designate discrimination by factitious “historical” hierarchies, but simply dulling and flat. And the result of so much of the same would be intolerable: too much to take. If contemporary criticism, in its zeal for textuality, fails to discriminate what makes Jane Austen’s writing what it is and no other writer’s, that would be one more case – and to my mind the only one that deserves censure – of critics being blinded by excess of insight.

The fact is, of course, that the best critics are amply aware of these and other problems in recent literary theory. Contemporary criticism is far from finished. Even that which I find to be most wanting in contemporary criticism – its failure to take adequate account in theory of what real authors do: writing – even this problem has not gone unnoticed. A recent essay by Paul de Man, entitled “Semiology and Rhetoric”, impresses me as particularly auspicious, given his affiliations and career as a theorist. De Man performs a lovely analysis of a passage from Proust, and he concludes by saying: “A literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode; and by reading the text as we did, we were only trying to come close to being as rigorous a reader as the author had to be in order to write the sentence in the first place.” This comes close to doing the needful thing: putting writing in the first place. Not entirely, because de Man still talks about Proust as a reader rather than a writer, but close enough. Putting the writing of the sentence in the first place. Placing the writer, not the “author”, the *writer*, in the right order of precedence. At the beginning. Not at the origin. At the beginning. Where narratology should start. And perhaps where literary theory must begin all over.

But this, it might be asserted, is where Barthes, in theory at least, has been already. He concludes his essay, “From Work to Text”: “The

theory of the Text can coincide only with the activity of writing.” Exactly – except that critics, even the critics committed to the theory of the Text, continue to write of what the text is written about rather than of that which is written. Moreover, there is a curiously disembodied sense of writing in Barthes’ theory, perhaps even in that of de Man’s. I would stress the material, the physical, indeed the carnal properties of writing. Start, as instance, at the unit of the sentence. Writing (to call upon the intonation of italics to punch through the obvious) writing is *made* of sentences. Writing is *making* sentences. And the sentence, as the American writer William Gass says, “has a rhythm, speed, tone, a flow, a pattern, shape, length, pitch, conceptual direction. The sentence confers reality upon certain relations.” Sentences in fiction do many other things besides, but it is properties such as these that enable sentences to take us endlessly by surprise in literary texts.

Accordingly, I would want to start a reading of Jane Austen’s novels with the proposition that her sentences are unbalanced constructions. Unbalanced and unbalancing – with all the pressure of meaning that can be brought to bear by contemporary literary theory on the beauty of “unbalancing” constructions. This may not sound or look like the author we all know and love: superbly poised, classical in temper, “a paragon of wit, wisdom, and virtue”, albeit by moods teasing and tart in her irony. It would appear to be a newfangled travesty of most of the likenesses, portraits, and images that we are presented with in criticism of Jane Austen. If there is anything more to what I would propose than a play on words, it would make the author very strange. So much the better, for making strange, decomposing the familiar, which Mukarovsky and the Russian Formalists held to be an imperative for poets, may well be a useful beginning for critics of traditional authors. But whether my project would turn out to be faithful or faithless to any image of the author is of little concern to me. I am suggesting that we start talking about the writer and not the author, the writing and not the text. I do not believe that authors should have a place in contemporary narratology and criticism. Authors have become the effigies of critics: their creation and property. I think it is time we restored the name Jane Austen to the writer and returned the text to her writing. The movement “From Work to Text”, the attempt to displace one theory of literature by another, has had tonic effects on the practice of criticism. What I am urging is that we carry that revolution one stage further, “From Text to Writing”. And the place to begin is with the writer, with what real authors are and do. I am pleading for an advance “From Author to Writer”.



Let me stop with an anecdote rather than a demonstration. You are all familiar with the ending of Chapter IV of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where Stephen has his vision of the girl on the strand. The last time I taught the text – it was last semester – I assembled an anthology of various interpretations of the passage, and in discussing these with my students we found ourselves moving through many of the positions of contemporary criticism. Was Hugh Kenner correct in claiming that Joyce was being scornfully ironic at Stephen's expense? Was Wayne Booth right in his interpretation of the evasiveness of Joyce's rhetoric, the equivocation of the dramatized author's irony? Or did the authoritative interpretation lie with the several critics who argued that there is no irony, that Stephen is speaking for Joyce? Which was the correct reading? Who was speaking in the text, and what difference did it make?

By the time we were through, the findings confirmed the original hypothesis (as of course they almost always do in the classroom): this was a text, to quote Frank Kermode's statement of the principle, about which "the illusion of the single right reading is possible no longer." It turned out to be a perfect modern text, in the sense that has been institutionalized by contemporary criticism. To be sure, we didn't rest there. We touched upon some of the problems in recent literary theory I have mentioned here today: the fetichism of the text; the opportunities and limits of interpreting the passage as a self-reflexive text; the question of reading the text in a modern horizon, according to a canon of "modernist fiction" (by comparing it with, as instance, *Great Expectations*); the hazards of blowing up certain features of the text out of all proportion; the question of whether we weren't being too hermeneutical or semiological or narratological, concerned too much with what the text was written about rather than that which was written; and we tried to push our inquiry to an appreciation of the worldliness of the text, and all that has to do with Stephen's time and place, his and/or Joyce's Ireland.

And then, just after the seminar ended, there appeared in the *London Review of Books* a piece on Joyce by Sean O'Faolain. He offered another reading of Stephen's view of the girl on the strand – one more to be added to an already very long series, and no closer to being a conclusive, authoritative, definitive reading than the best of those that had come before it. But what is noteworthy about the piece is not its contribution to correct reading. Nor even its lovely evocation of the author himself. What I find worth remarking is what he said about the *risks* Joyce took in writing that text. "What risks he took, and barely conquered!" Risks,

O'Faolain says, which left Joyce's contemporaries in awe and amazement at his daring.

This is what I think we have lost sight of in criticism: the risks the writing, the writer, takes. We can sort out and cast aside the mythologies of O'Faolain's piece, its personalizations and even its questionable historicity, but there remains a precious, an exigent, reminder of what a writer risks in his writing: a sense of the exhilarating precariousness of his activity.

And lest you think this applies only to the subject of Joyce's text, or that it is a property of modernist writing, I would claim that the same can be said of the writing in a book of a quite different cast and tenor: Jane Austen's *Emma*. I have been sniping away at Wayne Booth, but I have nothing but admiration for his generous appreciation of the risks his author, Jane Austen the writer, braved and conquered in writing that particular novel.

And lest you think I mean, by this insistence on the risks of writing, to re-romanticize the author, to invest the author's role and place with a kind of political gravity, urgency, or glamor, I believe I recognize that nothing "real" hangs in the balance to the risks a writer takes. The stakes are largely verbal and vocational: losing control of the text, chancing unreadability, playing it safe, not taking chances with his talents and powers – risking, in short, a poor performance. The writer risks nothing by his writing. Except his life, except his life. As a writer. In writing.