The Emergent Author: Affective Response to a Friend of a “Very Special, Artificial Kind”

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I could never trust even the most subtle of friends to be offering something interesting and valuable with such an opening – not as I trust Beckett, a friend of a very special, artificial kind: the ‘career-author’.

– Wayne Booth, in A Rhetoric of Fiction, Afterword to the 2nd Edition

I do not read a book; I hold a conversation with the author.

– Elbert Hubbard

An author may merely be a projection we insert into the text, but this interpretive reality does not feel so banal and ephemeral when we are doing it. Nor does it prevent us, though, however sophisticated our reading practices may be, from being influenced in our analysis by the special image we have of the person behind the pen and the feelings, warm or cool, that they excite in us.

We write their names in gold in the paracanons of love; we play out the conversations we would have if we ever met—would they make us laugh, make us feel the bittersweet ambiguity of human affections, momentarily confound us with obscure comments, honour us with the intimate experiences of their lives that have been explored obliquely through the fictionalised accounts we so intimately know, or frustrate us with their ignorance and the shallow depths of their emotional puddles? Of course they would. For these are our special, artificial friends, our authors, and we may feel we know them better than our lovers. Chicago School critic Wayne Booth laments the modern disinclination to talk about books with the “warm metaphor” of “friends,” and agrees with William Ellery Channing’s unfashionable thoughts from 1838 on how, in the best books, “great men talk to us, give us their most precious thoughts, and pour their souls into ours.”

In the solitude of our physical bodies, books offer us the imaginative sympathy of company, and this is not something we need to discard or deny in a misguided attempt at “objectivity.”

While flourishing as a personality in their own right outside of their texts, the author has been so decisively excised from the realm of meaning and interpretation one could be forgiven for thinking, like Graham McCann, that the human face of literature has been “washed away” to make way for language, leaving us—in the quiet aloneness of our reading—with “no-one to live with, and nothing to live for.” McCann argues against the “death of the author” not out of a desire to re-deify the original intention, but seemingly more out of an urge to reinstate the human, affective dimension of the text. This isn’t a question of subordinating individual responses to stated authorial intention: it is not a question of subordinating artwork to artist. Rather, it is making a space for the ethical dimension of other human minds within interpretation; understanding them rather than resisting them, as McCann might say. It is a question of liberating an affective response to the fully-realised human being that may live projected on the other side of the page, both within the text and without it, both perceived through meaning.
and influencing the appreciation of it. Building an even unrecognised emotional connection with our image of the authorial voice speaking ought not to be something fought, denied or relegated to the practice of “amateur” reading (and scorned appropriately); it should be embraced as something that enhances the reading experience, and studied as something that— even unintentionally—alters the meaning we derive from it.

Georges Poulet, from within the Geneva School of phenomenology and reader response criticism, adopts one of the more controversial positions, arguing that the reader gains entirely unmediated access to the author’s thoughts through reading. He may be criticised for believing both in the transparency of language and the existence of an authorial ego in full possession of itself and its pure transmission through that single text, however his position is not too different in substance from that of Schleiermacher and modern hermeneutics, which sees the goal of reading as putting oneself in the mind of the author and understanding them better than they understand themselves.\(^5\) The phenomenology of Poulet may focus more on the psychology of the reader than hermeneutics, and it may eschew the traditional biographical direction of life-to-text just as much as post-1960s literary theories, but across the variety of lenses it is interesting to note that the theme of human communication persists. Narratologists such as James Phelan suggest that readers see narrative as a construction made by a real person and feel themselves coming to know a “version” of that flesh-and-blood self\(^6\)—and psychoanalysis is founded on the belief that, as French psychoanalytical critic Charles Mauron puts it, art shows us what the soul of the artist is like. For them, by losing ourselves in the contemplation of that artistic object, we can “enter the kingdom of the spirit” and explore the animation of the artist’s soul.\(^7\) Second-generation Chicago School readers such as Booth align closely with this, suggesting that the only way a reader can behave “responsibly” to a book is to succumb, surrender entirely to the thoughts of the author, and allow him or herself to be “occupied in the sense of being taken over, colonised: occupied by a foreign imaginary world”.\(^8\) Even structuralism, through displaying how our use of signs demonstrates the way we think and make associations, shows how understanding the way in which the author chooses signs, the patterns that they use and what they signify for that individual, can form for us an intimacy with the way in which they think.\(^9\)

Henry James, for instance, is an author who presents scenes through the lens of a sensitive observer rather than overtly directing readers on his judgments and thoughts, as though to take the authorial voice out of the reading. He calls it a “very obvious truth” in “The Art of Fiction”, however, that “the deepest qualities of a work of art will always be the quality of the
mind of the producer." He also mocks the fatuity of supposed absence, criticising Guy de Maupassant for “entertaining” the belief that he keeps himself out of his books. James argues that they “speak of him eloquently, even if it only be to tell us how easy [. . . ] he has found this impersonality.”

Wilhelm Dilthey categorises works of art as “expressions of lived experience,” which disclose more about the individual uttering them than they do content; more recently, even French literary scholars such as Jérôme Meizoz, educated in the long shadow of Barthes, have published texts urging a re-recognition of the authorial presence. Based on the classical rhetorical distinction between logos, pathos and ethos, as redefined by Dominique Maingueneau in the area of linguistics and discourse analysis, the author is here slowly being readmitted through her or his “effective ethos” as it is inferred and constructed by the reader from the tone of the individual narration.

Empirical analysis on real readers is limited, in terms of studies that home in on the play between author or authorial image and textual appreciation—but what does exist supports this idea of readers often entering into a reading relationship with an author that they see as being as real as a flesh-and-blood human sitting next to them. Some German studies, such as those by Fotis Jannidis, have suggested that this “image of the author as an intentional creator” is a complex one, built of textual, paratextual and extratextual information, and “read-aloud studies” show how both professional and amateur readers talk about both characters as author as “real” people. In conversation, this author can be seen and understood through the artwork, and then lurks behind it to guide and infuse the whole. The 1984 work of Vipond and Hunt involved them asking 150 of their undergraduate students to talk through the experience of reading a short story, from which they identified three types of reading: “information driven,” where readers simply glean information; “story driven,” where they seek to make sense of a narrative; and “point driven,” where they not only try to infer a message from the story, but, in doing so, create a relationship with a real-seeming author behind the text to whom they can impute motives and a personality.

Proust speaks of art as the one way in which we are able to reach into another; to remove ourselves from the limitations of our own monotonous imaginative landscapes and walk through the gardens of another person’s thoughts; “to know what another sees of this universe which for him is not ours, the landscapes of which would remain as unknown to us as those of the moon.” In À la recherche du temps perdu, Proust, for instance, classes reading—that “fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude”—a far greater voyage of discovery than mere physical movement, no matter if it circumnavigates the globe, for it gives us not just
new things to see but new eyes with which to see them.\textsuperscript{17} And so it is with Proust’s art. The details with which his narratives are dressed are often specific to his time and personality—idiosyncrasies most of us could not hope to replicate—but we do not need to, because we can assume his. Reading Proust does not demand that we ourselves be hedonistic, decadent artists, wealthy and effete, living in the dying days of the Belle Epoque in Jolie France, nor that we ignore any of these aspects of his life that we may happen to know. Instead, it allows us to live that particular existence through him and, if we like, even imagine how a subjectivity such as the kind we imagine of him might influence all that which is unspoken between the lines of his prose.

In the 2011 reading circle discussions conducted by Sara Whiteley on Simon Armitage’s poem, “An Accommodation,” readers ranging from hobby readers to university literature professors speak about how they are “writing their own lives” into it when debating the “points” being made by the poem, and they overtly use their personal understanding of the author to lend weight to their critiques. One reader argues that some interpretations are “elevating it rather higher than he [the author] would have wished,” and another insists that the line “this tattered shroud, this ravaged lace” ought to be read in connection with Shakespeare’s \textit{Henry V}, as it echoes wording from it. Despite the fact that no similar reference to lace, shrouds, tattering or ravaging exists in any of Shakespeare’s work and that none of the words appear at all in \textit{Henry V}, she is certain Armitage has made the allusion deliberately, arguing, “I mean he has done that, that’s been in his head.”\textsuperscript{18} It is not important whether or not she is correct: she is living her imaginative displacement so completely she knows without doubt that her intertextual association is Armitage’s association. Armitage has become a fully realised person, and not one spoken of as a projection only of her own mind; rather, he is a fully realised person who is familiar with Shakespeare’s works, and who would use an intertextual reference as a metaphor for his own expression of an intimate relationship. The important thing for her reading experience is that the line is objectively impregnated with the imported Shakespearean meaning as a result.

Anecdotal evidence from the experiences of individual scholars also supports this theory, despite their limited status as merely individual stories. Booth, in \textit{Critical Understanding}, describes one group of students who commune with the author so completely they need to change their interpretation in order to create a more moral and likeable author with whom to have this communion. Booth describes how, after teaching “ygUDuh” by e e cummings, “students who are troubled by cummings’ asking them to be bigoted about bigots and condescending toward poor reading” try to read it
in a way that “rescues” the author; they do not want to feel that cummings is bigoted, so change the interpretation of the poem from the “elitist avantgardism” that Booth suggests—one that looks down on self-satisfied “inferiors” equally as much as on readers not sophisticated enough to disentangle its almost impossible syntax—into a plea for compassion for the bigots. Something in the nature of their study has made them feel they should like cummings, and so the interpretation of the text must, within the logical bounds of its language, make way for that priority. In doing so, cummings becomes for them a much more “defensible” kind of friend. Tolstoy suggests, “Whatever the artist depicts, whether it be saints or robbers, kings or lackeys, we seek and see only the soul of the artist himself,” and Booth’s students may want to feel they know a nice soul rather than a nasty one. It is possible, of course, that this could work the other way. We do not always think our friends—or people of our acquaintance in general—have only the very best qualities, and it may in fact be the case that one of the perceived traits we connect with the most strongly is something less than estimable—snobbery, say, in the case of Nancy Mitford; or machismo, for Ernest Hemingway. In these instances, coming to a text with an authorial preconception not altogether flattering, alternative and even more generous readings may give way in the face of a desire to see the less “nice” soul coming through the writing.

This construction of intimacy between “author” and “reader” owes its foundations to implied authorship, but moves beyond that in practice to embrace the paratextual, multitextual and extratextual, too. My platform is therefore the reader-constructed implied author—what Kindt and Müller call the “postulated author,”^20^ Seymour Chatman the “inferred author” and Gérard Genette the auteur iduit^21^—but I want to spring from it into the much less charted waters of the entity that exists outside the confines of one single text: potentially connecting the traits of these implied or inferred authors, but also potentially reaching outside them. It can be argued that we readers are fundamentally Gestaltist,^22^ with low tolerance for incoherence and arbitrariness. Mauron, for instance, argues that we “repose” in and are nourished by unity because proving that A and B are related by some underlying logic “wards off that fear which every original existence awakes in us – the fear of the unknown.”^23^ Perceptual psychology regards this as a commonplace,^24^ and E D Hirsch in *Validity in Interpretation* explains it simply as the process of analogy and metaphor, in that we want to find commonalities that can be ported from one text into another to help guide our expectations and experiences.^25^ Putting aside any disagreements one might have with Hirsch’s central thesis of intentionality, this reader-centred logic seems fair. We do not read each text as though we have never read
anything like it before and, when we recognise the authorial signature, we feel we have seen how the world looks and is expressed through his or her eyes—we then read that new text as a like product.

Hirsch illustrates this point by comparing his interpretation of John Donne’s “A valediction: forbidding mourning” with that of his students, who read it as a piece spoken by a literally dying man. They are heavily influenced by the deathbed images in the first stanza, of virtuous men whispering to their souls “to go,” and thus find consistent mortality references throughout the poem because that is what they are looking for: the two souls being parted in line 21 signifies the dying breath, and the “roaming” in line 30 shows the ascent of the speaker’s soul to Heaven. The meaning given to the poem from this starting-point actually shapes meaning away from the literal as the interpretation carries through. This reading is valid and internally-consistent (albeit superficial) on a single-text level, however Hirsch finds something different because he feels he knows Donne: he sees the work as an interconnected part of Donne’s oeuvre, in which a number of other Valedictions exist, so reads in an intertextually consistent as well as intratextually consistent way that arrives at by far the more accepted interpretation. From these other poems, Hirsch feels Donne is merely playing on the similarities between death and momentary physical absence—death is just a weekend apart, expressed in hyperbole—and so turns the “teare-floods” and “sigh-tempests” from the tenderness of a dying man trying to give his bereft partner the strength to go on, into a tease of her overreaction. Hirsch calls these kinds of cross-textual interpretations “generic probability judgments,” and gives a range of other examples, such as Wordsworth’s frequent combination of death and nature implying an affirmation of continuing life and belief in “a spark that does not die.”

Myself have had a similar experience with students reading the same “Valediction” for the first time. For my own part, I assume from the beginning—before even starting the poem—that I shall not take Donne literally unless there are clear textual signs to do so, because of my view of him (a view taken from both other poems and various biographical facts of which I am aware) as someone reacting too strongly against neat and conventional poetry and relishing cleverness to say what he means in a calm, manifest fashion. Two-thirds of my class, on the other hand, have had to have it suggested to them that he may not really have been dying.

Booth first explicitly recognises this tendency of readers to build opinions based on the connections between texts in 1979; the earlier The Rhetoric of Fiction makes generalised comments about authorial images as informed by multiple sources, but does not explicitly name this as an image distinct from that based on the lone text. This oversight is remedied in Criti-
cal Understanding, however, in which he posits a “Career-Author” that is the “sustained creative center implied by a sequence of implied authors.” It is essentially the “golden thread” that ties the various implied authors together, giving them a unified voice that emanates from the one coherent personality, and it can either appear fairly consistent from work to work, such as that of Jane Austen, or it can change over time, such as that of Faulkner or Hemingway. Distinct from the caricatures of public myth and marketing, the career-author image is, in Chatman’s words, the “known subset of features, carried over from other, similarly signed texts, which provides readers with narratively significant information as they make their way through the new text.”

This formulation comes much closer to describing that friend of a very special, artificial kind we come to love (or hate) through our reading journeys, yet it still falls somewhat short. Booth’s career-author is based only on the implied authors emanating from the writer’s texts, and there seems to be no version that combines these textual cues with extratextual cues, or with aspects of the one-dimensional public myth of caricature and marketing—even though I suggest we do this. Booth and Chatman’s public myth is thoroughly independent of the works, while their career-author is based solely on their works: the former is text-exclusive, while the latter admits nothing from outside the pages. The texts certainly may, and should, be central—but do we really read with one image in our minds taken only from textual inference, and a second entirely separate one alongside composed solely of the extratextual and biographical? There are also concerns regarding the universality of this identity. In Booth’s words it is the “composite of the implied authors of all his or her works” [my emphasis], however this seems to imply one unified and objective persona that does not come to fruition until the author has ceased to write and is dead. In the real world of reading, however, our image of the author will be both individualised and constantly evolving: we will not each of us be familiar with every piece in an author’s œuvre, nor will we have read texts in the same order, have interpreted them in precisely the same way, or have noticed the same “golden thread” of authorial voice woven through.

It is for these reasons that I wish to suggest an alternative formulation of the “artificial friend”: one that deviates from the “Career-Author,” and that I will call the “emergent author.” As the editor of Style journal, Brian Richardson, notes, the “slippery concept” of a type of “œuvre author” is one of the few areas connected to the theory of implied authorship that to date has been left relatively untouched—in both that edition and in critical discussion in general—thus there is as yet no agreed vocabulary for talking about it. Maria Bortolussi and Peter Dixon make use of an inferred creative figure
with a set of goals and plans that they call the “represented author” in their 2003 study on narrative, however only use the “represented author” as one of the ways in which the reader creates a picture of the narrator (with whom she or he is “having a conversation”), rather than the narrator being used as one of the ways in which the reader creates a picture of the author. Eefjie Claassen, in her 2012 text on author representations in the reading of literary fiction, reports that all study participants could “picture a lively, sometimes detailed, image of the author” and that in read-aloud protocols readers discussed the text as a result of deliberate choices made by the author, and their perception of these choices affected their understanding of the text. Claassen ultimately chooses to narrow her focus to clashes between a reader’s moral stance and the narrator’s moral stance, however, so suggests the existence of a composite empirical-implied authorial figure as a field for further research.

Sophisticated readers may have separate conceptions of the narrative voice or implied author, however these images may coexist with the emergent author without substantially affecting the discussion. The term “emergent” has been chosen instead of “constructed,” “career” or “oeuvre,” because the image of the authorial personality is an evolving one: it emerges from the texts that have been read . . . is added to subsequently by further texts that originally had not . . . is fleshed out by the precise set of extratextual content the reader attributes to truth . . . and is finally nuanced by the order in which the pieces are added and the meaning they hold for the reader at the time and on reflection. The friend of a very special, artificial kind is one that emerges for us gradually over a lifetime, and the intimacy of understanding and expectations is one that is continually changing—phrases such as “oeuvre author” and “career-author” too easily suggest the exclusion of the extratextual, and the belief in some objective image that springs up magically once the author forever finishes writing.

In her criticism of the implied author concept, Susan Lanser argues that there is no transparent and consistent methodology for finding the implied author, and suggests the need for “the equivalent of an S/Z for implied authorship: an effort to trace, sentence by sentence of seme by seme, the ways in which a reader, even a lone narratologist reader, might go about creating the ‘implied author’ from the intersection codes and sign systems that comprise the text.” By implication, the same criticism holds true equally of the emergent author: we do not know how readers construct their image of the author, or, indeed, the way in which this image may shift across both readers and across authors for the one reader. If we are willing to treat this image as a worthy category of recognition and study, the question still remains as to its relationship with the subsequent reading of
texts—the way in which it might shape the appreciation of meaning in those stories, as well as the way in which the appreciation of stories may reflexively shape the image of it. Affectively, all of these will influence the emotional responses caught up in the processes of reading, and the friendship (or enmity) developed therein.

If we are willing to accept that such an affective relationship and humanised, individualised authorial image exists in principle, the next step would be to consider the relevance of it in the practice of reading and criticism. There is evidence that this kind of authorial relationship can be influential in terms of the books we are inclined to choose from the shelf or read in the first place, for instance, but what impact might it have if it were considered in terms of that act into which no author may theoretically enter: the act of close reading. Because of the “rules” of interpretation laid down in the decades spanning the 1940s to the 1970s, that still wield significant influence, I argue this is a question hitherto left neglected or peremptorily dismissed in the negative.

Firstly, sometimes this authorial image can be communicated to us by virtue of the assumed world knowledge woven into the text, thereby causing us to attribute general knowledge from outside the text to the author because something in the story has made us feel they would have been aware of it. Since the attribution of knowledge and intent is, in a way, coming from the text itself, this might be the most subtle form of the emergent author influencing the reading of a work, and perhaps the least likely to trigger a reflexive rejection. Peter Rabinowitz uses *The Catacombs*, by William Demby, for example, to argue in favour of knowledge seemingly imputed to the implied reader by the text causing the reader to feel they can judge something about the knowledge or mindset of the author—and, consequently, influencing the reading. The mood of “impending doom” in *The Catacombs* can be read, in part, as being evoked by subtle references to events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the assassination of President Kennedy that have not yet happened in the storyworld, but that we know will. These events are treated as allusions or expectations rather than overtly-stated threats looming over the narrative, and this communicates Demby’s assumption that we will be acquainted with them; logically, it also communicates his complementary opinion that they are momentous enough crises that it is fair to have this assumption—they burned their impressions into his brain, so he feels instinctively the same imprint has been left on ours. The friend that emerges from this for Rabinowitz is one for whom the Age of Innocence crumbled in the early 1960s, for whom the cocoon of either hope or safety was ruptured, and who felt in retrospect they were on borrowed time beforehand. After all, these references are made
through a newspaper, the objective voice in the world that tells us simply how things are, and not through some romanticised recollection tinged with denial or lingering surprise.

The effect of this image may be an introduction to or enhancement of thematic purpose: that Demby’s work expresses a concern with the disillusionment that reality creates, and the inevitability of its violent breakthrough. The “poisonous potion of anxiety and anguish,” represented by the fifteen newspapers the character “Demby” reads each day, may translate as anxiety and anguish over how the world truly is beneath its veneer of Romanesque picturesque and sexual possibility—after all, a world in which the golden president has had his brains spattered over Jackie’s Chanel skirt-suit is not one that is beautiful and full of hope at heart. This choice, the choice to picture Demby as despairing of hope before it has even been extinguished, then has the ability to set us on one part of interpretation rather than another. The fictionalised narrator Demby could be on a quest for truth and meaning in life, or we could read him coloured by our image of a 1965 post-crises flesh-and-blood Demby as already having given up on it. Doris, moving into the scene with “minute magnetic explosions” and “colourless flames” sensuously shimmering around her body, may then present to us merely as a promise of painful reality to come, if we choose to read her as a product of this disillusioned author. This assumption is of course borne out by the text itself, as she cheats on Demby with the Count, who is himself cheating on his wife with her, and creates a baby that belongs fully in neither man’s affections, as each knows it could be offspring of the other, and it is born dead in the end anyway—but the extent to which we are shocked by this tragic cataclysm will be affected by the way in which we foresaw our Demby finishing the story in the first place. Who knows whether Demby’s affair with her is the romantic escape from sordid reality, or whether the romance itself is the sordid reality, soiled by betrayal. All I know is that the Demby I am reading has an urge to “take to the forest and hunt and be hunted”, not as some ancestral impulse to flee the rigidity of the modern world, but as a desperate but futile quest for some permanent state of blissful denial that cannot be exploded by an assassin’s bullet. Something content and innocent and easy.

Sometimes, however, it is not the absence of material and the assumptions we can interpret into them that form a picture for us of the author’s thoughts, but the way in which he or she paints the picture in the concrete. The specific imagery and senses employed, the restraint or ebullience with which the descriptions are written, and the way in which objects or concepts are anthropomorphised can tell us about the qualities perceived and attributed by the person doing the describing. A piece of litera-
ture can be thought of as a “pure projection” of the author’s mind, but the projection did not materialise out of a vacuum: through our experience of it we can feel the impressions the outside world has had on that mind, and feel the author’s conceptions.

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T S Eliot argues the need for an impersonal theory of art; the second branch of this theory in particular separates the poet from the poem, and the feelings and vision contained in and evoked by the poem from the feelings and vision in the mind of the poet. This suggests an excising of person from creation, and Eliot argues that the poet who is not able to properly effect this is evidence only of poor art: the more perfect the poet, the more the art will be an escape both from individual emotion and individual personality. It seems rather glib to dismiss all writing in which the writer is personally invested as inferior and somehow illegitimate—it becomes almost an argument of definitions, in which one can win the point simply by defining anything opposing it out of the debate—but it also seems to contradict the essence of another literary idea of Eliot’s: that of the objective correlative. Eliot argues the only way true emotion can be expressed through art is through the author finding “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts . . . are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”36 Simply naming emotions is shallow, prosaic and false, labelling the quantity rather than embodying or transmitting it. The selection of an object, however, communicates the subjectivity of the correlation; unless we are prepared to assume that every person reacts in precisely the same way to all stimuli, the choice they make of which object correlates with which emotion will always tell us something about the individualised response of that particular individual. Through the object chosen we can see the underlying value judgments, sensory responses and conscious or unconscious associations that led this particular author to choose the correlative they did; a picture of their own emotional make-up may thus emerge, and cause us to create an image of them that may not only influence the way we read the current piece, but that may subsequently be carried into others. And, ultimately, Eliot argues the separation of poet from poem, but this point of reception is independent of that: even if the poet feels they have subordinated self to work, the reader may still have a constructed authorial self that they put into the work anyway. Some of this image may come from knowledge or elements outside the work, but some may even come from the way the reader perceives the author has crafted the writing itself.

This is the way in which I come to know my pitiful acquaintance, Wilfred Owen, who may stand as an example of a constructed, emergent
authorial self in the mind of the reader having a powerful impact on the direction of possible readings. Owen has become a “friend” of mine through close acquaintance, but the human feeling that exists between us is more complex, and critical, than the more typical pity and acclaim; possibly, as a result, more like the actual relationships between complicated flesh-and-blood people. Philip Larkin, not someone given in his personal life to soft sentiment, celebrates Owen for embodying a “unique element of visionary compassion,” and in this he is not alone. The first major collection of Owen’s poetry was published in 1931, and was accompanied by a memoir in which Owen was described as a “destined being” who regarded the world around him “with the dignity of a seer.” Wisdom beyond his years is frequently imputed to him, and nowadays he is commonly taught as a paragon of “starkly realistic” description and the “straightforward reporting of experience”—as though merely a neutral lens to the horrors of the Great War. Any person approaching his work with this image of the man in mind will thus be vulnerable to the temptation—even unconsciously—to read the poems themselves in a way that confirms it, endowing them with the power, pathos and sincerity that the persona suggests will be present. And yet, a different picture of the man may lead to a very different reading of the poems; or, a virgin reading of the poems may influence the creation of a different image of the man. It is possible that the man in this case may be nowhere near as enlightened or sensitive, and may in fact be much more fallibly and weakly human.

Even before he arrives at the front, Owen writes as one consumed by the orgy of sensory experience the world has to offer. In his pre-war poetry, eroticism is present in leaves, “murmuring by myriads in the shimmering trees”; bees, “shaking the heavy dews from bloom and frond,” then presumably buzzing away with their round little bodies moistened and glistening; fellow boys, “bursting the surface of the ebony pond” and gifting the hungry eye of the poet teasing “flashes” of “fleshes”; and bodies “gleaming with wetness to the morning gold . . .” as the poem trails off suggestively. J Loiseau, writing in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War—something powerful and relevant enough to influence the person he wanted to see fill the shape of a polemically anti-war poet—credits Owen with an almost superhuman transcendence. “Never did he descend to actual life,” he writes of him; “As an artist, he lived in splendid isolation, escaping,” and, “Thus sheltered, he chiseled his descriptions or dreams into poems graceful and musical,” likening him to Milton in serving his “apprenticeship to poetry […] with the same lyrical fervor and seriousness of purpose.” Loiseau also compliments Owen on his poetic “restraint,” which would seem in keeping with the kind of artist who rose above the base passions of mortals, yet at
the same time is able to admit the “orgy of luscious terms and images,” particularly in his early poetry, betraying his “voluptuous delight in handling beautiful material.” Loiseau wants to see Owen as a tender wood nymph in the vein of Milton’s Shakespeare, and this enables him to read the later war poems as instances of a fragile passion burning hot in the fires of unthinkable carnage and despair—lighting the way of hope with its defiant horror. Loiseau can put aside the voluptuousness of the earlier verse, weighed down with luxurious verbs and “over-refined” epithets, and read the poems from the trenches as complete departures for which the earlier innocence and immaturity only add “a deep element of pathos to the tragedy of his life.” “He had been born for peace,” Loiseau writes, but that, eventually:

War shattered his House Beautiful, tore to shreds the ‘rosy mists’ of his experience, and the artist receded as the soldier strode forward. Or rather, the artist we know was silenced, and another poet was born, whose work stands in complete contrast with what had come before.

With this volte-face of personality in place, the war poems then do not need to answer the question of where the immaturity, arguably overworked evocation and hedonistic revelry might have gotten to. This is not the only way in which Owen the man can be conceived, however, and, while it may be a popular interpretation, it is not the only way in which his war poems can be read. The choice to see him as a seer torn from poetic musings, floating above the turmoil of this mortal place, is open to readers, but this is not an image that comes unambiguously from the texts themselves—rather, the texts offer a range of interpretations that can be selected by the reader to confirm either their expectations for the poems, or their expectations for the man. In this case, a second, equally valid, reading may be taken from among the many: that of the tender soul, titillated by the summer joys vital and fresh and alive around it at home, and that does not mute its titillation once it finds itself in the middle of a battlefield: when the bees and boys and leaves are replaced by torn limbs and staring eyes and self-inflicted gunshot wounds. Here, the previous artist has in no way been “silenced” by the change of subject matter and environment; instead, luxurious hedonism and eroticised description continue.

In this alternative reading of the poems, directed by the alternative impression of the author, we may see a marked lack of maturity and self-restraint: two qualities I feel certain a seer should possess. “Anthem for doomed youth,” for instance, is an exercise in lack of subtlety, as, from the title, this alternative Owen cannot decide by which means he would like to
make his point. The tender expectations of the sonnet form are dashed by
the incongruous subject matter of death and futility, while the same point is
made by the use of “anthem”—a rousing chorus of celebration, encourag-
ing everyone who hears it to sing along with pride—ironically preaching
condemnation and the fatalism and futility of “joining in.” This sonnet/dirge-
elegy/anthem is not content to rest on the pathos of “youth,” being so inno-
cent and impotent as to elicit our heightened sympathy, it must also drive
this home with the insistence that they are “doomed”: the ominous asso-
nance of “ooooh” evoking the heart-rending terror of fate, and reminding us
before we have had time to forget it that these poor young boys suffer not
only the powerlessness of youth but also the futility of pre-determination.
So unimportant are they, we soon learn they are slaughtered not as boys
but as obedient cattle, with bells placidly tinkling around their necks—in
tune, we presume, with the choirs of shells filling the air around them. The
exact nature of these singers is spelled out as “shrill, demented choirs,” of
course: lest any of us had pictured each soldier with his own retinue of an-
gelic tenors brought over from England. This is not an isolated instance of a
want of self-restraint, however: the title of “Dulce et decorum est,” using a
dead language to echo the dead soldiers and dead sentimtent, is insistently
repeated in the final two lines and introduced with the overt signposting of it
being an “old lie” we should consider as false as Rome’s ancient belief in
its invincibility. This signalling of the “lie” is needed, naturally, in case we
had not yet been able to grasp the scornful irony of the verse up to that
point—or perhaps it is to create a neat rhyme with “mori,” as “glor-y” simply
doesn’t cut it.

In “Greater love” Owen contrasts the “pure” love of the soldier with the
cheaper love of romantic passion. This choice of comparison could give us
pause for thought. Although he refers to it as “love pure” and “fierce love,”
Owen never states exactly what the object of this soldierly love is: what
pleasure it is he derives, what satisfaction, what it is he adores. The hollow
cause and machinery of patriotic war is mocked elsewhere in Owen’s poe-
try, and before he enlisted he commended the guns on effecting “a little
useful weeding” among the undeserving “lusty louts playing football”
fighting at the front—love of country and camaraderie may both therefore
dismissed as the objects of this “greater” passion, depending on the mate-
rial the reader is using to form their image of the author and background to
this individual text. Could it be, then, that the pure love of the soldier is real-
ly infatuation with the soul-trembling pathos of sacrifice itself? It is hard to
think what else is left. “Greater love” certainly starts with the pious allusion
of men kneeling down and kissing the stones of the ground, and other
works such as “Disabled” paint vivid pictures of the suffering martyr, jeal-
ously watching the “strong men that [are] whole,” and virtually wallowing in the self-pitying nobility that martyrdom brings: “Why don’t they come?” I want to read Owen’s “Greater love” as a reminder of what is important in life—the enormity of mass sacrifice and the ultimate gift of one’s life for another are, while our everyday trials, petty heartbreaks and excitements, our clandestine crushes, are not—but it troubles me to see how much pleasure Owen derives from the horror, and the picture of him built by his pre-war poetry seems only to enhance this perception. Surely it should ring more of bittersweet determination and acceptance than of eroticised pride, aestheticised misery and self-aggrandising pity: surely, in other words, it shouldn’t feel like Owen is actually getting off on it. Yet the trembling of “knife-skewed” limbs, “rolling and rolling” around in abandon after they have been “speared” and entered, is described as “exquisite”; the “dear, soft, murmuring” voices of the dying emerge from the tenderness of their “pitiful mouths”; and the pale skin of their untouchable bodies harbours large, hot, full hearts that have been “made great with shot.” The titillation of suffering can also be seen in other poems, such as “Dulce.” There, the “drunken” soldiers, after an “ecstasy of fumbling,” manage to fit their “clumsy helmets” just in time—except for one piteous boy, whose clumsy fingers are too slow to arm him against the “softly dropping” hoots calling from behind, and who is now doomed to appear in Owen’s sweaty, smothering dreams night after night, yelling, plunging and choking. These soldiers have not just suffered le mort; they have suffered la petite mort, and I cannot see the silence of the former artist in it. For me, no “complete contrast” has been achieved.

The subject matter of these later poems is far removed from the careless summer days of revelry and languishing in the shade of a tree amid the vitality of plants and insects, yet Owen’s arousal level is just as high: rather than being a tone chosen deliberately for its appropriateness to the topic, it therefore appears to be more of an idiosyncratic emotional response to the stimuli, bleeding through the style. That the stimuli in his war poems is bloody death, torturous agony and screaming pain is what lends perverseness to the fact that Owen’s response is the same. My special, artificial “friend” called Wilfred Owen is neither seer nor compassionate realist; instead, he is an immature boy, using a sledgehammer to crack a nut, and titillated by the exquisite agony and the exclusivity of suffering the same as by frolicking nakedness in nature. I use “friend” here as perhaps too casual a term for someone for whom I have some impatience and critical feelings, but what else to use for an intimate relationship based on human connection and at least a perception of the understanding of some essential self?
Owen has provided private letters, available to the public in recent years, that might further inform our emerging image of him and, consequently, our readings of his work, but I have limited myself mainly in this analysis to reading intertextually across his oeuvre. This need not, however, be the case. In addition to the purely textual cues that feed into our feeling of the author, Frank Cioffi argues that there is “an implicit biographical reference in our response to literature”; that it, indeed, forms part of our very concept of what literature means. Not only may we use the extratextual to shape the meaning we find in an author’s works, but we may also use the meanings we find in their works to feel we understand how they process and perceive life outside them. This conscious temptation or unconscious habit may be considered a shameful transgression, but the limited empirical studies that currently exist—such as that published by Claasen, in which readers frequently envisaged an active agent as the creator of the text, formed in part by what they knew of them from outside their works—suggest we are not each alone as recalcitrant. Frederic Regard, French critic schooled in post-structuralist discourse by the intellectual revolutionaries he calls the “gods” of his student years, admits that he interlaces biographical information with textual cues, and asks (semi-)playfully for forgiveness: “I realise this is a shameful, despicable habit, which consequently I choose to confess publicly (very likely in the hope of absolution). […] For I have sinned, and, worse still, found it pleasurable.”

Charles Mauron, for instance, derives a very specific meaning from Stéphane Mallarmé’s writing based on the fact that Mallarmé lost his beloved sister, Maria, at the age of fifteen; although it does not explain every passage, he submits that it is “everywhere present.” Because of his knowledge of this childhood tragedy, Mauron attributes to the recurring Mallarméan symbols of flowers, musical instruments, light and windows, the “constant architecture” of his obsession with his dead sister and, before her, his dead mother; Mauron says, in fact, that as a result of this knowledge and connection, he “can scarcely think of Mallarmé’s windows or his white pages without seeing in filigree the tomb they stand for.” In doing this, though, he rejects other, equally valid interpretations; because of the image he has of Mallarmé, consumed by his sister’s death more than any other fact of his life or abstract question, Mauron unravels the meaning of his poems in one very specific way, and not in others. Instead than Mallarmé’s windows representing the barrier between him and the world of the departed that he simultaneously wants to join and flee from, for instance, they could signify the unreachable artistic perfection that exists in his mind but not, somehow, as hard as he tries, in the words he scratches on the page. A Mallarmé obsessed with the afterlife would probably mean the for-
mer, but a Mallarmé more concerned with his own work product and legacy may not.

Rather than the lines of Mallarmé’s mind and poetry converging “toward the past and toward death,” as Mauron reads them, when I read them they converge toward this unattainable, impossible future of sublime poetry. In “Don du poème,” when Mallarmé writes how the “dawn hurled itself on the angelic lamp,” “through the window as if burnished with spices and gold,/Through the icy panes alas! still bleak” [my translation], I can see him sitting in his study, hunched over his writing table after yet another frigidly barren night of trying to write, looking out the window to see the spice and gold of the burnished sunrise reach in to illuminate his bleak page; or, in “Las de l’amour repos,” when he writes how he must “hollow out by vigils a new pit each night/in the greedy, frigid earth” of his brain, as he is reproached “by friends, by the past, by genius” and even his “lamp which nonetheless knows [his] agony” [my translation], I read his struggle with failure that the endless white page affirms for a writer. Finally, when he asks what he can “say to this Dawn” when “out of fear of its deathly pale roses,/The vast graveyard will merge these empty holes” [my translation], I feel his fear of reaching a night when all those blank pages join together. I do not, as Mauron does, see death and the corpse of sister Maria beckoning to him.

Why, therefore, this difference, when both of us are reading from the same text and the same primary internal evidence? Perhaps, unlike Mauron, I was not aware that the poet lost his sister when I was searching for an explanation of Mallarmé’s obscure metaphors, so that did not form part of my emerging authorial conception and was thus left out of my reading. Perhaps I more had in mind Mallarmé’s concern that “all earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book,” and that he was terrified to think of the artistic qualities that feat would require and that he was sure he did not possess; or, perhaps Mallarmé’s grumble to his friend Aubanel, eight days after the birth of his daughter in 1864, that “I have not yet resumed work; with her cries this bad baby has banished Hérodiade, of hair cold as gold, heavy-robed and sterile,” and four months later, to another friend, Cazalis, that “I do not enjoy all this enchantment that hovers about a cradle […] I am too much the poet and too taken with Poetry itself to savour, when I cannot work, an inner happiness which seems to me to take the place of the other happiness, the great happiness, the one the Muse gives . . .” My image when encountering his work may have been closer to the observation made of him by critics such as Marshall C Olds, that he was “haunted throughout his life by the thought that he would never finish his poetic task, but not because he would be robbed of any posthumous
glory. Rather, it was because something necessary might be left unsaid.⁵⁷ Regardless, I did not import the fact of his sister into my readings. Mauron did, and does. The window, instead of representing a barrier between the poetic imagination and the poetic reality, as it does for me, therefore represents for him a barrier between the living body of the poet and the afterlife he longs despite himself to join; instead of the graveyard depicting an all-too-prosaic fear of inadequacy and garden-variety writer’s block, a desire for tomb-vanquishing poetic immortality, for him it depicts an obsession with the graveyard in which lies Mallarmé’s sister and mother and the poet’s ultimate drive towards death. For Mauron, the decisive feature in his appreciation and understanding of the artistic, is the image he builds from the biographical.

Because he is a pluralist who likes to straddle and blend theoretical positions, Booth ponders the chasm stretching between the two popular “poles” of aesthetics: on the one side—living in East Egg, personified as the Toms and Daisys of the world—an artwork is an “expression of the author’s creative powers, of a kind of enveloping imagination, the author’s creative self,” and thus we derive from it aspects of the genius of intention embedded in it from the start; on the other side, in the West Egg of Gatsby, who believes we are never tied to our past and can always remake ourselves, an artwork is “autonomous, divorced from the author’s intentions” and can tell us nothing about the mind that created it.⁵⁸ In W K Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s words, it is "detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it."⁵⁹ One of the frustrations Booth has with this dialectical view is that it demands we argue in favour of one and demonstrate the falsity of the other, or achieve a magical compromise that reconciles both poles into one single position that somehow dissolves their differences. What this seems not to leave room for, however, is the most pluralistic notion of all simultaneously: the “well-wrought urn” at the same time as the “fiery clay.”⁶⁰ Booth argues that “[a]ny novel, good or bad, ‘really is’ many different things,”⁶¹ and a gesture of idiosyncratic thought and personality is simply another of these things that it really is. No more valid than any of the others, as there are many questions about the meaning of a text it cannot answer, for which it does not provide the tools; but also no less valid, as it finds meanings that other frameworks and forms do not attempt to look for. There is no reason it needs to be denied.

The authorial image arising from the text, the emergent author, is thus simply one component of the way in which we judge and derive meaning: one way in which we connect with a text and enrich our experience of it and
apprehension of its value. Readers such as Mark Schorer are quite open about what they are doing: he explicitly connects his observation of Austen’s “dominant metaphorical quality” with the probable “habit of [her] mind, the very grain of her imagination”; while others are more subtle in their associations. Implicit in critical readings, however, will often be personal connections that guide the interpretation—such as Cleanth Brooks relying on his image of the emergent author to aid him in his reading of Donne’s “The Canonisation.” Instead of reading the base paradox as a parody of both love or religion, each being a cheap imitation of the other, based on his conception of Donne being a man who takes “both love and religion seriously,” Brooks determines that the paradox is actually one that reconciles Donne’s equal reverence for both secular and sacred devotion, subtly referencing his conception of the man in his justification of the poetic exegesis.

The New Criticism and French post-structuralism both put paid to the idea that one studied the “shell” of a text only in order to form an idea of the “animal” of mankind, as Hippolyte Taine argues in the 1864 introduction to the History of English Literature. Yet the author persists, and persists outside this narrow and anachronistic view of his or her usefulness. Taine calls both shell and document merely “dead fragments and of value only as indications of the complete living being” and it is considered a “mistake” to study the document for the mere document’s sake, as though art has no business to simply “be.” Returning to this ideology is undesirable, but there must be other needs fulfilled by developing an authorial image and friendship that do not involve invalidating the value of art for art’s sake. Mauron argues that the “average man” will love something and think it brilliant simply because it has a particular creator, saying that the “logic of the heart is alone adequate when life, love and creation are involved.” The average reader will therefore be predisposed to love something because of the close, personal affection he or she has for the emergent author, and this may be reason enough to justify examining the way in which that image is formed.

An even stronger argument, however, lies in the light the notion of an emergent author can shed on the construction and appreciation of meaning. Luther’s dictum, “Qui non intelliget res, non potest ex verbis sensum ellicere,” tells us that he who does not understand the subject matter is unable to make sense of the words, and the theory of the hermeneutic circle shows us how the parts help form our picture of the whole while having an understanding of the whole assists us in making sense of the parts. Chatman gives an example of the same plot event occurring in two different novels, one by Ernest Hemingway and the other by Henry James: a main
character remains silent in response to a direct question. In the absence of any manifest difference, how are we meant to differentiate between significance? Chatman uses the “Career-Author” as one way in which this can be done, explaining how his knowledge of Hemingway’s “hero code,” combined with the experience of other texts in which Hemingway heroes commit similar acts of rudeness, leads him to a hypothesis that the reticence signifies a “heroic stoicism” and not a well of thoughts too nuanced and complicated to be spoken. In Chatman’s view, the authorial image is an important constraint on possible meanings that can and should be derived from an author’s work: in Booth’s words, this exploitation of the “extrinsic” image is our way of trying to read the story as well as we can, of “using our postulates about how a certain kind of human being might address other human beings.” The emergent author helps us to better understand the subject matter, and as a result we might be better able to understand the words. Context may help determine meaning. Finally, if we do not feel comfortable using an authorial image to place limitations or constraints on the meaning of the text, if we believe the text ought to be able to speak entirely for itself and that the same deductions ought to be able to be made about both silent protagonists in Hemingway and James if the words allow, we might instead admit our friendship for no reason other than simple human connection and understanding. John Steinbeck, in his 1938 journal, writes that “[i]n every bit of honest writing in the world [. . .] there is a base theme. Try to understand men; if you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love . . .” Which, if we follow it, returns us to Proust’s hymn to art as the sole medium by which multiple worlds make themselves at our disposal.

Many centuries after the “fire from which they emanate” is put out, our authors are still able to send us their ‘special radiance’ and provide us with “that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude.” It is worth examining the emergent author not only because it aids us in deciphering meaning and making sense of literature, but also because it may help us to understand and perhaps view, with a special type of honesty, another person.

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NOTES


2 Commonly attributed to Hubbard; for instance, in support of the argument that “You’ll get far more out of what you read if you think of it as having a conversation with the author” in Pat Williams and Peggy Matthews Rose, *Read for Your Life: 11 Ways to Transform Your Life through Books* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications Inc, 2007), 188.


9 See, for example, the work of Barthes during his structuralist phase in the 1950s and 1960s. Language is described as “never innocent”, because it is not transparent and different writers may use the same language but have very different “modes of writing”; in Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 16.


14 Fotis Jannidis, "Zwischen Autor Und Erzähler," *Autorschaft, Positionen Und...*


As summarised in Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, Handbook of Narrative Analysis, Frontiers of Narrative (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 17.


Richter, “Chicago School of Neo-Aristotelian Literary Theory,” 111.


“I made a similar sort of generic probability judgment about ‘A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal’ when I observed that, in the rest of Wordsworth’s poetry written at the same period, the connection between the death of a person and the processes of nature (‘earth’s diurnal course’) almost always implies an affirmation of continuing life, a spark that does not die.” Ibid., 193.


Brian Richardson, “Introduction. The Implied Author: Back from the Grave or
Simply Dead Again?," Style 45, no. 1 (Spring, 2011): 8.


35 Ibid., 12.


40 Ibid., 97-100.

41 Ibid., 97-98.

42 Ibid., 98.

43 Ibid., 97.

44 Ibid., 99.

45 Paraphrased from the poem.


47 Claassen, Author Representations in Literary Reading.


49 Mauron, Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Mallarmé, 10, 1.

50 Ibid., 34.

51 Ibid., 200.

52 Ibid., 201.

53 Also from ‘Las de l’amor repos’.


Ibid., 66.


Booth, “'The Rhetoric of Fiction' and the Poetics of Fictions,” 108-09.


Booth, “'The Rhetoric of Fiction' and the Poetics of Fictions,” 110.

Ibid.


Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 76.

Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, 89.


The first half of the sentence is my paraphrasing of Proust, using Proust, *On Reading Ruskin*. 