Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate

Fall 2002

Filling in the Blanks: Juxtaposition in Creative Writing

Carl Yost

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Filling in the Blanks: Juxtaposition in Creative Writing
Carl Yost

ENG
497
Portfolio

Fall
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Christopher Couch, Advisor

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\[ \lim_{x \to \infty} f(x) = 12 \]

I am y
am I:

happy \( y = 4 \)
Call me frivolous
content \( y = 10 \)
As a saccharine cow stands by a fence and munches cud
peaceful \( y = 11 \ rac{1}{2} \)
Perhaps a white flag is the best plan of attack
serene \( y = 11.5 \)
And cannot color outside the limiting lines

I am 12.

**Daisy-Plucking**

Dim GirlA As String
Dim GirlB As String
Dim A As Integer
Dim B As Integer

Private Sub cmdGo_Click()
    A = 10
    B = 0
    GirlA = txtGirlA.Text
    GirlB = txtGirlB.Text
    DoILoveA (GirlA)
End Sub

Sub DoILoveA(Name)
    Do
        If A >= 1 Then 'I love her
            MsgBox "I love you, " & Name & "!"
        Else
            B = 10 'I love her not
            DoILoveB (GirlB)
        End If
        A = A - 1 'Then again...
    Loop
End Sub
over cheese and crackers and the expedition
set forth, under the barbed-wire
border of the enemy territory
to the desolate wasteland mountain of doom
where the seagulls circled overhead to feast
on the bones of the ones who Didn’t Make It.
But there was gold in them there hills,
so we braved the cougars
and desert heat and the attacks
of the savage Injuns until
the depths of the mine laid bare her ten-cent treasure:
a golden bar wrought
of aluminum and emblazoned with
a scarlet Coca-Cola
that dribbled
sticky sweet amber from its mouth
when we raised it to the sunlight in victory.

Quotes taken from “Pulp Fiction” (Miramax, 1994), an Arthur Andersen statement to the SEC (October 2002), and maytag.com

Errata

I.

Brittany in fog:
swimmer’s toil between there and
alabaster cliffs.

II.

I saw a ship that bobbing and tossing is matching intently the ocean that swaying is moving
beneath it composing a harmony naturally fusing the seas with synthetic metallic and
built by a human hand fish in spectacular glorious—
common,
homogenous,
Monotony—

But I also see another boat arching through the swells, which motion, ill-timed, maximizes froth
and results in a shudder below-decks, rousing the crew, seamen and captain to speculate
whether the motion is conducive to actual sleeping.

III.

Watchmaker, watchmaker, make me a clock,
Crack my face open to see how I tock.

I watch an erosion conversation
lift the dirt from the top of a rock
and carry it, swirl it about a moment,
juggle it amid the common distance,
to heave against the other rock...

from lunch to dinner and back to lunch again
artichoke to artichoke
Today's special ... Gumbo

Watchmaker, watchmaker, make me a clock,
Crack my face open to see how I tock.

VIII.

I watch a man and woman coursing down the street in two organic rhythms walking perfectly metronomed among the crowd anonymous who reside and slide inside a smoothly sailing herd until one, forgetting the maritime rules of right-of-way, tracks left to cause collision with the other, who, forgetting the maritime rules of right-of-way, tracks left to cause collusion until both keep coming together—

"Excuse me again."
"We have to stop meeting like this."
"I don't mind."
"Well then, carry on."

hull strikes shuddering hull on undulating ocean water, repeating ruddered wrongs and ending in a
shrieking twisted fiberglass pass before sliding by in a spray of salty waves and concluding

it is right to trust the tension

IX.

locusts storm the sand
and face the leaden June rain:
France is fully known.


Carl Yost

Physics Final Exam

Charles Bernstein is playing pool and lining up his final shot. According to the following free-body diagram, what are the possible vectors that would allow him to place the eight ball, Reconstruction, into one of the four pockets at the middle or far right of the table? You will have 1 hour to answer, and partial credit will be given.
with perfect rhyme and time that wrecked ideal telling needed burnt to turn the tide and learn beside that crap must pass to lead the language back as sin in full may keep the sinner's soul.

Extra Credit:

T  F  Charles Bernstein's theories are valid.

Roads Taken

Two roads diverged in the yellow trees,
And knowing I now could travel each
With quantum physics, where'er I please,
I went beyond what normal eye sees
And let my others extend my reach;

I took one road, and the other too,
And shuffled away the single curse.
Where all of me traveled, I can't construe
Or see the things my selves then knew
While skipping along the multiverse.

Who knows what things have transpired there?
The pope has died, the sun gone black,
Now we breathe in peppermint-scented air,
Our kittens are slaves, our frogs grow hair,
The Earth was subdued by Martian attack.

I know my alternate selves are yet,
In a parallel other place,
Dividing the lives they each beget—
This metaphysic truth is set
As long as time flows in 3-D space.

Running in October

swish swish
thump thump
swish swish
thump thump

running pants in constant touch
and shoes that land in rhythmic punch

pounding out the paces
in a shuffle-stepping rhyme

gavestones on the left:
they say fini,
thump
swish

starboard autumn life,
heralding the start of something new,
you He made not

you are that man
are he who asked
that who made you
man asked you not

By the Wayside

It always surprises me how quickly the polished black granite sneaks up on you. Laughter skips across the grass before I realize I’m already upon it, the oblique wall gradually growing upward as the ground slopes away. It’s beautiful, really—the Wall devoted to Vietnam. I’ve always wondered why they polish it to make the reflections so decisively clear, as if clarity was a hallmark of the war. But looking around at the characters populating this corner of the capital, I can tell that clarity isn’t necessarily what people come here seeking. Sure, some are here to remember fallen comrades or family, but many come simply because their school trip made them; others because they appreciate the artistry of the stones; others because this is a public park and it gives their children space to run in circles; and others because they’re tourists, and well, this is just what you do when you’re a tourist.

As for me, I come to watch the people.

I first notice a man in a patriotic top hat who carries a collection of Fisher-Price colored balloons that complement the pale blue sky and simple black rock. He walks past a young woman with her child, hoping to hear the familiar strains of “Mommy, I want a balloon”; this pair, however, is far too immersed in their reflections to notice. As the child sits in the crook of her arm, the twenty-something mother points to a name on the wall and says in a hushed whisper, “that’s your grandaddy there,” and the infant stretches out an arm to finger the grooves in the stone and caress the memory of a grandfather never known. The balloon man walks on wearing a smile, comfortable in the knowledge that he won’t wait long before making a sale.

It’s warm today, the kind of warmth that nestles around me like a blanket when I first get into bed. As if in reply to the weather, the cars on the distant street, half-hidden by the trees between us, honk their happy horns as they amble about the city on their way to lunches and careers and homes. The meaty scents and the voices of the hot dog vendors mingle with the whirring vehicles in a far-off cacophony of motion and vitality.

But a contented calm sits around the people at the wall. A man breaks pieces off his hot dog bun and casts them like pennies into the miniature ocean of shimmering pigeon heads clustered around his feet. A group of Cub Scouts—non-uniformed but betrayed by their behavior—ignores the pleas of their chaperone to behave like little adults, preferring instead to run up and down the sidewalk with airplane wings for arms, or to tackle each other like puppies into the manicured grass. Amidst the commotion, two older men stand side by side and stare at the same point on the wall, until one wipes a single tear from his cheek and they embrace for a long moment.

“Makes you think, doesn’t it?”

I turn suddenly to see standing beside me a man I hadn’t noticed. He wears a Navy baseball cap emblazoned with the name, number, and likeness of a ship, hands thrust into the pockets of his bright red windbreaker. “Yeah,” I answer remotely.

He looks at one of the black chiseled names, touches it tenderly. “That was my brother. Is my brother, I suppose.” His voice trails off as he gazes deep beneath the surface the stone in front of him. With nothing to say, I simply stand before the name indicated and nod.

He faces me and stares intently into my eyes, looking for something, some sign that I understand and care. After a long pause, “I’m glad you came,” he tells me, then turns steadily and walks away without another sound.

--

It surprises me how quickly the lonely gray bend in the highway sneaks up on you, too.
“Have you come prepared?”
“I have.”
“And your second?”
“This man who stands beside me shall occupy the position.”
Perfunctory remarks acknowledged the seconds, both of them already known to the two principals.

“Allan.” “Leon.” There were no strangers here.
Stefan noticed the shoebox in Leon’s hands and a smile spread to his face. “Have you no suitable container for your pistol?”
“I will require no container apart from your coffin, when you lie dead at my feet,” Horatio said, eyes flashing. Stefan two, Horatio zero.
“I fight for the honor of my maiden today. Remember that in your defeat,” Stefan said.
“Maiden she is no longer, though having tasted her ‘honors,’ I have had all the victory I need.”
Horatio’s twisted grin only pierced Stefan further, striking him mute with rage.
“Perhaps you should inform her that drugs cloud the mind. Though I must say they impair the pleasures of the body not a whit.”
“Bastard!” Stefan ripped off his sunglasses and made to lunge at Horatio, restrained only by the power of Allan’s grip. Stefan two, Horatio one.
“Control thyself” Allan said. “Save it for the field of battle.”
Stefan made no reply, save a vicious stare into the eyes of his opponent.
“Arm us,” Horatio commanded.
The two principals glared at each other while their seconds lay their parcels on the ground. Allan flipped open the latches of the brown case and removed Stefan’s .38 caliber revolver with an extended barrel. The nickel plating had been recently buffed to a crystal shine, the handle wrought of ivory and ornamented with etchings of elephants, Hindu temples, and other relics of the British empire. The grandfather who had given it to Stefan had never intended for it to be actually fired, but no other weapon would do for such a noble purpose. Slowly, deliberately, hands shaking imperceptibly, Allan loaded bullets into the chamber one by one with great ceremony.
Leon pulled the lid off the Adidas shoebox and took out the jumbled mess of holster and charcoal-black Beretta 9mm. The last allowance check that Horatio’s father had sent was adequate enough to cover the hasty purchase of the handgun and holster, but the bribe required to make the clerk skip the waiting period and background check had used up all the extra money with which he had intended to purchase a foam-padded case. The complete image was just as important as the weapon itself, and Stefan had unfortunately won that battle. No matter. Bullets, not briefcases, would determine the final victor. Leon jammed the magazine into the base of the grip with a satisfying click, cocked the slide, and placed the weapon in the holster.
Stefan and Horatio had not even so much as twitched, eyes transfixed on those of the other. They mechanically raised their arms in unison and allowed their seconds to clip their gun belts around their waists. When they had done so, Stefan and Horatio lowered their arms, keeping eyes level.
“May the best man win,” Stefan said between locked teeth, extending his arm for a handshake.
“I shall,” Horatio replied, handshake denied. Stefan two, Horatio two. Tie game.
“Allan, remind us now of the proper procedure.”
“Oh, okay,” Allan squeaked. His voice hadn’t sounded like that since junior high. Clearing his throat, he continued in a normal voice. “Challengers shall stand back to back. Leon shall count out the paces, numbered one through ten. Upon sounding the number ten, both challengers are free to rotate and fire one shot. Should both challengers miss, they shall return to this spot for a second attempt. Have either of you any questions?”
“No, good sir,” Stefan said.
“No,” Horatio said.
“Then Leon and I shall remove from this spot and he shall begin counting. Good luck, sir,” Allan said to Stefan, eliciting a nod.
As Allan and Leon walked briskly to a place approximately thirty yards away, Stefan and Horatio moved to stand back to back, shoulders blades and tailbones touching. Static sparked briefly between them.
“One!”
Stefan stepped forward one pace, feeling his opponent break contact with his back.
“Two!”
beside him, and a detached portion of his brain realized that he must have pulled the trigger of his own gun during the fall. I wonder where the bullet went, he mused to himself.

A piercing flame was suddenly kindled in his left shoulder, a tiny white sun of searing flesh.

“Aw, fuck!” The rest of his mind finally caught up in real-time.

Stefan spasmed into a fetal position but just as quickly wrenched out into a full extension, writhing in the grass while clutching his shoulder. “Fuck ... me!”

Horatio’s right arm remained poised in the horizontal. The breeze tousled his hair. A faint hint of gunpowder bit into his nose as he stared at the figure thrashing in the grass twenty paces away. A bird flew overhead. Leon and Allan rushed over to Stefan. The weight of the gun slowly dragged Horatio’s arm down to his side. The weapon twisted on its trigger guard around his index finger before falling into the grass.

He walked the twenty paces, feet encased in lead, to the other three. As he approached, he saw the grass stained black with the blood that spilled from Stefan’s shoulder. Horatio’s throat was suddenly stopped up, and he turned aside to vomit onto the green. Wiping the sour strings of bile and chalupa from his lips, he stood up. A puke-flavored “Oh shit” escaped from his lips.

“Oh shit’ is right, man,” Leon shouted at him. “This dude is fucking up. We gotta get his ass to a hospital, fast!”

“Fuck,” Stefan moaned as he continued to writhe on the grass with his eyes shut. Allan looked pale.

“Quick, gimme your shirt,” Leon commanded of Allan.

“Oh god,” Allan mumbled.

“I said, gimme your damn shirt. Are you retarded or what?”

“Okay,” Allan mumbled again, mechanically taking off his shirt.

“Now jam it down in the wound.”

“Okay.”

Leon motioned to Horatio, who was still standing dumbly over them. “You, get the car.”

Horatio nodded, wiped his mouth again, and ran off in the direction of his Lexus.

“Oh man, this ain’t good,” Allan said.


“Yeah, you’re doing great, Stefan. Hang in there. We’re gonna get you out of here soon enough. Just hang on, man.”

The Lexus skidded on the grass beside them before coming to a sudden halt. Horatio stepped out of the driver’s seat to help.

“All right,” Leon said, “help me get him in the backseat.”

“Dude, I’m gonna get blood all over my fucking Lexus.”

“Dude, you’re just gonna have to deal. If he fucking dies, we’re going to prison. Do you realize that?”

Apparently he didn’t.

“That’s what I thought. Now put his ass in the car. If you’re so worried about the blood, you sit with him and take care of the wound.”

“Alright.” Horatio got in the back seat with the supine and still mumbling Stefan and took over the task of compressing Allan’s shirt into the bullet hole. Leon shut the door behind them and got in the driver’s seat, the topless Allan riding shotgun. Leon stomped on the accelerator and the wheels spun gouges into the grass before the car bumped across the turf back onto the gravel maintenance road.

The ten-minute ride to the hospital passed in one interminable instant. As they passed the sign for the Mary Magdalene City Hospital and prepared to pull into the driveway, Stefan’s forehead broke out in a cold sweat.

“Aw, fuck,” Horatio said. “He’s going into shock.”

“We’re almost there. Tell him to hold on.”

“Hang in there, man. We’re almost at the hospital.”

Stefan murmured more incoherent babble in response.

Allan continued looking out the window, his cheeks pale.
last line derailed everything he had been striving for, everything else had been engineered to utter precision. He blotted out the final line with another scribble of the mutilating pen and resumed the painstaking process. A word. A pause. Another word. An entire phrase. Scratched it out. A different phrase. A partial word. A long pause. Still pausing. A few more strokes. A period. A pause.

It was finished.

He halted and closed his eyes, wiping all traces of the composition from his memory and concentrating on being completely and utterly inert. When he raised his eyelids again to read what he had written, he sucked it in with the taste of a fresh, unfamiliar bottle of wine upon its first draught by a man who has been drinking the same vintage for the entire duration of his life—a bottle that made him instantly drunk upon tasting it.

As he gulped, he could feel his soul peeling apart the onion skin of his head and sailing up into the air, free of the unbearable weight of his body as it rose from the confining office and into a sea of warm cerulean. Restored to a state of golden youth, he was buoyed aloft, floating on the tips of a thousand warm fingers that massaged him gently as they passed him along through the circumbent blue. As he drifted serenely about, he bathed in a stream of full chords that, at each moment, seemed too exquisite to persist any longer, rising higher and higher in a musical spasm that Cole found almost unbearable to hear. He closed his eyes, blissfully aware of every mote of his person.

But to look over the top of the page at the inanities of his life—his cluttered workspace, the overflowing rubbish bin beside his desk, the flickering computer monitor, the Post-It list of milk and bread and cat food—was to peer down from the edge of a cliff to the muck and refuse of a pit too far removed from the idyllic heights at which he had just arrived. Returning to the cerulean, he quaffed the elixir once more, and then once again, relishing every drop. But then, gazing over the cliff for a second time, he allowed the paper to fall from his hands and went tumbling over the edge of the precipice, falling, gyrating down deeper and deeper into the darkness until his feet landed on the floor of his office and he thrashed about in the muck of mundane life looking for something, anything to grab onto, the heavy, oppressive silence that of Satan's Legion swirling about his head and droning their endless call of despair and hopelessness—ploddingly, intolerably real. In the darkness, his flailing hands seized hold of his top desk drawer and yanked it open. And in the drawer lay the key. Here was his exit. He clutched the letter opener in his desperate fist and plunged it deep into his throat.

With a sanguine gurgle, he slouched over the desk, arms around his computer monitor, and gracelessly slumped to the floor, pulling the equipment down to shatter on the tile beside his still form and the patiently spreading ruby pool.

Elliot was leaning back in his chair, thinking over a snapshot he had taken of the Parthenon when he heard the clatter from down the hall. Trouble, his brain informed him. Dropping the photograph on his desk, he ran down the hallway, retracing the crash back into Cole’s office.

After a quick step backwards to dodge the red pool on the tiles at his feet, he cast an appraisal about the room, taking a survey of the scene of blood and glass. As he was about to call for help, he noticed a frizz-edged suicide note, decorated with crimson spatters, resting beside the telephone. “Untitled” was written at the top of the notepaper. As he began to read it, he realized that it wasn’t a suicide note at all, but the final masterpiece of his colleague.

Pretty good, he thought to himself after the last stanza; he turned to the phone to dial for an ambulance.

**Homegoing**

*Beekeeping*

You wanna see somethin’ cool about bees? Check this out. When a worker come back to the hive from the field, she’ll do this little dance to tell all the others ‘bout what she found. Watch this one here. See how she jiggles back and forth? Something about them steps is telling the other bees where the stuff is. Left, left, right. Honey over here. Right, stop, stomp, left. Honey over there. Rum pah pah pum. Yeeaaahhhh, buddy. And check out how all the other ones is standing around watching. They know what’s up: they know there’s something good out there this here worker’s found, and they wanna know all about it. They’re so into her, ain’t they? She’s like the center of attention right now. Them others don’t care about nothin’ else until they figure out what it is she’s so riled up about. Rather cheery reception. Friggin’ amazing, it is. It’d be nice if people got so into me when I got somethin’ to tell ’em, wouldn’t it?
to color. Tucking her short chestnut hair behind her ear, she compares the blue on the palette to the blue on the canvas. She lightens the blue one more time and then places a brushstroke in the blank corner.

It’s a different color. She sighs deeply and pulls the headphones from her ears. Now that the music’s gone, she realizes I’m home and turns.

“Hi, love,” she says, and smiles gently.

Why does she insist on making this for dinner? “It’s really good, honey,” I say, biting through yet another bell pepper.

“Thank you,” she says, her face looking down at the table. “I know it’s your favorite.”

Was my favorite, until she made it so much. I push Kraft macaroni and cheese around my plate to hide the volume of the leftovers.

She raises her head and looks into my eyes, but I have to force myself to return her tentative gaze.

I don’t know why I’m always the one drying the dishes. I’d like to switch places sometimes, even if her job takes more effort.

I look down at her hands wiping the sponge in soapy circles on the plate. I think of white daylilies when I watch her fingers.

“You have beautiful hands,” I tell her.

“Thank you,” she says softly, but doesn’t look up from her scrubbing.

I lean over and kiss her on the cheek. She flinches beneath my lips, but I can feel the skin stretching across her cheekbones as she smiles. The dichotomy drives me mad.

Sitting on the duvet, I heft “Principles of Quantum Physics” in my hand. 3.4 kilograms—I’ve checked. I feel the blankets grow warm beneath my butt and begin thinking about energy transfer, heating coefficients, exothermic reactions.

The corners of the index are slightly curled, almost as brown as the faint coffee ring on page 754. There are plenty of entries for Schroedinger, but no cat. I wonder if I didn’t imagine the whole conversation. I decide to try “on measurement” on page 366.

I turn there and find a drawing of a box in which sits a cat, a vial labeled “Acid,” and the radioactive symbol in bright bumblebee colors. So my undergrad wasn’t making this up—it wouldn’t have been the first time.

The accompanying paragraph says something about the vial of acid breaking open if the radioactive substance decays in a certain period of time, then describes the cat as simultaneously both dead and alive until the viewer opens the box to check on it.

The act of measurement altering the results.

It’s nothing I don’t understand, or haven’t heard before in some other fashion, but the whole cat thing is really bizarre. I live for this stuff.

The shower is running when I look at the floor and see Heather’s clothes lying next to the bed. I see the violet cotton panties she was wearing when we first made love, on the couch that belonged to her then-roommate. I think of how the tooth marks on my earlobe bled when we were finished. I think of how she is right now, rubbing soap across her naked body.

I feel the crotch of my khakis grow tight as my penis swells. I stand up, bending awkwardly at the waist, and move to open the bathroom door.

Through the fogged shower doors, I see her outlined against the crimson tiles, eyes shut with her head bent down as the water cascades over her. She is fingering the jagged, pale mark on her right breast, tracing her fingers back and forth across the slight creases and wrinkles in the scar tissue. She is thinking of her father again, I know.

Crap.

Realizing the inevitable consequence of her mood, my crotch diminishes and my pants begin to fit again. I step out of the bathroom and delicately close the door.
Her name was Stephanie, the card said. But what the card didn’t say was just how beautiful she was. Of course, Brian would never marry anyone less, but still… this girl was stunning: blond, thin, small, very cheerful, and had this smile that could melt an Eskimo. She just seemed so nice. And when I talked to her at the reception afterward, I found out that she had planned on getting some big shot job with her communications major but after only three years, was dropping out to become a full-time wife. He couldn’t have done much better, that’s for sure.

Have a summer
Get a tan
Buy a thong
Bag a man.

-Madeline

Their wedding today was really nice. Her gown was exquisite, and she got really elegant dresses for the bridesmaids, too—none of those hideous pink things with the giant poofy shoulders. I think weddings were designed for the dejection of all the single people in the audience, though, because I was really starting to get depressed. Seeing all those happy people in the church wishing him well, including what must have been ninety percent of our smiling high school class, totally made me upset. Why are they here? Don’t they realize that he probably doesn’t even care? Aren’t any of them doing anything with their lives? I bet most of them will never even move out of our town. I know I won’t.

Hey, man! Well, it looks like we made it. Don’t know why you’d want to go through four more years of this shit, though. When you’re home on break, stop by the Burger King sometime. And tell yo mama I said hi.

-Richard

I only stayed at the reception for about forty-five minutes before I wished them well with a plastic smile and left my tasteful white and silver card containing the twenty-dollar bill on the table of presents. By the time I got out to my car, I couldn’t hold the tears in any longer. Everyone inside the banquet hall was pretending to have the time of their lives, and I was outside, running to my car so no one would see me breaking down. Just like high school.

Brian,
I don’t know you much at all—but you’re one of Steve’s friends so… Good luck in college.

-Shelby

How come I would never marry anyone like that? Someone who would drop out of school, just leave her whole life behind to be with me. How come I would never be that guy? Never have the entire class come to my wedding, never have everyone from the whole damn school bring me presents or stare at my beautiful wife. Never pull in the kind of money that Brian would. Never drive the kind of car that he does. Not like my piece of crap that shudders as I pull out of the parking lot. Never be in the newspaper every Saturday like he was. Never have everyone be my friend. Never love life like he does.

Brian,
Do you remember when we had Algebra II together freshman year? I had such a crush on you because you were so smart. But then you turned out to be a great friend. You are such an incredible young man, Brian, I wish you all the best in whatever you choose to do. Though this portion of our journeys are coming to a close, it brings us to an intersection that will lead on to even better things. May your future journeys be happy ones free of potholes and may the sun always shine upon your face. I’ll miss you. I love you.

-Allison

My car is stopped in the middle of the road with the hazard lights flashing, as I look down the hood to the bridge ahead. There’s a space there between where the embankment on the right drops down to road level and where the guardrail for the bridge actually starts. A few years back, a couple drunk college kids drove
Okay, two sentences and a fragment. But it was still more than he usually said. And that’s all of them—all the people that signed my silly yearbook. Except for one. You’re probably wondering who the third was. And by now, you probably already know.

Brian,
Congratulations man, we’re finally graduating. I hope your coming years are good ones. You always were so lucky. I know you’ll do great in college next semester. Take care.
-Mitchell

Mitch,
Wow, can you believe it’s been four years already? Time flies when you’re having fun, I guess. We had some good times, didn’t we? Like Anyway, enjoy your summer and have a great life! Sincerely,
-Brian
brighter and brighter until he was at the edge of blindness, near enough to touch the ball of white-heat, extending his hand, reaching out, touching the flames ... and gasping as the warmth enveloped his body.

Feeling the arousal draining from his veins, he got off of her and muttered something about needing to take a piss. He picked up his clothes and went into the bathroom.

Once he had shut the door behind him, he put on his boxers and jeans and retrieved a lighter and a package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. He lit one of the butts, sat down on the toilet, and drew in heavily as he thought about the girl in the other room.

Not too bad, he thought to himself. Kind of nice actually. There are certainly worse ways to spend a Saturday evening. What was her name again? Jan? No, ... Joan ... Jen ... Jenna! That was it. Glad that he had remembered, he took another long breath from the cigarette.

Three minutes and several drags later, he dropped the spent butt into the toilet and flushed it away. He put on his shirt, buttoned it up, checked his hair in the mirror. Satisfied, he walked back out into the bedroom and saw the girl sitting up in bed with the sheets wrapped around her naked body.

He paid her a quick, cursorly glance. “Thanks...”

A convivial-looking old man sat hunched at his typewriter—a man with the sort of face that conjures up childhood imaginations of *Pere Noël*. His fingers were typing away furiously, and then they stopped. He pulled the sheet of paper from the machine and read over the last paragraph. As he did so, a tear gathered at the corner of his eye and slid down his cheek. *Il était parfait.* In his hands, he held the culmination of his career—the final and complete *Amen* of all that he had ever written.

He set the sheet of paper on a stack of a few hundred others and leaned back in his chair with his tearing eyes closed. He let out a long, satisfied sigh before closing his lips into a serene smile. *Quatre ans.* Four years he had toiled over this work, and now it was finished. It was worth every second.

Two swings hung side by side, limply penduluming in and out in a pair of slow, dull arcs. In contrast to their lifeless movements, however, a flourishing exchange of words and affection was traded back and forth by the two people sitting in them. As their current peal of laughter began to fade, the man spoke with a sense of dignity in his voice. “But seriously, Sugarpie, I mean that. Congratulations.”

“Thanks daddy,” the young woman to his right said. Though her eyes were intent upon an Idaho-shaped piece of mulch at her feet, a smile glistened across her face as she listened. She toed the scrap of bark with her shoe as she swayed back and forth above it.

Her father continued speaking. “Just think, four years ago you had almost given up school altogether, and now look at you: salutatorian, headed off to law school, and, I might add, a beautiful young woman to top it all off.”

Still smiling, she remained quiet, reluctant to draw further attention to the compliments. Idaho found itself nudged even further from where it had started.

“You see that tree over there?”

She looked up. “What, the maple?”

“No, the locust beside it.” He pointed.

“Oh, right.”

“It reminds me of a gavel,” he remarked with a far off look in his smile. “It says that there are great things in store for you—a distinguished career, the respect of your peers ... maybe a position at the head of the Supreme Court: Chief Justice Jenna.”

She pointed to the tree next to the maple. “See the poplar? It looks like an ice cream cone. It says there’s a trip to Dairy Queen in my future.”

He glanced at her, and both snorted into another bout of laughter. “I’ll agree with that,” the man grinned as they left the dispassionate swings behind and walked back to the car.

He closed the book and set it down on the table; a black and white photograph of a convivial old Frenchman smiled up at him from the back cover. Not too bad, Simon thought to himself. The last eighty pages in particular weren’t really worth reading, but some of the other parts were quite nice. There are certainly worse ways to spend a Sunday afternoon.

He picked up a cigarette and went out onto his balcony for a smoke.
He was only a few points away from being valedictorian, but he had to settle with salutatorian because that Liz girl had a perfect 4.0 GPA. He totally should have gotten it instead of her, though, if you ask my opinion—how much is a tenth of a point really worth, anyway? Besides, he did so many more activities and sports than she did. If you told me that she never came out of her room because she studied too much, I’d totally believe you. Brian, though, I don’t even know how he got any sleep, he did so much. He was the superstar in just about every sport he tried, particularly soccer.

Buzz,
Woo hoo! We are so out of here! Yur coming to my party this weekend, right? That was awesome when you made that hat trick against Eastern this season. Keep kickin ass in college, boy. Spartans forever!
-Ben the Beast, #13

And he was always involved in stuff like sports boosters, student government, those civic clubs, prom committee ... everything. About the only pie he didn’t have his hand in was all those artsy things like choir, drama, band, and all that gay crap. But just like everyone else in the school, all the bandies and art kids liked him anyway.

Roses are red
Violets are blue
I’m so glad we’re done with this crappy-ass school.
Have a great summer.
-Reggie

He was also a really straight kid. The teachers thought he was great because he was a good student and was really polite, and they all totally respected him.

Brian,
You are a very talented young man. I have greatly appreciated your presence in my class—you brought an acceptance and warmth to the classroom that has affected all of your peers in a very positive way. © I wish you the best at college, and feel free to stop by and say hello any time!
Sincerely,
-Mrs. Carmichael

Oh sure, he toilet papered the principal’s house one time, but that was just for fun, and Mr. Ambrose got a good laugh out of it, too.

Brian,
Remember that time we got stoned back in the fields behind school and you tripped and fell into a pile of cow shit? Hey, your parents aren’t going to read this are they? Anyway, have a blast in college. Don’t smoke too many blunts.
-Andy

Brian never did anything that could get him in real trouble. And he was just so ... real.

Yo,
Word, whaddup, dawg? Hey, homie, we be ditching dis joint. Yo, props to you on that soccer bizniz you done this year. Way to show ya moves. Right. Peace out, dawg. Keep it real.
-Fred

You could meet him on the street and five minutes later, you’d feel like you knew this kid all your life, and like he knew all about you. That was okay, though, because he was such a great guy that you wanted him to know everything about you. That’s probably why all the chicks liked him so much. Oh yeah, he was definitely hot and everything, and popular and athletic, but more than that, the girls really felt special when they were around him. And of course, he loved the attention.
During the 1991 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), Peter Elbow, a contemporary theorist in the area of writing pedagogy, began a dialogue with colleague David Bartholomae on personal and academic writing, a conversation which was later published in essay form in the February 1995 edition of the journal College Composition and Communication.\(^1\) Elbow’s essay in particular, Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals,\(^2\) elaborates the contest that often takes place between writers and readers (particularly, in Elbow’s case, academic readers), with both parties generally wishing to appropriate a text for their own uses. In the writer’s case, to impart some meaning or influence the reader; in the reader’s case, to decide what meaning she is willing to construct from the text.

I first encountered Elbow’s text during Dr. Dzaka’s Topics course on writing theory and composition, which also happened to be one of my first experiences with literary theory in general. And as a writer, I found this explanation of reading and writing as a mortal combat rather disturbing, no less so for its apparent accuracy. What if people are just taking whatever they want from the things I write, with no regard for what I want to say? Though he seems to intend it more as a wry comment on the nature of discourse than a warning of apocalyptic import, I was frightened by Elbow’s comment that A[a]cademics in English are the only people I know who seem to think that the speaker/writer has no party in Y discussions.\(^3\)

Though I didn’t realize it at the time, Peter Elbow provided my first exposure to Reader-Response criticism, and the writer in me was not impressed. I felt like there must be some way to reconcile the two parties to each other, some theory of reading that would account not only for the writer’s place as the generator of a text and the person who intended something in its telling, but also for the reader, who naturally must bring to bear his own experience upon a text, distanced as he is from the author by time, geography, language (in the case of translation or etymological evolution), and by the basic impossibility of ever fully knowing another person.

So I proposed an experiment. Having slowly come to an appreciation of critical theory after my initial aversion to it, I decided to perform literary criticism on my own writing, produced last semester in the first portion of my senior project, in the hope that embodying author and critic in the same person (ostensibly making Elbow’s two combatants play on the same team) would help me to, in some way, re-envision critical theory to allow for the place of the author and make for a more responsible, dialogic way of approaching the act of reading, an experiment which yielded some surprising results. Furthermore, I decided I would benefit academically from a diverse, in-depth look into criticism that would broaden my knowledge of the discipline and keep me up-to-date on current trends in the field. Therefore, I established an eight-week timeline that would have me focus on four different schools of criticism for two weeks apiece—one week to read as much as I could of the seminal thinkers in each school, followed by a week to apply what I had learned to my own work—the four schools being, in chronological order, New Criticism, New Historicism and Marxism, Reader-Response Theory, and Deconstruction. In the next few paragraphs,

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\(^3\) Ibid., 493.
I will provide an overview of this critical process and some of the insights that I gained from each school; if you will permit me a brief non-humanities analogy, think of it as a lab report on my science experiment.

**Methods – the Lab Report**

**New Criticism**

My first examination was a New Critical reading of my poem “Errata.”

The most difficult aspect of performing a close reading on my own material was that I found it nearly impossible to determine whether or not the elements of the poem make the poetic meaning clear in themselves; since I have a good sense of what I included and why, some things that readers may consider unclear are perfectly understandable to me. I underwent this process with as objective a perspective as I possibly could, aided by both a temporal distancing from the act of composition and by a deliberate attempt to focus as much as possible on the words and drive my original intent from my mind, but nevertheless, my explanation of the “Dictionary” in section five, in particular, strikes me as a much more thorough treatment of the allusion than a non-author could give, particularly when considering the relative sloppiness with which the allusion is made. I would also imagine that the description of D-Day in section nine may very well be too subtle to notice, despite the reference to England and France in section one, which would severely compromise its effectiveness as an epilogue.

If this particular school is about objectivity, the lack of distance between the author and reader seems to imply that an analysis of this sort is impossible under the guise of New Criticism, which, to a point, is correct. “Errata,” however, with all its concomitant conflicts, inconsistencies, tensions, and variances, lends itself nicely to an approach that focuses on ambiguity, metaphor, the interaction between structure and content, and a reconciliation of differences; the conclusion that the messiness of the structure and content reflects the poetic meaning shows just how applicable New Criticism is to this particular poem. Not only that, but, as a New Critical reading attempts to reduce a poem to one correct reading, this approach is most authentic to the poet’s original vision of the poem (one of the primary concerns of this entire investigation), though the similitude of the author and reader makes the need for performing a “reading” nearly extraneous.

Or does it? Before conducting my review, I was greatly disappointed in my inability to force the poem into more of a coherent whole, until my close reading revealed that the disparities and disarray of the work were an accurate revelation of the main theme. I had actually intended to resolve the deficiencies I saw until I realized just how useful they could be. In addition to this larger concern, my analysis revealed chance connections in more specific areas as well—most notably, the inherent instability of the steady rhythm in section two, and the diminishing conflict throughout the second half of the poem. These revelations suggest that even authors don’t always understand their works to the fullest extent, a central tenet of nearly all forms of criticism since, and including, New Criticism, which assert the errancy of trying to pursue the author’s intentions.

All of these benefits, however, are more likely reflections of the efficacy of close reading than on the contemporary relevance of New Criticism. Paying close attention to my own work gives me a greater understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, but considering the text an independent, wholly self-sufficient entity as the New Critical school would advocate hardly seems to take into account the role of either the author or the reader, both essential elements of the reading process. Though not particularly effective in my attempts to resolve the conflict between the author and reader, more than anything else, this portion of my investigation leaves me with the simple recognition of how useful an author should find the process of revising his work when he does so with as objective an eye as possible, not to mention a greater understanding on my part of why critical theory has progressed beyond the New Critical perspective.

**New Historicism/ Marxism**

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4 Editor’s Note: See p. 46-47 for the poem and Appendix A for the analysis.
For my second school, I had originally intended to pursue a New Historical reading, but was eventually thwarted by the very understanding of history upon which the school is founded. One of the chief principles of New Historicism is that history is a purely subjective notion, and that all attempts to speak of historical events objectively are clouded by our own historical placement and suppositions. Unfortunately for me, as I examined my short story "Yearbooks," I began to realize that my perspective on the relevant history, while undoubtedly still subjective and unable to perfectly recollect the situation that gave rise to this work, has changed very little since my writing of the story and my presence in the high school situation with which this story is concerned, a change certainly less dramatic than the gap between a contemporary theorist and a Renaissance writer (as this school often turns its eye to texts of this time period). I still juxtaposed the story against a non-literary text, as New Historicism is wont to do, in this case an article from Time magazine, but this did little more than explain the social situation that gave rise to the story and was portrayed within it, rather than generating any new insight into the subjectivity of contemporary misreadings of the high school situation in 1999 (which is virtually the same as the situation today). Therefore, as a result of this inability to view "Yearbooks" historically, I instead ended up with more of a Marxist critique, as I focused more on power struggles and the inability of the protagonist to escape from the oppression of the social and symbolic situations of which he is a part.

However, my original focus (not to mention all of my background reading) was based in New Historicism, and as far as this particular investigation is concerned, when I am both author and reader, New Historicism provides very little extra insight. Even if I were distanced from the composition of the text by a significant amount of time and didn’t remember the circumstances perfectly, I will almost always have a sense of the social context that gave rise to my writing, making a historical analysis fairly irrelevant. In fact, the most notable thing about this section of my experiment is more a result of the story than of the criticism I performed. In "Yearbooks," Mitchell is speaking about high school nearly five years after leaving it, and it’s fairly clear from his narration that his perspective on school isn’t entirely accurate, a fairly good illustration of how the passage of time (even when relatively small) can distort recollections of the past; by the same token, I can never objectively reread my own texts. Admittedly, my rereading took place only two years after I wrote the story, which really isn’t enough distance to demonstrate historicity, but is more than adequate to prove that even the author of a text cannot fully escape his own subjectivity when he reads it later, a similar realization to those revealed by my New Critical study.

Reader-Response Theory

My next two schools were Reader-Response Theory and Deconstruction, but as both will prove integral to the final analysis of this experiment, they will both receive only a cursory treatment here.

Where New Historicism suffered in my investigation because of its limited focus on history and social contexts, Reader-Response Theory provided a much more comprehensive way of looking at writing, particularly since my encounter with this theory provided the impetus for conducting this study in the first place. And while writing an essay from a Reader-Response perspective proved difficult, as all of the texts I read on the theory seemed more focused on a theory of what reading is, as opposed to how reading should be done, this allowed the theory to infiltrate many of the other schools of criticism, instead of making it just one method out of many.

Essentially, Reader-Response Theory removes the author from any consideration of the reading process and focuses instead on the text and reader exclusively, primarily because of the impossibility of ever knowing what the author was up to. Even when I fulfilled both the roles of author and reader this subjectivity appeared, as noted in the two critical analyses above: in New Historicism as a result of (even a slight) temporal distance, and in New Criticism due to a simple carelessness with the usage of the language in the poem. Despite my ethical concerns with Reader-Response Theory (which I will return to later), it

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5 Editor’s Note: See p. 63-68 for the story, "Yearbooks," and Appendix B for the analysis.
7 Editor’s Note: See p. 57-58 for the story, "The Exquisite Tragedy of Icarus Revealed, or A Man Stabs Himself in the Neck with Something Sharp," and Appendix C for the analysis, which opens with further clarification of the difficulties involved in a Reader-Response "reading."
captures the essential unknowability of the author and the subjectivity of the reader, even when used in less conventional reading situations such as this one, facts that writers, myself included, will simply have to accept.

Deconstruction

This brings me to the final mode of literary criticism that I employed, Deconstruction. Though many different understandings of this school exist, it tends to focus primarily on the text itself, particularly on the ways that language demonstrates intertextuality and gets caught in endless iterations of reflexivity; this focus on language removes both the author and the reader far into the background of the reading process, though it admits that the author (obviously) created the text and the reader (naturally) is conditioned to read in certain ways, so neither find themselves completely removed. I chose to examine my short story “Shroedinger’s Cat” for this portion of the investigation, and while my written analysis initially focused more on the themes of the story than on the language itself, I eventually used that focus as a portal for pursuing the ways in which the language of the themes refers back upon itself and removes traditional dualistic oppositions. I find this sort of reading particularly helpful for opening up a text and revealing things the author failed to consider in his writing; very similar to my experience with New Critical close reading, this method helped me to revisit my work and see things in it that I had missed before, making it a very useful tool at least for understanding texts and textuality, if not for revision as well. Finally, I want to reiterate that Deconstructive criticism, along with Reader-Response Theory, will reappear later when I turn to ethical considerations.

A Graphic Phenomenology of Textual Generation and Reception

Having addressed the particulars of my experiment, I will now elaborate upon my understanding of textual production and transmission, and since the act of reading provided the impetus for this project in the first place, I shall begin with this portion of the text’s lifespan. A reader naturally begins with the text, but a number of factors come into play when the reader interprets that text—from life experiences, to cultural norms, to interpretive modes (such as feminism, Marxism, queer theory, etc.), even to such minutiæ as the reader’s mood that day, or what she ate for breakfast—all of which affect the final interpretation that the reader eventually creates. Consider the following,

![Diagram of Text and Reader](attachment:diagram.png)

where each potential interpretation, determined by any combination of variables, is represented by one of the various arrows above which originate in the text (although the reader is active at all points along the lines, not just receiving the meaning at the end as the diagram may suggest). In fact, so many potential interpretations exist (not all of them accessible to any given reader—could a Romantic critic knowingly give an authentic deconstructive reading?) that we could consider their compendium a dense field of lines occupying a conical volume, similar to current understandings of an atomic “electron cloud”:

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8 Editor’s Note: See p. 59-61 for the story and Appendix D for the analysis.
9 Of course, this “final” interpretation is always open to reinterpretation, as the reader gains new experiences, alters her opinions, talks with friends, or revisits the text at a later date.
All this is nothing new; it is simply a graphical representation of what literary criticism has known for decades. My concern, however, especially as an author who is involved in the production of texts as well as their reception, is that this is only half of the picture. The author has an equal role in the transmission of meaning through a text that most modes of criticism, particularly Reader-Response, omit. Instead of interpretive variations in the act of reading, however, the variation and possibilities inherent in textual generation are provided by differences in composition theories—expressivism, process theory, cognitive-process theory—not to mention the usual array of personal experiences and cultural influences, all of which contribute to the actual writing and the author's intended meaning of the text, leaving us with an image not unlike that of reading:

While it is perfectly understandable that criticism and composition would necessarily focus solely on their respective sides of the textual lifespan due to limitations of time and the vastness of either field in itself, the fact remains that both disciplines interact with each other at a singular moment of conversation (albeit a unidirectional conversation, as the reader can only internalize a reply, as opposed to actually delivering it to the author), in the text itself;
this metaphor of interaction over the text as a conversation will later prove integral to my understanding of creative writing as collaborative learning.

Lastly, as a brief parenthetical, I want to assert that, at some basic level, people agree on what language means, that the subjectivity inherent in language has a limit. If I encounter a Stop sign, I know that it tells me to bring my vehicle to a halt—arguing out of a traffic ticket on grounds of linguistic subjectivity would be tossed out of any legitimate court. In the same way, people understand that language contains, or is employed in, certain conventions that promote understanding. I personally find the position of “language means nothing” an untenable one.

Therefore, with this picture of the transmission of textual meaning and interpretation in mind, I continue.

The Ethics of Reader-Response and Deconstruction

An acceptance of the above diagram of the interaction between author and reader at the instance of the text practically requires a consideration of ethics: the author and reader are completely separate from each other, but there is still a moment of connection, and it is this moment that forces us to take into account the face of Levinas’ Other. Typically, the author is already conscious of the reader, as he often writes with some sort of audience in mind, and while ethical concerns still exist for the author, these concerns rarely fail to take into account the basic presence of the reader, so I will not concern myself with them here. Instead, I will focus on the ethical response of the reader to the author.

Ironically enough, the Reader-Response position, which I consider the most guilty of removing the author from the picture and focusing solely on the lower portion of the diagram with no regard whatsoever for the production of the text under scrutiny, considers itself an ethical one. Jane Tompkins, editor of a 1980 anthology\textsuperscript{10} compiling milestones from such seminal Reader-Response names as David Bleich, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, and Georges Poulet, among others, elaborates upon this ethical position in an introduction which summarizes key points of all the works anthologized. Likening Jonathan Culler’s method and ethical understanding to those of Walker Gibson, Wolfgang Iser, and Stanley Fish, Tompkins describes their proximity to “a liberal humanism that defines moral and intellectual growth in terms of self-awareness and self-development.”\textsuperscript{11} She then continues with David Bleich and Norman Holland, who, in a very similar vein “put questions of personal identity and self-awareness at the center of their critical theories. ... The practical goal of their work is to achieve knowledge of the self, of its relation to other


\textsuperscript{11} Tompkins, xviii.
selves, to the world, and to human knowledge in general. Much more than for other critics, their moral aims seem to determine the nature of their literary theories.\textsuperscript{12}

For all this discussion of ethics and moral aims, however, it must be noted that the "relation to other selves" of which Tompkins speaks virtually never relates to the other self of the author,\textsuperscript{13} only to other reading selves. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with the betterment of the human race, such advancement, when performed under the banner of Reader-Response theory, often takes place only after an action of violence performed against the author and her text. This violence often occurs when readers take passages out of context, make false assumptions about the text, or read into the text their own bias—who wouldn't agree that a reading of Milton's "Paradise Lost" that promoted Satanism (as Satan is arguably the most interesting character), while within the realm of possibility, is definitely not a reading that Milton would endorse, and indeed would probably find infuriating. A number of literary schools, including, but certainly not limited to, feminism, Marxism, and post-colonialism, devote a great deal of energy to exposing such readings that are essentially power struggles that occur at the expense of the underprivileged, whether those people are women, the proletariat, aliens, or, in my analysis, authors who have lost much of their place in literary criticism. Perhaps some writers would find no problem with readers apprehending and inverting their works for the advancement of knowledge, but isn't there a better way, a method of criticism that would both strive for the author's intentions for a text and yet allow for its opening to other possibilities? Yes and no, as we will soon see.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., xix.
\textsuperscript{13} One of the most notable exceptions to this can be found in Poulet, Georges. "Phenomenology of Reading." \textit{New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation} 1.1 (October 1969). Rpt. in \textit{The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism}, Eds. Vincent B. Leitch, et al. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. 1320-33, but even here, the author is a hostile, alien consciousness that invades the mind of the reader, and not an entity with which to willingly and openly dialogue.
In contrast to those of Reader-Response, the ethics of Deconstruction, as presented in a roundtable discussion presided over by Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, the latter a professor of philosophy at Philadelphia's Villanova University,\(^{14}\) seems far more responsible to the author; where Reader-Response adopts the position of liberal humanism, Deconstruction takes up a more religious, Other-centered stance.\(^{15}\)

The reader's responsibility to the author is expressed most clearly by John Caputo, who, expounding Derrida's response to the classical Greek thinkers, lays out the necessity of performing two readings on a text—one the "traditional" reading to understand what the author was trying to say and how history has interpreted the author's words thus far, and a second deconstructive, "productive" reading "which explores the tensions, the loose threads, the little 'openings' in the text which the classical reading tends to close over or put off as a problem for another day, which is really just a way to forget them. But that means that the very idea of a deconstructive reading presupposes this more reproductive and classical reading" [author's emphasis].\(^{16}\) Under Deconstruction, the intent of the author (or at the very least what history, in its attempts to be faithful, has transmitted as the author's intent) receives a great deal of attention, indeed, the most intention, before a reader may spiral off into any one of the various interpretations permitted by Reader-Response theory. Deconstruction maintains, even asserts, the right to these alternate interpretations, but only "after [the first] reading, or through it, or best of all along with it."\(^{17}\) One problem with this, however, to which we will return later, is that Derrida and Caputo concern themselves primarily with philosophical texts, which, by definition, seek to impart a message and are therefore loaded with didactic authorial intention; not all writing carries the same emphasis on content.

But doesn't this attempt to apprehend the author's or tradition's interpretation somehow violate Wimsatt and Beardsley's refutation of the Intentional Fallacy?\(^{18}\) Haven't the last few decades of literary criticism left us with the understanding that no possible way of discerning what the author was trying to say exists? Deconstruction has something to say about that as well. Again speaking of the Greeks, Caputo suggests a way to approach authorial intention:

To read Plato and Aristotle well, one must learn Greek, learn as much as possible about their predecessors, contemporaries, and successors, about their religious, social, political, and historical presuppositions, understand the complex history of subsequent interpretations of their works, etc. This is 'not easy'; indeed, it is an infinite task, and deconstruction is not a license to circumvent it. For otherwise, if this reading does not take place, then 'anything goes,' and readers may say of a text whatever comes into their heads.\(^{19}\)

The method which Caputo advocates is an impossible, an "infinite" one—to be fully complete, one would have to actually become Plato or Aristotle at the time of writing—but it is a way to at least draw near the intentions of the author. Deconstruction is quite comfortable living in close proximity to Calculus, so think of Caputo's method as a limit: he can never reach the point of full comprehension, but as he approaches infinity, he can get closer and closer until the distance becomes negligible.\(^{20}\) Returning to the earlier diagram of the textual lifespan, this method would attempt to reconstruct the cone of the author's influences that contributed to the production of the text, trying to account for all of the author's experiences, textual influences, comments to friends, diary entries, and so on to infinity. The ethics of Deconstruction, though impossible, seem far more responsible to the author than Reader-Response theory and avoids the


\(^{15}\) The parallels between religious thought and Deconstruction are explored more fully in the works of John Caputo, particularly in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell,* which provides an excellent introduction.

\(^{16}\) Caputo, 76.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.


\(^{19}\) Caputo, 78.

\(^{20}\) Even in my aforementioned experiment, where I did become both author and reader, the temporal distance separating the acts of writing and reading prevented me from completely understanding (in the reading phase) what I was "up to" as an author. Unfortunately, while I got close enough that the gap became, for all practical intents and purposes, zero, this experiment's method of getting even closer to the limit does so artificially and irreproducibly, at least for typical readers who are not examining their own work.
masculine\textsuperscript{21} tradition of literary criticism as an attempt to negotiate power, making the discipline less militaristic and more cooperative and dialogic.

**A Collaborative Learning Paradigm of Textual Transmission**

The weakness in this otherwise valuable deconstructive ethical model, however, (apart from the fact, the extreme pragmatist would argue, that the task cannot be done) appears when we ask the question, why must readers be responsible to the author? Initially, the most appropriate response would be to say that the author, in writing, is trying to convey something—be it a political message (Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*), a description of a location (Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"), a religious devotion (Donne's "Batter My Heart" Holy Sonnet XIV), or a quasi-biographical self-expression (Plath's "Daddy")—so the reader should try to understand why the author put forth so much effort into the text. This would suggest that the primary ethical concern of Reader-Response criticism—the advancement of self and humanity—is at least partially appropriate; maybe it shouldn't be the focus, but the contribution made to other people by the author certainly carries some importance. If the author didn't want her readers to be somehow changed by her work (at least within ideological constraints that the author would consider appropriate), why write at all?

This purpose-driven conception of writing suggests a model of the transmission of a text from author to reader that parallels pedagogical theories of collaborative learning, which, though problematic, will prove useful. Under this model, the author becomes the classroom teacher, and all potential readers of the author's text become the students, similar to the members of Stanley Fish's interpretive community or Kenneth Bruffee's discourse community. (It must be noted, however, that, in order to maintain the integrity of the illustration, traditional hierarchical models of the classroom in which the teacher retains an authoritarian lordship over the students must be avoided in favor of the utopian equality between teacher and student advocated by collaborative learning in its most theoretical propositions; I wish to place the author on equal interpretive and intellectual footing as his readers.) In a synthesis of the previously demarcated ethical positions of Reader-Response and Deconstructive criticism, the teacher (author) would give an assignment, pose a question, or suggest a line of dialogue (all of which would be synonymous with the text, or the instant of conversation outlined in the diagrams above) to the students (readers). Deconstructively, the students would then begin to discuss the topic proposed by the teacher, acknowledging her initial influence over the learning in the classroom, very similarly to the first reading of Caputo and Derrida. Eventually, the collaborative teacher would expect her students to spin off into other areas of discussion and learn from the input of their individual experiences; this is the second reading, where the Reader-Response ethic of heteroglossia contributing to self- and societal-development comes into play. At the outset, however, the teacher wouldn't want her students to begin by talking about something completely off-topic, and this is where it seems like literary criticism should pursue the limit of authorial intention. In addition, readers will inevitably bring their own experiences to bear on their interpretations, and this too is a good thing, as long as they continue to talk about the issue at hand (otherwise, they should be part of a different classroom, reading a different text).

But the problem arises over a crucial element of this model: the teacher is absent. It is as if he gave an assignment or asked a question, and then promptly left the room and drove home. Because the author (whether through temporal, spatial, or linguistic separation, or even his own death) never contributes to the dialogue after posing the initial question given in his text, never steers the discussion, clarifies ambiguities, asks any new questions, or even rates the various interpretations posed, the student-readers are under no moral obligation to pursue the train of thought initially given by the teacher-author. Indeed, if the students were to try, the end result would only be frustration as they try to engage with empty air. Ultimately, it seems that the only ethical responsibility with which the students are left is to each other. Reader-Response, then, apparently provides the only explanation of what to do with the message of the author and the learning or advancements that can result from that intention.

The "Meta-Intention" Spectrum: Some Clarifications

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So where does that leave the author, who genuinely has something he wants to say? In addressing this question, two opposing intentions for writing must be addressed: creative (artistic, "literary") and (displaying my obvious prejudice toward the humanities24) historical-philosophical. These are not to be confused with the notion of "authorial intention" (à la Wimsatt and Beardsley) as a message that the author is trying to convey through the text; rather it is the author's intentions for the writing—what he wants it to do, how he wants it read, or how he wants it published. I propose the term "meta-intention" to describe this characteristic, as not to confuse it with "authorial intention" as a synonym for "poetic meaning."

Returning to my two categories, I consider historical-philosophical writing to include any sort of text that seeks to describe what is, whether temporally ("this was," "this is," or "this probably will be") or ontologically ("reality is like this"); in either case, the author's meta-intention is to clearly convey a fact (or at least an interpretation of data that the author considers accurate) to an audience. On the contrary, creative (or artistic, "literary") writing, makes it clear that its "message" in ensnared in layers of ambiguity and embellishment, writing that has no qualms proclaiming that it is "counterfeit" in the same breath that it denies it is so.25

I make this distinction primarily in deference to historical-philosophical writers who would hate the idea that their message carries no weight whatsoever. Those writers exist who avoid creative texts for the purpose of conveying something they consider important to know, writers which would include Plato and Aristotle, who would greatly appreciate the attempts of Caputo and Derrida to fully understand what they were philosophizing. Furthermore, people often write because publishing is the most efficient method of spreading information (both before and after the Internet revolution), and the method that ensures the most longevity to that information. Caputo's deconstructive ethics, though largely irrelevant in the context of creative writing, apply quite definitively in the case of these historical-philosophical writers who want to be understood, but must eventually leave the classroom anyway.

But virtually no text exists that resides wholly at one of these two extremes; most occupy a space somewhere between complete didacticism and complete abyss of meaning. Perhaps an author chooses to convey meaning through a fictitious account to put a human face on the message, or to make it more of an enjoyable read than a expository treatise, though no less informative. We can see a very precise example of this middle ground (assuming we forgo all concern for quality and aesthetics) in the genre of Christian fiction, novels that seek to portray characters who find happiness in a Christian conversion experience, with the obvious implication that so, too, should we. Such texts are creative in that they tell a fictitious story about imaginary characters and experiences, but historical-philosophical in that they tell the reader something the author considers an essential quality of being—namely, that a religious life is better than an atheistic one. This example implies a continuum or spectrum between the two meta-intentions outlined above, in which we can understand creative authors as those writers whose texts fall closer to the "creative" end of the spectrum, and historical-philosophical writers as those closer to the opposing side. Therefore, all texts employ both types of meta-intention, though many do fall rather close to the two extremes, making our response at all times both an ethical one and an an-ethical one. All writers must leave the classroom (assuming the author and reader are not simultaneously present), but the more historical-philosophical their intent, the greater our moral obligation to discuss the topics they present.

Some may claim, then, that this discussion is really just an argument about clarity in writing and to what extent we understand linguistic and literary conventions, sending us back to Stanley Fish's interpretive communities and to the subjectivity in language. Indeed, to what level we find language socially constructed and variable will unavoidably color our perspective on the position I have outlined thus far, though I do not propose to go into an extended linguistic investigation here. That does not change the fact,

24 The purpose of historical-philosophical writing, as should soon be clear, can be found in such diverse disciplines as business, scientific, technical, journalistic, and even personal writing, and is not just limited to the fields of history and philosophy, though these two most comprehensively capture the essence of what I am trying to delimit.

however, that tension exists, and resorting to relativistic claims does not provide an adequate reason for circumventing that tension. To the extent that every text carries at least a small amount of historical-philosophical intent, every text requires an ethical response on our part, requiring that we at least establish the level of our moral obligation to the text, if nothing else.

Conclusions

So what relevance does this have to my investigation into the role of the creative author (the author that falls slightly more creative of center)? Well, if the creative author is largely an absentee teacher, proposing a question and then leaving the room to let her students devise knowledge and interpretations on their own without her facilitation, her meta-intention had better not be that of historical-philosophical writing—to clearly convey a message—a purpose that I fear many creative authors hold. If the creative author seeks to convey a message in such a way that her readers will unambiguously grasp her meaning, but does so in a poetic or fictional format, which almost by their definitions include ambiguity and the potential for misinterpretation, in effect, removing her from the classroom, two possibilities await her: unconscious failure where exists no ability to receive feedback, or constant frustration as reader after reader tells her that he “missed the point.” That doesn’t mean that all readers will fail to understand what the author was talking about (indeed, perhaps most of them will make the intended connections), but the creative author must accept the potential for alternate interpretations, and must accept them as equally valid as her own.

What it all comes down to is that, if I as an author really want to tell something to someone, I must be clear about it; the most ideal method would probably consist of writing an expository essay, or better yet, just having a conversation. But if I’m going to say something by writing a poem or a work of fiction about it, I had better be prepared to accept the reader’s influence in constructing what that poem or story means. However, this does not absolve readers of their moral obligation to try for an appropriate response to the author and text when the writing seems to call for it.

P.S. - a Poetics Script

Before closing, I’d like to make a brief, proactive suggestion for what to do with this dichotomy between creative writing and communication. A deconstructive reader, if she properly follows the method prescribed by Caputo and Derrida, performs two readings on a historical-philosophical text, the first of which, we have already noted, devotes itself to understanding (as much as possible) the original meaning of a text before spiraling out into marginalized interpretations. One of the great things about creative writing, however, is that it requires no first reading: individual interpretations are allowed from the outset. This enables a text to begin the process of collaborative learning (or the advancement of humanity, or self-development—whichever model you prefer) more quickly as the teacher removes all ethical responsibility to himself and allows his students to begin constructing interpretations without having to first understand and address the topic he proposed.

In my mind, this suggests a new genre of writing, which, for lack of any better term, I will label "creative-academic." This genre would consist of creative writing with a political purpose: to generate knowledge. But it would do so recklessly—posing a topic, and then retreating to allow the readers to draw all sorts of conclusions and ideas, all of which would be equally valid. In a way, this writing would promote deconstructions of itself, but without the extra commitment of a first reading. It could take the shape of a poem about philosophical ideas, a dialogue that performs literary criticism, a novel about writing novels, somewhat-less-than-reverent theological reflections, or bizarre interdisciplinary offspring of math, science, and the humanities. Undoubtedly, forms like this exist. But I think the theory outlined above provides a new rationale for writing in this manner, not to mention a call for more of such texts, texts that understand their purpose to be one of such audacious learning.

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Appendix A

Mess-Understood: A Close Reading of “Errata”

At first glance, the poem “Errata” appears to be a giant mess. Composed of nine separate sections, none of which possess an obvious correlation to any other; content-wise (except perhaps the first and ninth), without any distinct sense of meter or (with few notable exceptions) rhyme, this particular work gives off the impression of having haphazardly slapped together without any unifying or cohesive sense of structure. A closer inspection, however, will reveal that, though faults certainly exist, this “mess” actually ties together in numerous subtle ways that are integral to the meaning of the work, indeed, that the mess itself is at the very heart of the poetic statement, tying together form and content in a manner both harmonious and indispensable.

Let us first turn our attention to the overall organization of this particular poem. While superficially rather different from each other, these nine sections begin to reveal structural connections after a close reading. The first and ninth sections are both haiku that mention France; the second and eighth contain nautical imagery, not to mention exceedingly long and notably rhythmic lines that bracket a short list indented beyond all other lines in the poem; the third and seventh both exhibit the problematic “watchmaker” couplet, references to the desert, mention of food, particularly where a “daily special” is concerned; the fourth and sixth are composed of seven lines, broken into two stanzas of three and four lines apiece (though their order is reversed), all without any capitalization or punctuation; leaving the fifth section to stand alone without a mate, an entirely reasonable assessment, given that its subheading, “A Dictionary of Words Misunderstood,” effectively places it in a genre all its own and suggests that the crux of the poem is to be found here. (In actuality, as we will see later, the fifth section is a key for understanding the poetic statement when it does finally arrive, but this still places it in a position of great importance)

This vast number of parallelisms makes it highly unlikely that their presence is mere coincidence, allowing us to assume that the author included them intentionally, and that they are thus worthy of our attention. The first four sections, apparently unrelated to each other, all possess correlatives in sections four through nine; the implication being that the fifth section forces a reinterpretation of the four that preceded it, a reinterpretation that then takes place in reverse order. While forgoing a detailed explanation at the moment, allow me to propose that, graphically, the structure of this poem resembles a “V” shape, with the fifth section lying at the vertex, and each other section having a complement—the first and ninth, the second and eighth, and so on.1

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1 Consider a coordinate plane in which the value of x represents the numbered sections and y = 0 represents the center of the poem’s meaning, so that an increased absolute value of y indicates a greater digression from the meaning of the poem; on this plane, the function f(x) = | 5 - x |, where 1 ≤ x ≤ 9, can be used to represent the trajectory of the poem. Graphing the first point in the coordinate plane at (1,4) would indicate that the first section is four units (though this designation is purely subjective, I take “units” here to indicate the actual distance, in sections, from the key in the fifth section) removed from the crux of the poem; subsequent plotting would place points at (2,3), (3,2), and (4,1). At x = 5, however, the y-value narrows to zero with the key to the poetic meaning, beyond which the poem opens back up as the subsequent sections are reevaluated in light of the catalyst proposed by the fifth section.
This structure would assume the graphical form of a large "V" that, because of the correlations between sections (which can be seen visually along horizontal lines of identical y-value), can be considered a partial chiasmus (as a "V" perched upon an inverted copy of itself forms a chiastic ["X"] shape). Furthermore, each section has a complement in poetic meaning or devices, as given by equal outputs generated by the function \( f(x) = |5 - x| \), which, graphically, would demonstrate complementarity along lines of horizontal y-value.
Because the fifth section, at the vertex of our \( V \)," assumes such importance, let us begin our analysis of the poetic elements here. The subheading of this section, "A Dictionary of Words Misunderstood," makes an allusion to Milan Kundera's The Unbearable Lightness of Being—an unfortunate comparison in that the existential themes of that novel are in short supply here in this particular poem. However, whereas Kundera's novel used the Dictionary to demonstrate differences in perception between its main characters (and therefore the impossibility of absolute relationship), the definition of "Misunderstood" (which appears only in these two instances in the fifth section) in the context of the poem seems to indicate that the words included in the Dictionary of "Errata" are simply to be understood as words commonly confused with, or for which people unintentionally exchange their definitions for, each other. Understanding this does nothing to decrease the relative carelessness of the allusion, but at least the poem makes it reasonably clear to what effect the Dictionary is employed. The "misunderstanding" thus implies that "Erotica" and "Errata" are sometimes considered synonymous, or at least that the reader should consider them so for the purposes of this poem. It is worth noting that the title of the poem is one of the two confused words in the Dictionary, demonstrating that the poem itself is not only a collection of "error[s] in a text or printing, often compiled in a list of similar such errors," but that it is also "marked by desire." Remembering this presence of desire will prove invaluable as we read the text.

Returning to the beginning, the first section demonstrates that conflict is built into the poem from the outset. As a coastal province of France, Brittany stands across the English Channel from England (implied in the striking "alabaster cliffs" that comprise the Dover coastline), invoking a host of battleground associations: the Hundred Years' War, the Normandy invasion of D-Day (which appears in the ninth section of the poem) that originated from the shores of the United Kingdom, the barely concealed modern-day conflict between the languages of the two countries for global linguistic prominence, and their simple geographic opposition across the "demilitarized zone" of the Channel. Indeed, the gulf between these two diametrically opposed forces—or perhaps we could say, these "incongruities between texts"—is a difficult one to surmount, as the syncopation of "swimmer's toil" would indicate.

The second section exhibits tension also, though here the conflict is of rhythm, not geopolitics. The first stanza of the second section (beginning with "bobbing") flows in a natural rhythm of dactylic feet for the majority of its first long line, whereas the second seems to deliberately thwart any possibility of falling into a steady meter, giving the impression of constant conflict and collision. However, even the regularity of the first stanza begins to show signs of decay when it stutters into "and built by a human hand fish" and regains its rhythm momentarily before finally decaying into entropy with "Monotony" and the second stanza, implying that the steady rhythm of the first stanza is unnatural, forced, and inherently unstable.

The imagery of the second section resides in the depiction of the two ships, one of which bobs in (near) perfect harmony with the ocean upon which it floats, the other crashing violently through practically every wave that crosses its path. The latter of these two vessels begins to exhibit the sexual imagery we should expect from a poem whose title is to be confused with "Erotica"—"froth," "a shudder below-decks," "[a]\"rousing," and most notably "seamen"—though this stands in marked contrast to the less sexually-charged, natural imagery of the first stanza, in "ocean," "seas," and "fish." However, due to the negative value judgment ("Monotony") placed upon the first stanza, the second stanza takes prominence in the mind of the reader, in spite of (or rather, because of) its irregular rhythm and sexual metaphors.

We've noted how each section has a complement (the first and ninth, second and eighth, etc.), though not all the connections made by the poetic devices in these sections line up perfectly and exclusively with their partners. While our graphical model would indicate that the only connections to be made with the first section should be found in section nine, aquatic imagery appears in both sections one and two, in "swimmer's toil" (which we have taken to indicate the English Channel) and the extended nautical metaphor of the two ships. The mess begins to make itself evident.

The third section only reinforces this mess. This section begins with a couplet, \[ \text{Watchmaker, watchmaker, make me a clock.} \]
\[ \text{Crack my face open to see how I took.} \]

that immediately draws attention to itself, distinguished from the remainder of the poem not only by its italicization, but also because it is so far the only example of end-stopped rhyme, and makes another direct allusion, this time to the "Matchmaker, Matchmaker" song from "Fiddler on the Roof." While the ethnic overtones of that musical make no appearances in this poem, the sexual focus of the poem forces us to conclude that the allusion of this couplet simply makes reference to the relational and romantic aspects of the "Matchmaker" song; once again, we see an allusion that relays its purpose, despite the relative
carelessness with which it is employed. However, the ambiguity in this line makes it a good choice in itself (despite its dead-end allusiveness); “make me a clock” suggests either “make a clock for me” of “make me into a clock,” though the latter option seems more likely after the anthropomorphism in the second line: “my face” and “how I tock.” The implication of the second line, suggested by the correlation between “tock” (talk) and “conversation” (in the third line), is one of close examination of the speaker to achieve greater understanding and intimacy. Understanding the clock anthropomorphically also helps clarify the first ambiguous possibility as well: “make a clock for me” thus becomes the cry of Adam requesting a helpmate in the Garden.

And the remainder of the third section may be best comprehended in light of these themes, understanding and intimacy. Two rocks, through “conversation” and a great deal of time (the passage of time given in the third stanza and the understatement presented in “week”), slowly change into opposites, the “gulch and the arch,” though in the midst of this difference, they assert understanding and relationship by the end of the section. In the same way opening a clock to examine its inner workings can give a person an understanding of how it “tocks,” conversation can be the medium through which identity is formed and relationship developed, even when the two items in relationship with each other are vastly different. (In analyzing this section, I have clearly omitted some concerns and made some oversimplifications. However, the brief synopsis of the section that I have presented should prove adequate for understanding the poem in general.)

After the complicated tangle of the third section, the fourth comes as quite a relief. Despite the lack of punctuation, the stanza break would suggest that this section can be read as two simple, declarative sentences, sentences that set up a simple comparison between the rather conventional metaphor of a pearl turning something ugly into something beautiful, and the rather unorthodox, sophomoric image of mucus smeared under a table in school. Nonsensical by itself, this stanza really only exhibits meaning within the overall context of the larger poem, which we shall continue to develop below. However, before continuing, it must be noted that the poetic voice in this second stanza, by finding some sort of childish value in vandalizing the table, leads us to associate “boogers” with “beautiful” and to find something worthwhile in what we would normally consider simply gross.

At this point, the reader has encountered four distinct and wildly disparate sections of the poem. One is a highly formalized Japanese structure, one heavily rhythmic, one intensely imagistic and anthropomorphic, and one a simple metaphor. Such variation in nearly every primary category of poetic device (form, image, rhythm, and especially content) seems irreconcilable until the fifth section. In this, the central passage for understanding the entire poem, we realize from the second definition given for “Erratum” that “incongruity” is exactly what the reader should be looking for. But incongruity of what? Simply throwing together a number of unconnected poetic devices seems haphazard, if not irresponsible, so for what should the reader look? Perhaps this will become evident as we continue through the rest of the poem (as x gets reinterpreted and y increases).

In reinterpreting the previous four sections by reading the final four, we first come upon section six, which, like its complement, section four, is rather simple, and provides a welcome break between the central fifth section and the difficult third and seventh. Once again, the casual tone is maintained, particularly in the final line, “at least it keeps my tea from growing cold.” However, while a fairly large disconnect existed between the two elements of conflict in section four, between “pearl” and “boogers,” the two antagonists within section six are much closer together: “tea-cozy” and “teapot” (both of them metaphors vaguely sexual in nature). Throughout this and the next three sections, we will continue to see the contrasted elements grow closer and closer together.

As we should expect from section three, section seven proves rather difficult, and will once again require some simplification and omission. In the first portion, the phrase “Opposites Attract” appears, distinguished by its capitalization, which makes perfect sense in a poem that, as we are beginning to see, is about relationship and conflict, particularly between opposing elements (like England and France, “gulch” and “arch,” or “pearl” and “boogers”). However, this familiar phrase is promptly followed by an allusion to Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, which immediately negates the cliché by conjuring nonsense and make-believe; the rhyme (only the second occasion of end-stopped rhyme in the poem) further clarifies that this is the position held by the poem, and not that opposites do, in fact, attract.

Therefore, the second stanza presents what the poem actually advocates. Cracking open the “icebox” immediately recalls cracking open the clock in the couplet that reappears in the following stanza, suggesting conversation and intimacy in “contrasting contents.” As noted in the sixth section however, the contrasts are beginning to diminish, as the list of the icebox’s contents lines up similar categories—meats,
fruits and vegetables, and drinks—before culminating in a perfect match, "artichoke to artichoke." The differences are not shoved aside (indeed, by the end of the stanza, it is suggested that they all get thrown into a pot together), but familiarity is beginning to appear in the midst of those differences.

Section eight wastes no time in presenting the rhythm that played so prominent a role in section two, only this time the rhythm is far more complex. While the first stanza of section two fell neatly into dactylish for nearly its entire length, no such regularity is to be found in section eight; however, by the same token, the severe irhythm of section two, stanza two, also fails to appear. (As a detailed analysis of the rhythm throughout this section would take up a great deal of time and space, I will simply allow the reader to note the natural ebb and flow of the language on her own.) Even the contrast between the imagery is less apparent—the nautical metaphors are no longer the focus of the section, and are employed merely to characterize the actions of the man and woman involved; the natural imagery appears only in "organic" and "herd"; and the sexual imagery ("shuddering," "ending" [climaxing], "shrieking," and "a spray of salty waves") would probably go unnoticed if not for its blatancy in the corresponding section two.

But section eight is where we can find most clearly stated the underlying meaning of this poem. This is hinted at in the subtle vowel-switching in the first stanza, as the line "forgetting the martial rules of right-of-way, tracks left to cause" appears twice, ending alternatively with "collision" and "collusion," implying that alliance can be found through collision. But the most explicit declaration is given its own stanza—"it is right to trust the tension," spoken by the two "hulls," or the man and woman of the previous stanza. All the conflict in the poem has been building up to this point: all the different foods, the tea-cozy surrounding the teapot, the incongruities and misunderstandings, the dirt covered in mucus, the gulch and arch, and the boat crashing through hostile seas have all been conflicts, and all presented in a favorable light such that by the time we reach the statement that the tension and conflict are somehow beneficial, we have been prepared for this declaration all along.

But, haven't the conflicts been diminishing in severity since the fifth section? If the conflict is good and trustworthy, why go about steadily removing it from the poem? Here is where the epilogue, section nine, comes into play. Once again, we are presented with France, only here the image is that of Allied soldiers ("locusts") storming the beaches on D-Day ("June") and facing the German defenses ("leaden rain"). The restricted conflict of the poem has suddenly exploded into open war, the Biblical allusion to the Egyptian plague ("locusts") has turned the forces of good into the enemy, and the haiku ends with the subsummation of the Other, which contemporary philosophy tells us can never happen. The net effect of the slow diminishing of the conflict to the unifying poetic "thesis," followed by the utter nullification of any resolution that section eight may have brought about, leads the reader to an understanding that while trusting in the conflict and tension is good, and brings about intimacy, relationship, and togetherness, conflict is still conflict, and the final section serves as a reminder that trust in that tension must always be maintained in shadow of open war.

Our close reading has revealed to us some of the meaning and unity behind this difficult and complex poem, but the fact still remains that this poem is an utter mess. In addition to the apparent arbitrariness of the imagery, we've already taken note of the way in which some of the structural cohesiveness fails; id est, some of the aquatic imagery of section two also appears in section one, making a connection where one should not exist. Other examples of these connections between non-complements exist in the quotations in sections three and eight, the presence of food imagery in section six in addition to where it should be found in sections three and seven, and in the haphazard placement of allusions in sections three, five, and seven. Our first reaction to this would be to say that the poet was careless, but perhaps these structural limitations are actually fundamental to understanding the poem. The very act of sexual intercourse, to which this poem frequently alludes, is a rather messy one, yet few would debate that it is not only the highest form of intimacy possible, but also takes place between two very disparate entities, male and female. The messiness of the poem reflects the messiness of sex and relationships in general; far from being a flaw in the poet's craft, this actually reinforces the overall meaning. Admittedly, the messiness does detract somewhat from the overall cohesiveness of the work. But in a poem that is about revealing cohesion in elements that do not necessarily seem complementary, there is no better way to marry form to content.

Appendix B

"Yearbooks" and the Tyranny of Symbol
On April 20, 1999, the United States was shocked by the massacre of 13 students by two of their peers at Columbine High School, Littleton, Colorado. And while blame was pointed in many directions by many different fingers, one thing eventually became explicitly clear to adults around the country: high schools had become increasingly fragmented and caste-organized, wherein a select few social groups—particularly the athletes (or “jocks”) and cheerleaders—held implicit power over the remainder of the students. *Time* was one of the first newsmagazines to alert the larger public to this reality in relation to the Littleton incident, most notably in Adam Cohen’s article “A Curse of Cliques,” from May 3 of that year.

This article revealed the sort of peer domination that allowed, and silently gave assent to, the social persecution of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold that left them with rage enough facilitate the brutal murders of their classmates and themselves. Practically any teenager who was a high school student at the time of the massacre would be quite familiar with this social structure that so marginalizes and alienates those who fail to conform to the norms of the ruling cliques. So, too, seems to be Mitchell, narrator of the short story “Yearbooks,” who by his own admission is “the one who never fit in,” a fact most apparent in the symbol of his yearbook.

In case people are unfamiliar with this symbol, a yearbook is typically issued annually at the close of each school year; its pages exhibit photographs of each student and teacher in the school, along with snapshots taken of various school clubs and activities. Over the final few days of school, students generally have their friends sign their names somewhere in the volume, accompanied by a few brief sentences reflecting upon the past year or giving a valediction for the future or the coming summer. Mitchell, reflecting the views of most people who participate in this tradition, makes the obvious connection between the volume of signatures and social standing, the implication being that the student who garnered more signatures enjoyed greater popularity than the person who obtained fewer.

This popularity is crucial currency in the high school world, where, as Cohen points out, the privileged social castes “glide” through high school, their exploits celebrated in pep rallies and recorded in the school paper and in trophy cases. “The jocks and the cheerleaders, yes, have the most clout,” says Blake McConnell, a student at Sprayberry High School near Atlanta. “They get out of punishment—even with the police. Joe Blow has a wreck and has been drinking, and he gets the boot thrown at him. The quarterback gets busted, and he gets a lighter sentence.”

Nearly every teenager of this time attributes a measure of worth to a high yield of yearbook signatures, and in an environment such as the one Cohen describes, desiring such a status symbol can hardly be faulted. Mitchell's problem, however, is that he still continues to obsess over this symbol, over four years after his high school graduation, a fact made evident in that yearbook entries dominate half of his narrative, jumping into the story practically every time Mitchell completes a thought. The student with whom Mitchell is obsessed, Brian, obtained one hundred and twelve signatures (compared to Mitchell's three), so Mitchell naturally assumes that Brian's high school experience was enjoyed from a greater level within the social hierarchy. The irony, of course, is that four years of hindsight have failed to grant Mitchell insight enough to recognize that Brian's signatures are infinitely more vapid and convey infinitely less sincerity than either of the revelations from Mitchell's two friends.

This perceived deficiency in his yearbook-symbol leaves Mitchell with a deep-seated inferiority complex that is quite typical of those from the marginalized social classes of high school. Another student quote regarding Columbine reveals just serious is the potential for emotional trauma resulting from peer abuse: "If you go to school, and people make fun of you every day, and you don't have friends, it drives you to insanity." Sylvia's entry in Mitchell's yearbook, though optimistic, contains hints of recurring abuse in her and Mitchell's high school experience, and provides a probable basis for the sort of neurosis that Mitchell demonstrates throughout his obsessive narrative. In Mitchell's case, the abuse was likely not as severe as that of Dylan Harris and Eric Klebold, but as Cohen notes, unpopular people tend to be magnets for cruelty, even from the so-called “nice” kids, and severity is hardly requisite for emotional scarring.

At the end of the story, Mitchell finally confronts his depression and barely-concealed desire for suicide by staring down the plunge into the ravine and eventually deciding (after a particularly vivid fantasy

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2 Ibid., 45.
3 Ibid.
of his own death) to carry on with his life, and the reader assumes that he has finally escaped the tyranny of allowing the scarcity of entries in his yearbook to contaminate his memories of high school and dictate his hopes for the future. However, a closer inspection suggests that Mitchell hasn’t removed himself from the system that places such a high value on the symbolism of the yearbook at all, only that he now looks for a different revelation within the same symbol that high school society has told him holds importance.

At first glance, it seems entirely reasonable to assume that Mitchell is a changed man and that he has escaped the power of the yearbook-symbol; his narrative even opens with the bold statement “today I learned how to fly,” which presumably refers to his affirmation of life after pondering suicide. He refers to the yearbooks as “stupid” and “silly,” and even declares that his envy for Brian’s status takes place in the past tense—“more than that, I think, I envied his yearbook” (emphasis added). And furthermore, his “conversion” at the end seems final and purgative—“eight whole years of misery come pouring out”—just as his decision to continue living seems to lay to rest the notion that the yearbook-symbol has dominated his life.

But has he really escaped at all? It seems entirely plausible that the judgments of “stupid” and “silly” serve only to convince the narrator that he has left high school behind, with its imposition of value upon the yearbook, when in fact he hasn’t at all. He determines to reinitiate contact with his friend Sylvia, but the form of the story, with its continual juxtaposition of yearbook fragments against Mitchell’s narrative, implies that even this action, so seemingly redemptive and inaugural, was foretold four years prior in Sylvia’s entry into his yearbook—“if you ever need an ear to listen or a shoulder to cry on, you know my number.” Admittedly, Mitchell now seems to have some grasp of the vapidity of Brian’s one hundred and twelve signatures, but when Mitchell’s old system of values is removed, he turns right back to his yearbook to replace what was lost, only this time the focus is on genuineness, not on sheer volume. By the end, he seems to understand that the one-third of his signatures—the one from Brian—is entirely devoid of any sort of true relational attachment, but Mitchell still looks to the yearbook to discover where his authentic relationships lie, in Sylvia and Archie. And in the end, he takes the book’s advice to call up Sylvia.

As a white baseball cap (emblematic of one’s membership in the superior, athletic caste) marked students for death at Columbine High School, so for Mitchell is the yearbook-symbol a matter of life and death: only when the yearbook (either his or Brian’s, vicariously) shows him the positive estimation of his peers does he find his life worth living. By the end of his narrative, he reveals himself to have undergone a transformation of sorts, and no reader could deny that significant and meaningful growth has occurred. But the ending elicits more of an ironic than an inspirational effect from the opening statement—Mitchell hasn’t learned how to fly on his own at all, he has just simply reestablished what he will value in the symbol high school has given to him. The yearbook-symbol still rules his life, but now with a more bearable scepter.

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4 Ibid., 44.
Appendix C

"The Exquisite Tragedy of Icarus Revealed," or the Exquisite Travesty of "Icarus" Repealed

Before beginning this particular analysis, allow me to make a confession. As the author of the work that I am about to examine, I am necessarily privileged to insider information about the author's intent and reason for writing. Some may argue that this diminished objectivity makes literary criticism impossible; however, I am using this work to demonstrate the validity of claims made by the Reader-Response tradition, not to argue for a particular historical-critical reading. As the majority of writing on Reader-Response theory is primarily theoretical and phenomenological anyway (as opposed to offering practical guides for the actual process of reading), I see absolutely no problem with stretching the limits of the discipline to demonstrate even more authoritatively the subjectivity exhibited by variances in interpretive communities. With this in mind, let us turn to "The Exquisite Tragedy of Icarus Revealed, or A Man Stabs Himself in the Neck with Something Sharp."

It must first be noted that the author is a self-described “idea writer,” choosing to focus more on a particular idea or message than on plot and characterization. While such a focus usually sounds the death knell (quality-wise, at least) on fiction, perhaps it would be more helpful to consider these prose works fables, rather than short stories. As such, let us take it as a basic assumption that some sort of authorial intention undergirds this particular work, regardless of whether or not the audience has any access to it.

But of course, I—as the author himself—do have (limited1) access to the author's intention, and will use it accordingly to discuss the variety of possible readings for this work. Essentially, the author intended this piece as a humorous treatment of the excesses of Romanticism, particularly that it focuses too much on transcendent emotion to be of any real practical use, juxtaposed against the cool-headed rationality and pragmatism of Classicism, and its contemporary extension, Modernism. Accordingly, the character of Cole (an abbreviation of Coleridge, a connection begged by the presence of the Lake District photograph) represents the Romantic camp, while Elliot (think T.S.) signifies the Classical (with his photograph of the Parthenon) and the Modern.

As the Romantic character, Cole's portion of the fable is rife with overblown (in the author's opinion) vocabulary and Romantic clichés—"laboriously extracted solemnity," "the mutilating pen," "sea of warm cerulean," "golden youth," and "circumambient blue," to name a few examples—which serve both as a commentary on the Romantic tradition and as the primary source of the humor in the piece. Cole tastes ecstasy for a few moments, only to find that the real world now seems intolerably dull in comparison, forcing him to exit through the only way befitting a true Romantic poet—suicide. While tragic at first, considering that his ascension provides the impetus for his death, committing suicide over a poem seems thoroughly needless and ridiculous. Cole, on the other hand, provides the antidote to such a wasteful focus on the transcendent—while retaining a genuine appreciation for the newly-finished work of art, he is able to set that aside and live practically, shown in his ability to call for an ambulance.

That takes care of the author's intentions, but what about other readers, people from interpretive communities that don't partake of an anti-Romantic literary perspective? Though the clues for the authorial interpretation seem to my mind rather clear, a friend first clued me in to the possibility of other readings when she said that it seemed "unbearably tragic." Tragic? I thought it was supposed to be funny. This friend in particular, she told me shortly after revealing her interpretation, was coming from a worldview that sought beauty in transcendent experience, so naturally, she would identify more with Cole than with Elliot. In her opinion, the brief moment of Cole's ecstasy was the focus of the work (rather than the moment of Elliot's pragmatism), and demonstrated the sort of ideal revelation toward which all of human experience is focused, or at least should be. By contrast, Elliot's inability to see the transcendent beauty in Cole's poem represents the sad result of becoming accustomed to the unvarying grind of daily necessity without any

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1 I understand that a variety of arguments exist to show that even the author doesn't always fully comprehend her own intentions for writing or the various component parts that she brings together in a text, but my focus is far from such psychoanalytic discussions. Suffice it to say that I wrote both the "Icarus" story and this particular essay.
thought of a higher reality. Though the author intended this story as a critique of the Romantics, for people who don’t approach the text with the thought “Romanticism is silly” in their minds, my friend’s interpretation is a perfectly valid one.

But what about some of the other interpretations? A feminist critic may note that the presence of only men in the narrative is just one more example of the exclusion of women from the literary canon and the various literary epochs. A person reading with an eye toward religion and the dualism between sacred and secular may read this as a critique of religion, saying that organized religion is too focused on a spiritual plane to have any usefulness for an earthly life. A pro-Romantic reader may consider this an example of how modern culture has lost touch with a necessary spiritual part of human existence. Someone with a technological bent may see a significant image in the Post-It list and shattered computer. And so on and so forth—I can imagine varying potential interpretations through any number of personal biases: writers, academics, mystics, deconstructors, the list goes on and on. And any one of these interpretations could be “correct”; most likely, all of them are. None of these readings violate the author’s intentions; on the contrary, the author’s reading is only one of many different, and equally valid readings, all of which are present in the text and require only a particular reader to draw them out.

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2 While Stanley Fish’s “interpretive communities” seem to relate more to academic discourse, I am here going to borrow from that notion, but broaden it outside the classroom to include worldviews and primary interests in a very general sense.
Appendix D

Dualism in "Schroedinger's Cat," or Hacking Out the Heisenberg Hairball

If one of the primary goals of deconstruction consists of challenging conventional notions of dualism and demonstrating the presence of third options or of spectra between the two given poles, then religion should be one of the first places to which this theory turns its gaze: nowhere is dualism more apparent than in the religious oppositions of sacred and secular, us and them, faith and knowledge, and it is this latter pair that "Schroedinger's Cat" address most overtly. Conventionally, faith and knowledge are considered opposing terms by both religious and nonreligious parties, so that anything religious must be accepted without proof in order to be authentically faithful (with argumentation for the existence of the spiritual restricted primarily for apologetic purposes), and so that anything that can be empirically or scientifically known is not a matter of faith. Many religious traditions support such a dualism by an appeal to Scripture—"Now faith is assurance of [things] hoped for, a conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1, ASV)—while the case could be made that the corresponding secular perspective results from the growing failure of the Christian church to accept the burgeoning scientific revolution of the last few hundred years. And while the advent of the post-modern has had the effect of placing knowledge and faith on a continuum, so that acceptance of theories like the Big Bang and macroevolution requires at least a small element of faith in the scientific data, they still inhabit opposing poles, with more certain theories falling closer to the knowledge side of things and less certain (or religious) ideas sticking close to side of faith.

"Schroedinger's Cat," at first glance, seems to favor the "blind faith" pole of this continuum, allying itself firmly in the religious camp. The focus of this story appears to be the statement "the act of measurement alter[s] the results," located in the only passage of the narrative that actually focuses on the titular physics concept. Applied to the apparent climax of the story, the argument between Heather and the narrator, the indication seems to be that love, if measured, becomes significantly altered, and that a faithful acceptance of love is preferable to a testing of it. This understanding of faith seems one opposed to the intervention of rational proof—it is somehow less valuable to know that someone loves you than to simply trust that they do.

The reference to the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle further supports a reading of faith/knowledge dualism. The Principle essentially states that you can know either the location of a subatomic particle or its speed, never both; the more certainty with which you can speak of its location, the less you can of its speed, and vice versa. This either/or assertion again places knowledge and faith at opposite ends of a continuum.

But this presentation of an ideal faith as one without knowledge deconstructs itself right in this same text, with the image of Heather trying to reconstitute the blue color for the sky in her painting. Because a glob of paint on a palette often looks different from the same color when spread across a canvas, she would have absolutely no way of determining whether or not the color she is mixing is the exact one without the test of placing it on the canvas. In this case, the act of measurement, though it does (coupled, apparently, with her emotional state after the argument) significantly alter the painting in the end, proves absolutely necessary. The implication made, therefore, is that testing, or the obtaining of data (knowledge) is a significant element of the faith-act. Under this assessment, the narrator is entirely correct to demand Heather's affirmation of love; indeed, a test such as this would be the only way of determining whether or not her love is real.

But is knowledge a simple part of faith, or is it necessary for faith action, or is it actually destructive to the faith-act? An examination of the Oxford English Dictionary only complicates matters further by making more connections. "Knowledge" is defined in religious language as "acknowledgement, confession," faith can be a confession, as in "the Jewish faith." "Faith" is "belief proceeding from reliance on testimony or authority," a grounded belief, not one that proceeds from blindness or naiveté, in the sense that "to have on good faith" is to have an assurance, a promise that things will turn out. But if "faith" is "belief in authority," then to "know" is to "admit the claims or authority of."

But it goes further than that. "Faith" is "attestation, confirmation, assurance," language more certain and unambiguous than that in the first five definitions given for "know": to "perceive," "recognize," "distinguish," "acknowledge," "admit," "be acquainted with," "be familiar with." Not only is faith part (separate from) and parcel (a package) of knowledge, but it is a more assured (encouraged) form of apprehending (seizing) with the mind.
And with that, Heisenberg no longer has any place in the "Shroedinger" narrative. Faith and knowledge are no longer at opposite ends of a continuum—as one grows in faith, knowledge decreases, and vice versa—but inexorably intertwined. One cannot have faith without knowledge, and one cannot know anything without a measure of faith. Furthermore, connotatively, they are often the same. As the narrator of the story tests his relationship, he alters the potential response of love he could expect from Heather, but it is not a matter of faith over knowledge—his question is a gesture of both, a test with its own effects, but a legitimate test nonetheless.

Indeed, as we test this meaning of the story, we alter the initial result, the initial interpretation, of our reading. Shroedinger's Cat wins over Heisenberg. This we can recognize, distinguish, know. In this we have assurance, confirmation, faith.