The eternal return: The Shipping News and the consideration of faith
by Melissa Anna Jaten

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English
Montana State University
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Abstract:
This study examines faith within the context of literature, namely in E. Annie Proulx’s novel The
Shipping News. The construct of self-identity is considered in both reading practices and in Quoyle, the
protagonist of the novel, as an act of continual quest. I will argue, via The Shipping News, the initial
and unavoidable reading of oneself performed through literature is merely an act of (visceral or earthly)
self-preservation, an act of preserving a thread of knowable identity, controllable and malleable at will.
This is part of the process language as paradoxical faith engages. We cannot not read for
self-preservation and self-control. However, that we can see all of ourselves through a text is an
illusion because it is that very text dictating the choices we have - there is no one true self, exterior of
influence; there is only the text and the various identities and debates it engages.
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*THE SHIPPING NEWS AND THE CONSIDERATION OF FAITH*

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

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This study examines faith within the context of literature, namely in E. Annie Proulx's novel *The Shipping News*. The construct of self-identity is considered in both reading practices and in Quoyle, the protagonist of the novel, as an act of continual quest. I will argue, via *The Shipping News*, the *initial and unavoidable* reading of oneself performed through literature is merely an act of (visceral or earthly) self-preservation, an act of preserving a thread of knowable identity, controllable and malleable at will. This is part of the process language as paradoxical faith engages. We cannot not read for self-preservation and self-control. However, that we can see *all* of ourselves through a text is an illusion because it is that very text dictating the choices we have -- there is no *one* true self, exterior of influence; there is only the text and the various identities and debates it engages.
**Faith:** The lesson of the eternal return is that there is no return of the negative. The eternal return means that being is selection. Only that which affirms or is affirmed returns. The eternal return is the reproduction of becoming but the reproduction of becoming is also the production of becoming active: child of Dionysus and Ariadne. In the eternal return being ought to belong to becoming, but the being of becoming ought to belong to a single becoming-active (189-90).

From Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*

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**Faith:** To write the word ‘wilderness’ is to believe that a reader shares one’s language, that the reader will understand this word, and all the word means. The use of language is an act of confidence in a belief system of sorts, belief that certain words have the power to convey images, to evoke feeling, emotion, action (4).

From Chris Schaberg, “Authorship and the Subject of Nature”

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**Faith:** A faith inspired fiction squarely faces the imponderables of life and in the fiction writer’s radical self-confrontation may even confess to desolation and doubt. Such fiction is instinctive rather than conformist, intuitive rather than calculated; it features vital characters rather than conforming types, offers freedom and anomaly rather than foregone conclusions, invites thoughtfulness not through rational argument, but through asking the right questions. A faith-inspired fiction is, as Father DeMello has said of story, the shortest distance between human understanding and truth (6).

From Ron Hansen, “Faith and Fiction”

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**Faith:** The essential act of faith, it seems to me, is wonder – a sort of involuntary fascination in awe. By awe, I do not mean the act of seeking, either – the quest one hears a lot these days in the affectionate recollection of George Harrison’s *My Sweet Lord*. I don’t believe in seeking, and I don’t believe in finding (92).

From Roger Rosenblatt, “God Is Not on My Side. Or Yours.”

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**Faith:** But in this start that readers receive there is a new alternation of movements: they go from the traumatic experience of the unknown and strange meaning to the grammar which, already operating on another level, restores order, coherence and chronology. And then there is a movement back: from history and philology to the understanding that again affects and awakes, forcing us out of the bed of the preformed and customary ideas that protect and reassure... An alternation which, admittedly, testifies to the hesitation of our little faith, but from which also stems the transcendence that does not impose itself with denials through its actual coming and which, in inspired Scripture, awaits a hermeneutic - in other words, reveals itself only in dissimulation (115).

From Emmanuel Levinas, “On the Jewish Reading of Scriptures”

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**Faith:** Chapter 39 “Shining Hubcaps”: “There are still old knots that are unrecorded, and so long as there are new purposes for rope, there will always be new knots to discover. *The Ashley Book of Knots* (324)"

E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News*
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In her 1987 *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, Julia Kristeva poses this question:

Do the Indoeuropean languages reflect a type of culture in which the individual suffers dramatically because of his separation from the cosmos and the other? Presumably implicit in such a separation and its attendant suffering is the act of offering – a bridge across the gap – together with the expectation of reward. The human, however, is immersed in the rhythms of the cosmos, which in the Indoeuropean world dominate the separation that underlies faith (31).

According to this passage, humans cannot exist outside the “rhythms of the cosmos,” and, moreover, the very structure of our “cosmos,” as all space, is a function of “suffering” by nature of the “gap” in which humans try to connect with “the other” through the “act of offering.” By implying the “act of offering,” implicit with “expectation of reward,” this passage reflects the illusion whereby humans *can think* themselves separate from “the cosmos” and *able* to pursue the transcendent.

However, by nature of human immersion in a process foregrounding separation, rewards will always become either invisible or unachievable. Hence, the more real suffering comes from realizing no act of offering will result in tangible rewards – no act will bridge the gap. What one pursues is always in the future and subject to the eternal separation that is beyond one’s ability to act upon. But, by nature of this inherent separation, the passage seems to suggest our languages require
that we pursue the other, “to bridge the gap”; *the illusion of our separation is the space in which we can engage in a faith placing us at once with(in) the other and a space requiring us to be always at its mercy.* Language hinges on and creates the illusion of separation – it reflects a culture as much as a culture can reflect it. Moreover, it creates the illusion at times of being separate from its user – the illusion of its user to wield it at will with all intentions visible. Kristeva goes on to explain “the separation that underlies faith” exists in “the somber division that is perhaps the paradoxical condition of faith” whereby Christ asks, “‘Father, Father, why hast thou forsaken me?’” (31-2). Christ, the momentary suffering human, in offering himself, his life, as a service to God, cannot understand, cannot see, his suffering as the completion of an endless service. His human-ness requires him to perceive himself as abandoned in a time of need, his reward for living virtuously denied. A close reading of this passage creates a myriad of questions, some of which will go beyond the scope of my project. If our expectations of rewards are always thwarted, then what demands our continual acts of offering? Are we all always like Christ, are we paying service to his ultimate sacrifice, are we always engaging in both? What kind of faith is this complex construction requiring one to offer without achieving a visible reward? Is suffering inherent to human functioning and faith or is suffering a breakable illusion revealing faith a farce? Can one believe, have faith, and be happy? Do we have the power to not believe or are we subject to this process by nature of the very language we use? My project stems from the contemplation of these very questions and how far they reach, especially in the language of literature.1 For, what
does it mean to explore, to engage in a process whereby one uses language to apprehend meanings in that same language? It seems readers are bound to interpret, to translate texts because language can continue only in the space where these actions occur. We cannot not find meanings. Yet, simultaneously, the moment we discern meaning, language defers our interpretation by showing alternative meanings, the "surplus" of meanings, or even the lack of meanings (Levinas, JRS 109). While these ideas seem to support the not-so-profound theory of relativity, I'd like to suggest the language we use already and always leads us to search. Language, as an act of faith, is the paradoxically evolving space that always remains open to the other. I'd also like to suggest that in this world one cannot be an atheist or engage in secularity because the language we have to communicate and explain anything from theory to ourselves already points toward the other, perhaps multiple or infinite others as excess beyond visibility. Language always *both* moves into a continually coming future because its "surplus," as leftover or excess, is inexhaustible; simultaneously, it allows the future to come by openness to the "surplus" of its potential. Language is search and simultaneously engages us to search on multiple levels. It grants us authority by nature of the way we use it as a tool to explain or to make meaning to explain ourselves. We perceive this as an act of our own control and assume language is, in fact, whole and able to explain everything. Our use of language to communicate becomes the visual focus we prioritize; we see language's ability to function as a source generating definitions. At the same time, language's excess takes away our seeming control of its 'stable nature,' thwarting our needs to use it to
master, to understand, to know, and to make meaning in a world often filled with anxiety, misunderstanding, and mystery. On the one hand, language reveals itself to be a subversive power containing intentions that may escape visibility. On the other, it reveals to us our desires to locate control. This powerful paradoxical double movement of language creates interesting implications for ‘origins,’ ‘meanings,’ ‘intentions,’ and most of all faith. Faith becomes that which guides us and requires search without guaranteeing complete visibility. For it is through using the language of stories of fiction, biography, autobiography, and history that we make sense and meaning of our experiences. And through examining these stories, we will always redefine meaningful occurrences. If our stories account for our needs to act, yet still contain absences or voids by nature of the language used, perhaps they engage a search for an other that we cannot comprehend. Perhaps the stories we love reflect the language they use to speak, where the only governing law searches out or acknowledges the presence of unexplainable absences. It would seem, if this were the case, our favorite stories and the language we always use point to absences that when seemingly filled with our interpretations reveal themselves not full. They continually reveal themselves capable of accepting more interpretations. Language is a site where ‘maximum capacity’ does not apply.

The implications for considering language as faith may sound daunting for anyone who has grown up distrusting the various religions in practice. Consideration of Kristeva’s ideas seems to beg the question: Is our language a function of, a reflection of Christianity? If this were the case, it might seem we are always bound to
suffer Christ's burden. As a young teenager, I renounced my Episcopalian
background and other Christian religions because of the hypocrisy I saw in the
congregation members, my inability to feel empowered as an individual, and the ways
people used religion to avoid responsibility for their own often unethical actions.
This left me in a dilemma articulated best by Peter Marin in his article "Secularism's
Blind Faith," where the "higher power" is now "played by the state":

Something has gone radically wrong with secularism. The problem has more
than its share of irony, for secularism, in the end, has converted itself to a kind
of religion. Our hallowed tradition of skepticism and tolerance has grown into
its near opposite, and it now partakes of precisely the same arrogance, the
same irrationality and passion for certainty, the same pretense to unquestioned
virtue against which its powers were once arrayed. In the desperate way we
cling to belief, in our contempt for those who do not believe what we believe,
secularism, has, indeed, taken on the trappings of a faith - and a narrow one at
that (2).

While Marin sees an inseparable tie between religion and faith, I did not (and still do
not) see faith as a simple function to maintain belief in religion or as equivalent to
naming the term 'religion.' I have explored faith as a way to maintain wonder in a
world where so much is mysterious and beyond explanation. Faith has often
sustained me in a spiritual sense, but that spirituality is not relegated solely to ritual
practice in a church. I began to read stories and language as other ways we make
connections, meaning, and challenges to our world and that which is to come. With
language and stories, I continually find a system of belief where paradox, history,
representation, expression, hypocrisy, irony, love, and pleasure all amount to a
swirling mass of contradictions that must co-exist to open to a new future. Good faith,
the openness to coming future meaning, also honors play in the present.
Certainly, Marin’s article raises some provocative questions about how we perceive religion and religious practice in relation to ‘free choice.’ The more I read the religious texts and the stories we write today, the less I am sure that my belief in language is separate or distinguishably different from the practice of religions of any sect. I suspect that considering our language as a function of Christianity itself is unfair and limiting. Christian-like stories can be found in pre-Christian literature. Using the example of Christ’s offering and revelation of a paradoxical faith is one moment in any history among many in which offering/reward is tied up in searching through language for a visible invisible. But because I am not engaging a study for a degree in Theology, these questions could create another study after this one. Rather, in my project, exploring the paradoxically complicated manifestations and actions of faith in literature, namely The Shipping News, might enable one to see faith not simply as a function of one religion. I would like to submit a consideration of faith where the place of suffering is part of a process enabling one to take pleasure in the ever-continuous change, renewal, and redemption defining human existence.

According to Deleuze, in his critique of Nietzsche, “The story of the meaning of existence is a long one. Its origins are Greek, pre-Christian” (19). In essence, the obsession to find meanings and origins seems to lie continually at the heart of any text and context. That we are oftentimes unable to find definitive answers, but can create meaningful responses, indicates a repetitive cycle that language engages while it simultaneously speaks to the act of wonder inherent in reading and the pleasure in
recognizing repetition. I will argue the response to the question *why do we read and write* exists in one seemingly simple word, concept, action, and embodiment: *faith*. The word itself has much baggage about its meaning – my conscious intent is to debunk the common uses of the word to show it functions in ways more complex than some of our uses for it. This is not to say that the familiar sense of faith (to be examined) can no longer exist or is ‘wrong,’ for that is impossible. Instead, I am asking that we extend our notion of faith rather than relegate it solely to a religious construct and a logically impossible paradigm (to be explained below). I believe considering faith undeniably at work might enable us to have more resilience, and open-mindedness, as well as the ability to find pleasure in moments where our powerlessness is most apparent. The knowledge that we cannot control might actually open avenues for creativity and fun for us; less will be at stake in following pre-ordained plans. We might learn to recognize the gaps inherent in our system of language and rather than ‘stressing’ over these unknowns, we may begin to see them as opportunities to create meaningful moments. I will work to unpack the notion that language and reading are inseparable acts of faith. While this all may seemingly lead to ‘yet another notion of utopia,’ where reigns the predictable, stable, unified, and peaceful, the faith I will propose is not always a guarantee of peace and total acceptance as understanding; it is an engagement in the process of living daily while opening to the future. It is the balance between the giving and taking of knowledge and responsibility, coupled with the recognition that these powerful actions are not always ours to wield, dispense, or even consciously pursue.
The notions of resolution and faith, often intertwined in powerful ways, provide a place to examine more common uses of faith. Oftentimes, issues of the seeming past come back to reveal themselves as unresolved; we are shocked and frustrated (perhaps unsurprised if one is a control fanatic, as in the lawyer’s mantra, ‘expect the unexpected’). We are left thinking we tied up loose ends and realizing we have resolved nothing at all. The immediate reaction dictates there must be another way to solve the problem – our initial attempt to fix the problem was not the correct choice (‘If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again’). This process can go on endlessly and often without resolution. In this familiar context, faith in the life process may work to give relief from the oppression of that mystery while simultaneously acknowledging its necessary existence. It allows one to pass on responsibility to the other, expecting the other to end one’s suffering. This more common definition and/or function of faith suggests it allows us to imagine, as infinite and not tangible, a divine perfection beyond human imperfection. If we can conceive of, as understand or apprehend, anything, it must be imperfect, because humans are naturally flawed. Faith in this sense releases us from the shame of making mistakes and gives us solace that physical death is not truly the end of life – life can exist beyond human existence. But the response to this may be: That we can conceive of ourselves as imperfect seems to indicate that we have some measure by which perfection can exist, be known, or quantifiable in some way. This is where it seems to get tricky. That which is perfect should exist beyond the realms of
calculability and our ability to enact anything out of our own power; anything that we imagine (or think we cannot imagine) as perfect can never be perfect because it would fall under some measure of our own (imperfect) human conception and judgment. While perhaps not realizable, not subject to finality, this kind of 'perfection' exists in the realm of the knowable. Faith, as a process by which we can make space for perfection, is still limited to that which we can know and sometimes realize. In a sense, faith works against its own purported use and definition – that which is supposed to be unknowable. This is a cycle, a repetition, by which one uses faith contrary to what one wants it to achieve. Faith ends in this context because it is limited by the ways we use it – hence, an “act of duty” (Derrida, The Gift of Death 63). There is no “wonder” or “awe” as Rosenblatt might suggest. In this context, faith always ends as a quantifiable action. However, considering faith as the language already in process opens possibilities. It may be out of our power to enact faith as a separate entity from language. The excess in language as always open to the coming of the other creates a different notion of faith. Faith is not something one has, can contain, or place in something else. Rather, it almost becomes the patience of waiting and being open to the future.

In Simulacra and Simulation, Jean Baudrillard says, “We require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end” (10). This seemingly simple statement has tremendous implications for the ways we read, our expectations of language, and how we think of faith. Like the more common uses of faith discussed earlier, language can create a visible knowledge that
one may come to rely upon. Stories become a means of reassurance because they offer a visible, readable knowledge. Readers may come to expect stories will always be able to tell what we want to know – *sometimes* they do. Reassurance is also typically a characteristic of faith because it allows one to suspend anxiety about the unknown; it creates a visible goal in which to believe. However, in these requirements of "visible" exist the implicit yet perhaps more powerful avoidance of the knowledge of the eternally invisible, what can never be accounted for or understood. While we learn from the visible in stories, they also often leave us in a state of wonder where we do not know all of the answers. Henry James’s story *The Turn of the Screw* is a great example of literature’s excess and ever-present visible and invisible. Its myriad of arguable conclusions defers one final, knowable ending, often creating readers’ crises by denying their desire to know. Forever opening to new interpretations, it shows us language’s capacity to inspire. This invisible may enable another faith to emerge, but not before some readers panic at language’s paradoxical condition as traces of the visible and invisible. As readers, seeking to interpret stories to alleviate the pressure of the unknown, we are faced with a frustration. Using a language inherently excessive to make a whole sense, we are often left with the unknown. Nevertheless, this begins a cycle whereby seeking the visible becomes the concrete means to understanding and the seeming way to avoid the invisible, "to reassure us about our end." But, no sooner do we ‘see’ and our vision becomes cloudy at best. It may seem logical to turn inward to generate meaning, for what is seemingly more visible than oneself and one’s intentions?³
We find ourselves in texts and allow ourselves to live vicariously through characters in texts as a way to anticipate the future. In the early stages of reading this can be a productive way to situate oneself within the world and to create values. It is a way to affirm oneself in the world. But as a limitation, it teaches us to place ourselves at the center of every process and situation; it becomes a path toward solipsism. So we learn (or are taught) the art of critical examination as a means to open ourselves and texts to more interesting interpretations, for example those which may consider or seek the influence of the subconscious. Either way, the nature of the desire to explain elicits the production of Baudrillard’s “visible.” Is there a way to read or write that always acknowledges the ‘invisible’? As an interesting question, it assumes we have the power to act over texts, we are in control of their meanings, we can expose that which ostensibly cannot be seen. What if texts already inspire this entire process of self-discovery and meaning making in the first place, in order to point to another, to the invisible, that we may never see, perhaps only sense?

I will argue, via The Shipping News, the initial and unavoidable reading of oneself performed through literature is merely an act of (visceral or earthly) self-preservation, an act of preserving a thread of knowable identity, controllable and malleable at will. This is part of the process language as paradoxical faith engages. We cannot not read for self-preservation and self-control. However, that we can see all of ourselves through a text is an illusion because it is that very text dictating the choices we have – there is no one true self, exterior of influence; there is only the text and the various identities and debates it engages. One may argue the excess in
language contains infinite choices for defining self-identity. However, the perpetual 
'excess demands the recognition that choice is not the sole self-definer; language 
contains infinitely unreadable others by nature of its openness to that which will come 
to be examined below through Derrida's "other". This does not suggest that one is 
always incapable of 'knowing oneself.' We can locate consistencies within our own 
selves and others. However, that process by which we commonly go about 'knowing 
ourselves' assumes the outcome will result in a tangible, unchangeable, self-
knowledge – a true essence of one's being. The act of seeking does not guarantee that 
of finding. The act of knowing oneself needs recognition as a continuous process, not 
one in which a person takes a long trip alone and comes back enlightened, knowing 
the self forever. A physical or mental trip enacting self-reflection and engagement 
will create self-knowledge but perhaps we should not ask that self-knowledge to be 
fixed and unchanging. What if self-knowledge was simply some process by which 
we learn to make choices and priorities – every day in light of the past and future? 
The self becomes at once constant and always changing. We can know it and it can 
escape our view in the same moment. I will argue that in and for The Shipping News, 
readers and the main character Quoyle are subject to similar quests for self-identity. 
Moreover, self-identity read through an opening faith may reveal our limited ability 
to find a visible, even reliable, self. And perhaps in this seemingly unstable location, 
one has infinite potential for wholeness.

The reason I chose to examine The Shipping News for this project stems from 
my multi-layered personal response to the text and how it has enabled me to re-see
wholeness. My initial reading, after graduating from college and journeying away from home, granted a sense of self-empowerment to me. Yet, I knew the text was more complicated than I was able to see at the time. In every reading, it seems something new appears, emerges, both about the story and how I read it, and then read myself. Each time the text is pleasurable. The Shipping News became a logical choice for how to examine reading practices, self-development, and the various factors involved in all of these constructions. Moreover, published in 1993, it is a fairly recent novel. As of 2002, the critical work about it consists mainly of book reviews. The novel was also re-made into a movie in 2001. I saw this project as an opportunity to offer a meaningful contribution to the examination of contemporary literature and to re-examine one potential role of faith in a culture torn apart by divisions concerning beliefs, values, and morals. Can there be unity in division? On an interesting note, upon finishing my first reading of the novel, I remember thinking that I would be bound to return to it someday. For, it had a certain unlocatable something that seemed to resonate with my various acts of quest. I hope that I will continue to return to it after this project.

Why do we believe a text can speak to us as individuals? Why are we able to find ourselves in texts? The text always offers one the ability to take self-autonomy and control as a viable way of recognizing oneself as one’s creator. We read and can read for a certain form of self-knowledge. But our readings should not stop there on a conscious level because language does not stop there. Our ‘true selves’ might be
more liberating if we acknowledge them as changeable (not necessarily only by our own conscious actions or impositions). In this, some level of consistency will not disappear, for searching will embody a continuous repetition; we are bound to make decisions and accept responsibilities. The act of searching does not always predict its outcome – rather it creates a space for the unknowable future to inhabit. Language as faith is always searching, awaiting interpretation; why would we try to ignore that and shut down the possibilities for future creativity by fixing meaning for ourselves and texts (Levinas, JRS114-15)? In the initial acts of reading, it is almost as though one needs to see through a series of smoke and mirrors to see the mirror rather than oneself. Paradoxically, one cannot see the mirror without seeing the self. But in more repetitions of reading, one can see oneself as a construction in/of the mirror while simultaneously seeing oneself seeing. This seems to recall Derrida’s complex exploration of the relationship between one and other, human and God, where each is itself and an other simultaneously, “Tout Autre Est Tout Autre – Every other (one) is every (bit) other” (GD 82). Derrida’s “dictum” certainly seems to hold a “trembling secret” when read in the context of faith, how one reads, and the various levels of visible and invisible operating at any given moment when reading a text (82). Like a “password” it does seem to offer the reader of this text a key to unlock the promises faith might contain (82). By Derrida’s explanation, this formula might enable some interesting opportunities:

The trembling of the formula “every other (one) is every (bit) other” can also be reproduced. It can do so to the extent of replacing one of the “every other”
by God: “Every other (one) is God,” or “God is every (bit) other.” Such a substitution in no way alters the “extent” of the original formulation, whatever grammatical function be assigned to the various words. In one case God is defined as infinitely other, as wholly other, every bit other. In the other case it is declared that every other one, each of the others, is God inasmuch as he or she is, like God, wholly other. Are we just playing a game here? If this were a game, then it would need to be kept safe and untouched, like the game that must be kept alive between humans and God. For the game between these two unique “every others,” like the same “every other,” opens the space and introduces the hope of salvation, the economy of “saving oneself”... (87).

In our existences we are self and we are other, but we are also like some other or infinite others, “each of the others, is God inasmuch as he or she is, like God, wholly other.” Simultaneously we are always other to something/one else – this sense of other is largely invisible to us but it exists. Hence, we are and we are like. This excess of others and otherness creates a complex notion of self-identity. There is a double movement here where we at once see ourselves and are blind to what we contain or emit. The exchange between “others,” texts and readers, continually creates a place for further exchange – this exchange is faith, “For the game... opens the space and introduces the hope of salvation...”. And like faith, the gaze, our gaze, what we presume as seeable, is actually made up largely of what is unseen, unseeable:

It is dissymmetrical: this gaze that sees me without my seeing it looking at me. It knows my very secret even when I myself don’t see it and even though the Socratic “Know yourself” seems to install the philosophical within the lure of reflexivity, in the disavowal of a secret that is always for me alone, that is to say for the other: for me who never sees anything in it, and hence for the other alone to whom, through the dissymmetry, a secret is revealed. For the other my secret will no longer be a secret. The two uses of “for” don’t have the same sense: at least in this case the secret that is for me is what I can’t see; the secret that is for the other is what is revealed only to the other, that she alone can see. By disavowing this secret, philosophy would have come to reside in a misunderstanding of what there is to know, namely, that there is secrecy and that it is incommensurable with knowing, with knowledge and with objectivity...(91-2).
In terms of a person reading a text for self-knowledge or to find oneself, this "dissymmetrical gaze" creates an interesting shift whereby one cannot read to find oneself, yet one cannot not read to find oneself. "Knowing yourself" is not necessarily simply a function of self control; it does not fall within "the lure of reflexivity." I am constantly being given to the text, "It knows my secret even when I don't see it." And the text always returns to me through "dissymmetry," through revealing that "for the other my secret will no longer be a secret." My own secret is precisely that which "I can't see...what is revealed only to the other, that she alone can see." This passage suggests some forms of secrecy are "incommensurable with knowing," therefore denying one's expectations that all secrets can become visible. The invisible reveals the excess of language as sites of eternal secrets. The powerful exchange between the "I" and the text continually preserves a space for coming unrevealable secrets. This does not say the power exchanged is equal in quantity or equivalent in revelation, but rather that there is movement, choices must be made, one must engage. Paradoxically, the continual revelation and creation of secrets combined with eternally unknowable secrets enables a knowing that relies upon the "visible in-visible," that which remains open to what may come (90). Faith as this repetition of "likes," of creation/revelation/creation, secrecy/knowledge/secrecy always continues in excess that "opens the space and introduces the hope of salvation..."(87). Faith is this text and its reading, the act of this text and the act of reading it.
I examined the issues of authority and subjectivity and their relation to language using Kristeva’s text in a reading of the Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector’s novella, The Hour of the Star. During the course of that study, I came to see the text already guiding and anticipating the critical interpretations offered by theorists concerning the nature of translation and how that changes authorial ownership. I realized I was subject to engage the study the text already engaged - it was far ahead of me but required my pursuit to reveal a sense of play. This created, in me, a sense of awe in which I began to question language’s ability to enact faith in a way that we cannot avoid engaging. What is this language of inspiration that guides us? Faith, in this context, seemed intertwined with interpretation and making meaning through reading texts. This notion of faith carries over into this study.

“Act of duty” can be differentiated from “absolute duty” in the former’s ownership by human action and consciousness. “Absolute duty” is beyond one’s ability to choose to enact.

While this seems to disregard all knowledge we have about the subconscious and its effect on our ways of making meaning, most readers cannot read anew and account for the effects of the subconscious on that reading. It is the process of reading, re-reading, and interpretation that may reveal subconscious intentions. In general, consciously people read for what they can rely upon, attain, and organize through what they can see – these become the prioritized processes for acquiring knowledge. Consciously, we think we read for what we don’t know, not with what we don’t know.

This concept, unlike Baudrillard’s Simulacrum, where everything is merely a repetition of a repetition, ad infinitum, without original, thus leaving the Simulacrum as the origin, does not always only seek origins but speaks more to how we construct ourselves from the structures we have. It concerns affirmation of self-identity and how room for the unexpected is always made.

Inspired from Sara Jayne Steen’s essay entitled “I’ve Never Been This Serious”: Necrophilia and the Teacher of Early Modern Literature” to be published in the forthcoming anthology, Attending to Women: Gender, Culture, Change, edited by Margaret Mikesell and Adele Seeff, University of Delaware Press.

CHAPTER TWO

TEXT, READER, AND INTERPRETATION

Creating critical pieces about texts considering the text's situatedness represents a series of repetitions. The repetitions consist of the tension caused by the unequal exchange between the visible and invisible. Researching a subject, text, author, ideology, via reading critical response always seems to engender a desire to make meaning in a text based upon one's thematic and visible agenda whether Feminist, Marxist, Deconstructionist, or others. Each reader has a stake in creating a version of the text that might support a set of ideologies that serve a certain end, or perhaps meaning, in the world. Each writer seems to have at least one particular story s/he wants to tell.

For example, in one graduate seminar we explored Wallace Stegner's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Angle of Repose*, which is supposedly based upon the real life events of Mary Hallock Foote, an early settler of the west, and her published diary, *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*. The seminar was designed to explore Foucault's infamous question, "What is an author," and the various legal and ethical implications of the responses. Essentially, we were pre-programmed to examine Stegner and Foote's work through the lenses of plagiarism and original authorship. In addition to the two primary works, we read a series of articles examining several passages from Stegner's novel that were very similar to, sometimes verbatim of those in Foote's previously published diary. We also read a series of interviews with
Stegner, all of which seek his intentions as an author and historian and the differences in responsibility that may come with these identities. We students in the seminar engaged in a series of heated and passionate discussions both accusing and exonerating Stegner of charges of stealing the autobiographical diaries of Foote. Oftentimes, the discussion returned to students' feelings of betrayal by Stegner for his ostensibly having copied Foote's writing word for word without giving recognition, for having broken the expected trust in scholarship to be original and 'do your own work.' *Angle of Repose* pays "thanks to J.M. and her sister for the use of their ancestors," but Stegner was prohibited from mentioning Foote's name directly by her remaining family. They feared the use of her name in a work of apparent fiction might slander her identity and the 'truthful' events of her life recorded in the diary (Walsh 207). Without research or foreknowledge of these issues, readers of *Angle of Repose* historically have not linked the characters of the novel to Foote and her life (probably because her text is not widely read). But when various scholars began researching the two works and found similarities, the family accused Stegner of consciously misrepresenting his intentions and actually slandering their relative. They, and various critics, have claimed Stegner's novel is neither worthy of its prize nor its status as "literature." Other critics, however, have suggested Foote's diary is not a full representation of "the truth," that it too is a representation (partial at best) of Foote's desires, perceptions of herself, or how she wanted to be perceived. These critics suggest the diary *does not and could never* contain one, essential, and definable truth about how Foote was or lived. Even our own representations of
ourselves are obscured by how we wish (perhaps intend) to perceive ourselves.
Intention is often a matter of desires informed largely by the unconscious; therefore,
the genre of diary or autobiography has unfair and unrealistic expectations concerning
the ability to apprehend a real and tangible truth.

Regardless of the interesting and complex theoretical issues this debate raises
surrounding genre and authorship and the obvious constraints placed on Stegner by
Foote’s family concerning the revelation of her identity, we students engaged in a
brutal, circular, and obsessive search for Stegner’s intention via the interviews and
our own moral positioning on the issues at hand. Comments like “If we could only
figure out what he meant to do, we could make a choice” jammed side by side with
“He cheated and won’t admit his laziness or intentional use of her words; therefore
his book is not literature” created an intellectual gridlock in the classroom that was
both maddening and bordering on the irrational (a kind of forbidden fruit in
academia). At a stalemate, where could we turn but to the texts, to Angle of Repose
and A Victorian Gentlewoman’s Journey West in order to address the issues from
another perspective? A bit of close reading revealed that both texts already
encompass and perform the debate we battled concerning the nature of authority and
authorial intention, character reliability, and identity as a construction that reveals
only parts of a larger, more complex picture. Visibly, it seemed we were creating the
debates around authorship through examining the dilemma created by the critics and
scholars but it became apparent that both texts, as representations or stories of human
life, by nature of their construction as language, repetitively engaged in these debates
often without resolution – we did not need to put them there, for they already existed in the narrative prose. In that moment, we held a new respect, almost awe. Both the texts and our processes of examination had new meaning and direction, for how do you regard a text that presupposes the conversations that will occur around it? Moreover, what does this have to do with the faith I am exploring? My conscious attempt here is to illustrate that the language we have, and the stories we love constructed of that language, always already contain the debates we have around them. Recall the Rosenblatt epigraph: “The essential act of faith, it seems to me, is wonder – a sort of involuntary fascination in awe” (92). We cannot choose not to engage in these debates for language’s excess requires pursuit through interpretation. The involuntary act of wonder often sets us on a trail of interpretation that opens up meaningful experiences. Our examination of Angle of Repose in particular demonstrates the process whereby “wonder” as “awe” reveals itself as “involuntary.” The process of interpretation becomes a direct collision with the expectation of the singular knowable, hence the term faith. Interpretation inspires itself to continue through repeatedly creating wonder to satisfy the desire to know. But rather than satisfaction, the essential act of this process is to maintain the space for awe. Faith becomes that which remains open, rather than the act of putting faith in something. This may seem to present a problem in terms of meaning, for it suggests meaning is always illusory or in the future. However, without reading and creating meanings or interpretations of stories, texts and language cannot continue into the future for others to read (not to mention that speculation about meanings and potential
meanings enhances the impact and implications of a text thus creating interesting, engaging, and fun conversation). Essentially, to read in good faith, to participate in language in good faith, requires continuous interpretation as a way for language and stories to continue into the future. I repeat the conundrum: language and our stories are predisposed to, structured to engage us in this process. It is beyond our control to choose participation.

This presents a logical problem for many readers and writers. For how can we use language 'to open' if that language has a pre-ordered structure that anticipates opening? Because all texts are already situated ideologically in the culture that reads them, they are bound to repeat the concerns and conversations of that culture. However, texts are not limited to their 'present.' As constructions of language, texts can exist in 'the present' while also existing in the past and future. Language flows through time in ways seemingly more transcendent than trendy, popular ideologies or values. But language envelops and contains certain values; we, however, may not consider issues as part of language but rather products of language. We may want to prioritize an issue, not the language it uses as expression. Paradoxically, language has a power to define issues while enacting those issues – we may be conscious of the former of these movements such as where an issue becomes a political or economical engagement and material consequences become apparent. One uses language as a vehicle to explain, or persuade. But, as Levinas suggests one could also say language has a subversive power we may not always recognize; it can both supply and defy our intentions (JRS 111). To shed light on this (no pun intended), one could consider the
spiral-like structure of our universe and our habitation within it. We direct (to some degree) what happens on the planet Earth, but are still subject to its laws. The Earth is subject to the laws of our solar system and the Sun. Yet, our solar system is held in place by the galaxy. The galaxy is determined by the universe. Scientists show that our universe exists within or is part of another universe – the repetition continues forever. As far as we know right now there are infinite spirals dictating the laws of the ones we know and are subject to and those we think we impose. No one system can exist alone, yet no other system can exist without that one. Thus, origins become the main question because we like to imagine we can know a ‘start’ – what happens when you suspend (if suspension is even possible) the obsessive search for one and concentrate more on the process of what it means to search? We are contained within language just as much as we contain it – but that does not mean we can know everything language or we might contain – recall the excess inherent to language and Derrida’s other.

Considering language in this light relegates the intention of one author almost to the trivial because he or she can not consciously account for the various layers of issues already inherent in the language and narratives of the culture – humans generally are not omniscient. Moreover, taking as authority one writer’s idea of his intentions concerning the meaning of a text appears to shut down the ability of the text to move meaningfully through time by fixing it with one set of concerns.

Supporting the intentions of one author conflicts with our judgment that the best texts can ‘stand the test of time’ and be read as universally applying to the
concerns of many generations of people and time. Thus, another question becomes, if the human author cannot always account for an idea's origination, why do we think he or she can? It seems we have a double desire or vision for texts to be at once transcendent and always revealing or adapting and a readable, knowable product of a knowable and truthful author. Baudrillard's statement, "We require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end" (10) invokes this paradox. The 'invisible' always whispers in the face of its Siamese twin, the visible. The tension caused by these two notions working simultaneously against and with one another may result in a crisis causing that strongest desire of all—to create a stable meaning one can apprehend and always rely upon. If and when this desire for stability is thwarted, we can create the illusion of originality, thus repeating the complex cycle whereby language is a tool we use to build while it also is that which continually builds us. Let me again rein (reign?) in this discussion (which seems bound to keep unraveling into multiple directions) to show how faith might be considered in light of this paradox.

In the essay "Authorship and The Subject of 'Nature'," from which one of the introductory epigraphs of this piece derives, Chris Schaberg encapsulates the dilemma that occurs when language and our expectations collide. In considering the recent popularity of "nature writing" because of the various threats of destruction and domestication to our wilderness, Schaberg considers the role of the activist trying to reach a wider, perhaps more financially able, group of people. This is worth quoting at length for several reasons. Namely, it illustrates how we use language for ends
often contradictory to our intentions. The passage works to show that interpretation of language is often subject to one’s conscious agenda, but that does not mean the language is subject only to one agenda. Most importantly, in exposing this contradiction, Schaberg shows our language always speaks to other by nature of its excess. For only with interpretation can a reader approach the excess of language to show its complexity and how it might speak to an issue in another way:

This need for ‘Nature’ as a means to solitude seems to be very much at the heart of what we typically call ‘Nature Writing.’ Solitude provides a venue in which one can achieve a sort of unmediated relation to the ‘outside’ world. It is in this unmediated relation that writers often find a voice through which they assert their feelings for the ‘outside’ world. Terry Tempest Williams writes in this style, as a ‘Nature Writer’ who expresses deep passion and sensual pleasure through her solitary connection to ‘wild nature.’ Williams writes as an advocate of wilderness, in defense of wilderness. In her most recent book, Red, Williams states at one point that “Wilderness is not a belief. It is a place.” (61) – In this context, Williams is writing for political protection of wild places, places that are called “wilderness.” However powerful of an ultimatum Williams sets forth in terms of how we perceive ‘wilderness’ (and to a larger extent, ‘nature’), her language – when broken down – reveals some quite troubling complexities. The insistence that ‘wilderness’ is a “place” rather than a “belief” might seem to support a political agenda to ‘protect’ wilderness, but it also works to barricade certain channels of knowing what ‘wilderness’ is: If ‘wilderness’ is a place, and not a belief, then the only people who can truly know or understand what ‘wilderness’ is are people who directly experience such a place. This works against a text that tries to bring the essence of ‘wilderness’ (and the author’s experience of it) to a wider audience. I would argue instead that ‘wilderness’ as Williams uses the word is precisely a belief, not a place (4).

Oftentimes, as exemplified with the term “wilderness,” what we believe as a literal place, is more clearly a “belief” or idea that holds in mind some intangible ideal as its more true expression. Yet, “wilderness” is clearly a place and a belief,
simultaneously. It cannot be pinned down to one use only. Schaberg suggests
language functions in ways that transcend our conscious reading and writing
capacities. The implications further suggest we cannot always be aware of
language’s power. The introductory epigraph also from Schaberg’s essay, discusses
language as a “belief system” enabling people to share experiences via
commonly understood words. In using language, we have faith that others will
understand us. But Schaberg shows more often the words we share do not always
have one shared common meaning. The paradoxical prejudice leading certain
ideologies to empowerment comes when we expect words to contain universally
accepted and understood meanings. Some interpretations get prioritized depending
upon who has power in the culture. Our desire to be understood will always be
undermined if we assume shared meanings, yet we often still look to language as a
way to share meaning. The faith in language Schaberg reveals leads us to false ends
because it is predisposed to have one final meaning or outcome. This faith leads
presumably to one concrete, locatable interpretation that can oftentimes be
undermined. With the advent of multiple, supportable interpretations, what if we
consider faith as the process of search without the objective to find a definitive end?
Language engenders search, but the faith it engenders is not as simple as shared
meanings. For how else could we expose a multiple use of terminology or even
sharing than through interpretation, through search? This does not suggest
interpretation, or reading for that matter can engender a truth, but rather it can open a
text to possibilities.
The Unraveling: Faith and the Authority of Intention

The obsession with intention is really interesting because it seems to fuel one of the reasons people read – to know the author, to know a truth, to have faith that one can know and locate a true and essential identity. Faith in reading to locate a truth could be considered a form of religious practice. Faith here is a construct whereby one can calculate and anticipate what is coming and going; faith is restorative as something one can acquire through practice and discipline. In the sense that one reads for comfort, faith enables one to believe everything will turn out as it should; the ‘end’ will be good or peaceful, “...what simple and unquestioning faith expects: longevity, eternal life or earthly happiness...” (Levinas, JRS 105). We often use faith as a way to satisfy (or quell?) a desire. Faith is a function of desire for the person who attends church in order to feel forgiven for sins or to gain a glimpse into the ‘afterlife’ to remove the anxiety of the unknown. In some religions, a portion of the intentions of a ‘higher power’ can be learned through attending church and reading scripture. It seems, however, that explorations for intention, textual and religious, lead to fragmentation oftentimes referred to as the postmodern condition of the world. (In academia these ruptures are considered playful openings; for the layman, they can be virtually paralyzing; for the ‘believer,’ they can create faith in – and of course these are not set standards). The inherently contained gaps and inexplicable absences contained by all texts we read and write often become the focus as the missing key to what we perceive as ‘the answer.’ Those gaps invite or inspire
exploration and interpretation, yet they often defy or slip through the meanings we attach to them. Perhaps the limitations of the text are actually the readings we attach to them. In positing one reading, another is ignored or denied. There is no way to read a text in all of its meanings simultaneously. One could argue no one reader is that omniscient, or that texts continually repeat the “unfore-see-able” by nature of excess in words like ‘maybe,’ ‘perhaps,’ and ‘seem.’ There are always unseeable secrets. However, recognizing our interpretations are limiting is also to see the text as continually opening to other meanings and interpretations. Emmanuel Levinas suggests:

But as a reward for a life accepting limitations, one can also understand the nature of this very life: the limitation of the wild vitality of life, through which this life wakes from its somnambulant spontaneity, sober's up from its nature and interprets its centripetal movements, in order to be opened up to what is other than self (JKS105-6).

The myriad of interpretative possibilities decenters one’s sense of self to open that self to the unseen. Interpretation offers a space where “life wakes from its somnambulant spontaneity, sober's up from its nature,” meaning, without interpretation, one is bound by the illusion where self generates “spontaneity,” as though ‘out of thin air.’ “Accepting limitations” is to recognize one is always placed within a context where part of the context will always be a secret revealed only to the other. The “reward” comes in opening to the potential for change. Levinas further claims that language always is more complex than we or it can comprehend and/or display. His “surplus” (109) might be the locations to which we point as absences wherein ‘answers’ are contained:
The reading processes that we have just seen at work suggest, first, that the statement commented upon exceeds what it originally wants to say; that what it is capable of saying goes beyond what it wants to say; that it contains more than it contains; that perhaps an inexhaustible surplus of meaning remains locked in the syntactic structures of the sentence, in its word-groups, its actual words, phonemes and letters, in all this materiality of the saying which is potentially signifying all the time (IRS 109).

For Levinas, language perpetually engages in and is signification, “an inexhaustible surplus of meaning remains locked in the syntactic structures of the sentence” – it never stops. And language always contains more than its seemingly original intentions: “the statement commented upon exceeds what it originally wants to say.” A language “potentially signifying all the time” contains the infinite power of signs continually morphing into another other. He continues that through “exegesis,” as interpretation or explanation, can be exposed “a bewitched significance that smoulders beneath the characters or coils up in all this literature of letters” (109).

This is not to say one can discover all hidden meanings, for that would deny language’s inherent excess. But by that very nature of “inexhaustible surplus,” language inspires one to search. Levinas considers “the language that is capable of containing more than it contains” as “the natural element of inspiration” (110).

Language always requires us to interpret, to explain it, however, no attainment of closure is guaranteed. In our own reading practices, the denial of definitive answers seems to strengthen the quest for more meaning, hence the repetition. The goals of faith as a process to quench desire with a tangible goal in mind such as “longevity, eternal life or earthly happiness” will always be thwarted – one may not be able to calculate the returns (105). Faith continually becomes the quest, and the quest
eternally becomes faith. One can never realize when the process is over, thus enabling the process to continue perpetually into the future. This holds a problem for many because it represents a place of discomfort – closure seems illusory. We have been taught that the act of 'faith in' will alleviate the pain suffering entails. However, rather than faith as a fixative, I'd argue that faith can engender more of a letting go of control. The future will come whether we want it or not – recall Levinas again: “But as a reward for a life accepting limitations, one can also understand the nature of this very life…” (JRS 105). Levinas sounds like Derrida here (or vice versa) where recognizing the power to “know yourself” is not limited to the self-reflexive (Derrida GD 91-2). In this awakening exists the infinite potential of infinite others. Moreover, to attempt to resolve the tension this lack of closure may present, which enables language and stories to continue allowing us to make meaning (and achieve some level of comfort), is to read and/or write in bad faith. Language will not really allow us to shut down meaning through one definition. We are obligated and responsible to interpret, to make meaning, and to engage. What defines the ethical interaction with texts is where one must not “act out of duty” to “fulfill a debt,” in other words, to create meaning to satisfy the next guy, but rather recognize the “absolute duty” to interpret, making one responsible to the infinitely invisible other without choice (Derrida GD 63). It is that giving over of oneself to the future and recognizing that we are always be given over that allows for openings.

All of these metaphysical issues and questions paradoxically still seem to lead us on an obvious search for something greater than – the infinite invisible. The
debate around authorship, intention, and who owns a text all speak to the construction of faith I am considering. The notion of search has often taught us we will locate an end or understanding – this desire is nearly impossible to subvert. However, if we consider the language and stories we have as pushing us already in these directions, we might more willingly withstand ‘discomfort.’ Again, the roles of the author clearly exhibit the tension between how we wish to expose ‘the unknown’ and how unknowable places repel exposition. The debate engendered around Stegner and Foote is one specific example of many where authorial intention and presence reveals itself as a governing function of a narrative and story. Looking back at the cultural construction of authorship might help to define the paradoxical function of faith as language.

Could it be that those texts deemed ‘timeless,’ or ‘classic’ have been conflated with their writers? That through reading texts and discerning meanings we are reading authors, or getting sources of authority and transcendent knowledge? Thus, one interpretation of the Romantic notion of author as god-like being has infiltrated or, one might suggest, virtually designed our system of literature appreciation, analysis, and reading. Roland Barthes’ pivotal (and well worn) 1977 piece, “The Death of the Author,” goes to great lengths to show the damage our desire for individual authors does to the living being of a text. He offers a concise description of when and how the author became such a powerful commodity in literature:

The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual,
of, as it is more nobly put, the "human person." It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance of the "person" of the author. The author still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs. The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author "confiding" in us (254).

Barthes goes on to argue we must release the desire to know authors in order to free a text to reach its more full potential. A written text is not a "recording," meaning of the past, but is always "performative,"... "a field without origin...other than language itself...which ceaselessly calls into question all origins" (255-6). A text is more meaningful when in the hands of the reader, "the birth of the reader must come at the death of the Author" (257). Language is neither definitive nor collapsible into one set of intentions. Reader Response criticism and theory has taken new meaning from Barthes' claims by offering readers a chance to engage with texts rather than feel as though texts are always didactic and containing one truth. This has paved the way for previously marginalized genres to gain new authority both in academia and popular culture.10 The more traditional ways of reading and understanding authority have certainly gone through radical examination and questioning.

However, while the world of academia has done much with the debate of 'Authors' and to loosen the cuffs that apparently bound critical interpretations to
them, it seems both academia and the culture at large still look for final truth and definitive meaning through texts and their authors. In academia, the debate sits squarely in the middle of the scholar’s dual role to create ‘original’ works while simultaneously exhibiting a comprehensive understanding, use, and citation of prior thinkers’ works. In popular culture, Oprah Winfrey and her ‘Book Club’ invite authors to the show to talk about their books. Oftentimes, the most common questions invite the author to discuss the intention and meaning of the text. It seems many readers are blind to the work of Barthes, Foucault, and the taken-for-granted-by-academia ‘author function.’ The author function suggests an author and text are always situated in a shifting context, thus disabling one author to decide definitive meaning of his/her text. While the boundaries may be more flexible, even in academia authors are still canonized and revered for their efforts. That a text can contain a writer’s biography or autobiography implies we can discern essential truths about people. We are loathe to dismiss this idea because people are most fascinated by attempting to know other people, and in turn, knowing themselves. The clash between readings that seek authorial intent and those like Barthes’, that seem to place meaning in circumstantial interpretation, creates a situation where all readers must choose which side to enact. A re-examination of a text considering a new use of the term faith might make this debate one that will not pit these two sides against one another.

Inge’s recent article in PMLA, “Collaboration and Concepts of Authorship,” contends that within the culture at large and academia “the author remains at the
center of general critical attention” (623). His arguments cast an interesting shadow when considering academia’s desire to recast authors as culturally constructed versus what it seems to rely upon and often impose, namely authors as sources of original inspiration:

It is commonplace now to understand that all texts produced by authors are not the products of individual creators. Rather, they are the result of any number of discourses that take place among the writer, the political and social environments in which the writing occurs, the aesthetic and economic pressures that encourage the process, the psychological and emotional state of the writer, and the reader who is expected to receive or consume the end product when it reaches print. Even if not intended for an audience or publishing marketplace, a piece of writing cannot escape the numerous influences that produce it. All discourse is socially constructed. Yet we continue to maintain the traditional image of author as an individualist up against a materialist world, trying to create something pure and unsullied by the rank of commercialism of society despite the interference of the system of publication, which requires mediation and compromise—an image that Jack Stillinger has called “the romantic myth of the author as solitary genius” (202) (623).

Inge suggests everyone knows on some intellectual level that texts are more complicated in their construction than simply the product of one conscious mind. However, to examine a text for meaning beyond asking the orchestrator of the words for explanation is oftentimes a difficult task requiring critical examinations at various levels. Most people do not feel comfortable in the realms of critical inquiry—it is viewed as the work of scholars who have nothing better to do but make up scenarios about meanings to satisfy their own (ivory tower) goals. Stillinger’s myth, as an easier investment because it prioritizes the visible, allows people to concretely imagine humans’ ability to create perfection beyond our own system. In the cultural desire for definitive answers and obvious origins, writers who wield the tool of
language with such ease and seeming projection of knowledge can easily be placed upon a pedestal above other people or even other constructions of authority, such as governments.

Placing the author on this higher level is to at once position her presence within the world of humans and her connection to what we imagine as divine – a Christ-savior-like being. We think we can comprehend the presence of this divinity and its availability to us. In the wisdom and guidance of authors, we can find understanding, salvation, and promise of forgiveness for being humanly imperfect. We can have faith in authors. To think a human can create the divine is to imagine that we can someday as well – if we only believe and have faith. However, if we want human authors, meaning those with whom we can converse about human dilemmas, we must accept all humans’ limited conscious ability to see and to know. Then texts have the ability to become far more interesting than the limited interpretations of them offered by authors. So, why do we desire the transcendent? The thing is, we want both – to know humans and to know the divine. This issue becomes more complicated because the desire to know a human author, or an author’s intentions, through a text, is setting up the impossible. This is perhaps the more interesting issue: we set up the impossible to postpone full realization that we cannot know definitive answers. Perhaps the impossible is already set up through the nature of the language used; the debate over authority and intention is already an implicit function of language and a text. As readers, we are then forced to examine the degree to which we control our reading practices. Is the search for authorial intention as truth
something we, as readers, need to overcome? Or is our desire misplaced and the transcendent unknowable in the ways we seek it? Perhaps the other is beyond the realm of our conscious act of searching because it is already a part of the language we live and use to search. If that which is transcendent can be traced through language, where language always becomes a medium of residence and a portal initiating future interpretation, then our undividable attachment to language, as individuals and cultures, makes the path for searching for the origin of the other unavoidable. The deferral or denial of locating the other is also unavoidable. We cannot choose not to engage in the search for origins by nature of the fact that we use language. Language is simultaneously search and the temporary location of definitives—where origins are paradoxically not fixed, not singular, and perhaps not in the past. This repetitious search is an enactment of faith because it requires us to recall our “absolute duty” (Derrida GD 63) which may be to recognize our presence in the eternally coming past and future of the “instant,” “to an atemporal temporality, to a duration that cannot be grasped: something one can neither stabilize, establish, grasp [prendre], apprehend, or comprehend” (65).

Again a complication arises here because in theory, suspending the immediate and conscious search for the origination of meaning is a powerful means to opening up texts to more play. However, in practice, the issue of who is in control, who controls the meaning of the literal text and the text of the world, is an important debate. Everyone has the chance to be in charge when the more visible lure pursues the rewards of locating authorial intent. Texts can serve to empower previously
marginalized groups or genres. We see this today in the celebration of writers with ethnic experiences other than those of white upper to middle class economies. For these groups, authorial empowerment can lead to ideological and financial gains in the culture. And rightly so. Yet, by positioning a writer as author of, for example, a Native American experience, we are limiting the text’s ability to move through time by limiting it as only important for or speaking to one set of issues in one time period. Fixing texts in time positions writers into inescapable traps as ‘genre authors,’ thus disenabling further creative and worthy interpretations of the texts. Meaning becomes limited only to the level of consciousness of a certain group or time. Situating a text in time is an interesting and well-debated issue, both sides having persuasive and substantially worthy claims. But more complicated (and important for me) is this question: Can we truly prevent a text from moving through time? We may not have the power to control a text and how it is read or even how we read it. If not, the stakes for how meaning is created within and around the texts seem up for grabs. But it would seem meaning is created beyond the scope of what a culture prioritizes or even ostensibly recognizes. Is meaning created by the reader, the text, or a combination, an interaction between both?

This quest for meaning leads us on to the epigraph of Ron Hansen’s discussion of “faith inspired fiction” as “the shortest distance between human understanding and truth” (6). He seems to offer a more complicated yet ultimately freeing way to view language and our use of it without promising an arrival at truth. While I do not think stories or fictions represent a truth one could apprehend, “the
shortest distance” may not signify that fiction will take us from our own “human understanding” (implied as limited and apt to falsehoods) to truth, but rather may continually lead us in the direction of truth through process, by “inviting thoughtfulness,” not “foregone conclusions” nor “rational arguments.” Nor is this to say we could comprehend or envision ‘the truth’ once we got there. Interestingly, the passage could suggest the path of faith is one of journey – where one constantly faces the self in the unstable places of “desolution and doubt,” “instinct,” and “intuition.” In no way is the reading subject required to find a way out from these places; more important is the engagement within them as meaning. Truth could be the recognition of these practices, rather than the product of search. Similarly, the use of language as search, as faith, opens texts to meaning now and in the future. Perhaps belief, in this context, is not a product of search but rather the search itself. However, as Schaberg suggests, there is no promise of ‘goods’ or even understandings exterior of one’s situatedness or shared language; our shared situations and language prove more multi-layered in meaning than that which can be boiled down to singular and unchangeable essences.

Reading continually opens as faith; the other, in the text that one cannot control, through recognizing one cannot not engage with a text, becomes the eternally moving site of excess holding hope for the future. The text provides the chance to be humble, to know that ‘I’ am not the sole origin of my thoughts, that ‘I’ am a construction, that there are some things ‘I’ must choose. Derrida suggests: “The
question of the self: “who am I?” not in the sense of “who I am” but “who is this ‘I’” that can say who? What is the “I,” and what becomes of responsibility once the identity of the “I” trembles in secret?” (GD 92). That ‘I’ can ask these questions gives faith but more importantly, it shows the complexity of faith. The text’s (including but probably not limited to the critical conversations and the literature), language’s eternal quest seems to reflect a repetition where it forever engages in postponing an other it cannot know, and cannot not know - that there is perfection and that perfection is beyond human comprehension; it exists “in secret” where secret has a double function to be visible to one and eternally invisible to another.

Levinas might cite readers’ and language’s quest for meaning as that of inspiration:

Inspiration: another meaning which breaks through from beneath the immediate meaning of what is meant to be said, another meaning which beckons to extreme consciousness, a consciousness that has been awoken. This other voice resonating in the first takes control of the message as a result of this resonance coming from behind the first. In its purity of message, it is not just a certain form of saying; it organizes its content. The message awakens listening to what is indisputably intelligible, to the meaning of meanings, to the face of the other man. Awakening is precisely this proximity of others. The message as message in its method of awakening is the modality, the actual ‘how’ of the ethical code that disturbs the established order of being, unrepentantly leading its style of being (JRS 111).

The “other voice” that begins to “resonate,” “to awake,” from “behind the first,” could be the result of the act of repeatedly reading a text. “Inspiration” occurs when we realize texts are not limited to our view but always invoke “the proximity of others,” while simultaneously creating everyone as other, similar to Derrida’s “like.” What is interesting about this passage is the “other voice” that “is not just a certain
form of saying,” meaning another applied interpretation, actually “organizes the content” of the first, the initial “immediate meaning.” Language has a subversive, almost invisible structure that dictates how it is meant to be read -- not what it means -- but the process by which meaning is created through its signs. The “message as message” creates itself, allows itself to continue, “unrepentantly leading its style of being” but paradoxically, invoking a message requires an other. We become language’s other and it becomes ours. Both readers and texts are required to quest, to search for a way to be heard and examined. This exchange, which enables continuation and beckons for followers, is faith.

So it seems, faith transcends the parameters set by one particular religion or religious belief. It is neither as blind nor as unexamining as our seemingly secular and at times cynical society might like to believe. We, as humans who use language, live the discourse of faith -- we cannot chose not to. Paradoxically, faith/language always propels us in to the future and that which is incalculable, unknowable. One set of mantras of today’s ‘Self-help’ society claims the true path to happiness is to live in the present, one day at a time, let go of the past and the future, there is only today. While I do believe these are healthy and necessary ways to live (certainly not easy), I do not think the language we use, as suggests Derrida’s “instant” (GD 65), will allow us to divorce ourselves from the anticipation and memory of future and past times. This is not to say we should dwell in the past or obsess about the future. But these influences are always a consideration in how we live today. In the present, we are always acknowledging the coming future because we use a language that
always makes room for future acts and realizations. To truly live consciously in the present is to accept and make room for the future we do not know — that future might be as close as the end of the day. This is both ‘letting go’ and living in the present, carpe diem; it is also faith.

The Levinas epigraph I invoked, like Derrida’s “dictum,” seems to hold a sense of portent, a promise or “secret” that when translated, interpreted, or examined might reveal a key to the final word on how meaning is created or faith is revealed:

But in this start that readers receive there is a new alternation of movements: they go from the traumatic experience of the unknown and strange meaning to the grammar which, already operating on another level, restores order, coherence and chronology. And then there is a movement back: from history and philology to the understanding that again affects and awakens, forcing us out of the bed of the preformed and customary ideas that protect and reassure. An alternation which, admittedly, testifies to the hesitation of our little faith, but from which also stems the transcendence that does not impose itself with denials through its actual coming and which, in inspired Scripture, awaits a hermeneutic — in other words, reveals itself only in dissimulation (115).

In the paradox of this “alternation of movements,” perhaps double gesture, readers use a language that is already in excess, “operating on another level,” to escape the “trauma” of the “unknown.” Those safe interpretations and presumptions we make are neither safe nor presumable. The “order, coherence and chronology” they create are a sense of the past, “history and philology,” continually re-enacting itself through “customary ideas that protect and reassure” in the present. Again, we see here the notion that one can ‘understand’ and make definitive meaning of the past or a text (or a text as the past?). But what Levinas suggests here “our little faith,” perhaps limited to the interpretations made by the ‘I,’ limits us to creating the present and future only
from our visible past experiences – this is unavoidable. But, moving from presumptions to acknowledging them as perhaps incoherent or disorderly creates a space for language’s “transcendence,” not as superior but as continually opening to new ideas unlike what we have been able to imagine. In a sense, Levinas may suggest the very language we use requires us to move from creating interpretations to seeing them undone; and in this double movement language shows us it is continually waiting and calling out for us to follow it, to pursue and interpret it – eternally. As continual movement, this is inspiration, this is quest, this is faith.

1 Interestingly, a text is of a time, yet ideally it can be read and made meaningful by people from many time periods. A text, therefore, may not be simply a function of one time, but rather can lend itself to the desires and values of many times. This questions the power ascribed to one author’s interpretation, who probably cannot account for the desires and values of all cultures from past and present, but more importantly, future.

2 A good example of this theory exists in this essay’s discussion of Schaberg’s essay on the use of the term “wilderness” and its uses and representations as a place and belief, often with contradictory agendas.

3 This seeming contradiction is often referred to as ‘intentional fallacy.’ But I wonder if ‘intentional’ has the same function for all readers.

4 This may read like a game of backwards leap frog – not intentionally.

5 Faith and belief in fate are intertwined here. Chance is always a factor, such as when one is blindsided by a certain event, feeling, reaction, etc. Even those who believe in destiny or fate as determined are unable to anticipate everything that will occur – events can still be emotionally engaging. Such people may simply have a different apparatus to deal with things as they occur. They may ‘get over’ initial shock faster than those who believe they are controllers of fate and destiny. Either way, faith grants a sense of serenity.

6 Obviously the use of the term ‘meaning’ is complex and seemingly paradoxical. This passage would seem to indicate that a meaning we create is an illusion; meaning is always projected into the future. How often, in retrospect, do we realize ‘the meaning’ of something? Events become more ‘clear’ with time; hence, we make the present meaningful, but meaning is always a product of reflection. Perhaps more interesting to consider is that meaning is not simply always absent from the present but rather is malleable or not fixed in time. Perhaps another interpretation of Derrida’s “absolute duty” might be our inability to not create meaning.

7 “Unfore-see-able” is a term suggested by Dr. Michael Beehler in reading a draft of this project.

8 The term ‘realize’ is different from ‘knowing.’ Realize seems to entail something that is quantifiable, tangible, or even subject to finality or closure – whereas ‘to know’ seems to have more of an esoteric quality, one that is intangible and subject to varying internal standards of judgment. Example: To
realize one’s goals is at once to know what those goals are and/or to have achieved them—one’s goals come to fruition. To know one’s goals is to have in mind an object to pursue—goals are always of the future in this sense.

9 A feminist critique might claim this structure as the means by which a patriarchy stays in power—who, but white males, existed in the original literature canon?

10 Barthes’ notion that texts are performative and never original would seem to blast away all rules of prior readings of texts, especially those of Formalism where language contains certain unchanging signs and structures that call forth meaning. I will argue language does in fact contain certain directions that guide our readings but paradoxically this can be viewed as an eternal opening of the text’s meanings, rather than a shutting down of meaning. In the end it seems to come down to the different views of ‘God’ and authority as something we can tangibly imagine as fixed or something wholly beyond as mutating.
CHAPTER THREE

THE SHIPPING NEWS AND FAITH

In a knot of eight crossings, which is about the average-size knot, there are 256 different ‘over-and-under’ arrangements possible... Make only one change in this ‘over and under’ sequence and either an entirely different knot is made or no knot at all may result. *The Ashley Book of Knots.*

The epigraph taken from *The Shipping News.*


Taken from the cover of *The Shipping News.*

There are still old knots that are unrecorded, and so long as there are new purposes for rope, there will always be new knots to discover. *The Ashley Book of Knots.*

*The Shipping News* 324.

Interpretation allows a text to keep opening to new readers and new readings. Interpretation inspires the creation of enriching meanings. Interpretation is also an inevitable process that the best texts already acknowledge in their own processes. I have suggested and will show through *The Shipping News* that our act of making meaning through reading signs in language is always already accounted for by language as a system of signs that does not always point to definitive meanings. It seems the stories, the fictions, deemed ‘best’ often account for readers’ needs to repeatedly interpret and find meaning. They accommodate our readings in the use of foreshadowing, repetition, and by placing the future into what one reads in the present. The main characters often engage in repetitious processes of self-exploration...
or quest. Some stories even obviously suggest the desire to find ultimate meanings through interpretations while in the same breath point to the next interpretation, the next set of meanings. The good fictions always precede their ‘endings’ by continually requiring the reader to ask ‘what’s next?’ It may seem that when the questions are answered, the text ends, there is resolution and no more repetition. However, certain plot questions can be resolved but the future stories of the characters may still be uncertain.

Among various reasons, we read for self-renewal or development, for pleasure, or challenge, perhaps to know we are a part of something. We read to find difference, to affirm the other, but also to be affirmed for what we believe ourselves to be and for our potentials as human beings. Oftentimes, the influencing structures come in forms of stories and narratives. Self-identity becomes a construct formed by this complex system of languages and signs. If, as claimed above, language is already implicit with, imbued by, faith, self-identity is constructed with the complicated and often contradictory desire to expect the eternal opening of knowledge from the start. That is, the way we go about constructing identities and opinions is already a function of looking into the future; it is faith. Language is a construct that will be informed in large part by the unknowable, the future. This is the connection whereby one could consider language as faith, as the process we must live to continue to make meaning. Paradoxically, faith demands we face our mortality while it also allows us to know that events go on after we die.1 Similarly, language
requires us to make meanings of it, to create interpretations, but it will also change and mutate when one dies and no longer uses it.

The Shipping News masterfully tries to trick the reader into believing a 'happily-ever-after' where the protagonist, Quoyle, finds a self-identity, a meaningful job and home, a wife, and a community. Yet, the use of metaphor and signs, namely from The Ashley Book of Knots, often works to unravel simple feel-good endings, where readers can know what will happen. But more striking is the weaving of the seemingly factual, real, newspaper rhetoric with acts of the impossible that occur, as magical realism, like the sudden resurrection of the seemingly dead Jack. These work to show we use language and stories to make sense, yet the same language and stories cannot always explain everything. The Shipping News, as a complex layering of narrative voice, story, and authorship, engages in the various theoretical issues concerning faith and the other, why we read and are constantly read and re-made. With both a story line concerning Quoyle and his search for love, happiness and a self-identity, and a narrative presence always creating commentary in an outside voice and in the voice of Quoyle referring to himself in the third person, language is constantly manipulated to produce a crisis in reader interpretation and expectation. Yet both narratives also present themselves, at times, to be seamless, logical, and fated. The Shipping News is in some ways, a harmonious read. The narrative voice making meaning of the narrative process exists largely in trying to guide our interpretations with a prescript/subtitle to every chapter consisting of various descriptions of knots and mariner tales/tips from The Ashley Book of Knots.
Having these epigraphs as preludes to the contents of the chapter suggests *The Shipping News* is aware of itself as a construction of a series of events. It seems to know that it leads its reader on a quest, to a mystery, and promises there is meaning and closure. This narrative tactic seems to mimic the storyline itself, where the characters encounter the process of fate that seem to hold "portent." But the contents of the epigraphs combined with the unexplainable coincidences of the storyline are both open to interpretation. Neither the narrative tactic nor the storyline offers definitive and final answers. The novel thus not only questions the seamless stories we create but the very meanings we attach to them by showing the provisional nature of symbols and events. It is a reader who attaches finality or closure because we like tangible results and we like to think we understand something in its entirety. The text, the narrative tactic, and the storyline suggest this desire, its prevalence, and its effect on the way we make meaning. It allows us to create closure while simultaneously suggesting that closure is merely an illusion that another interpretation must shatter. The text lends itself to the story of Quoyle and to the story we create through reading Quoyle's story, only to show that without the text, without language, we could have no meanings. Meaning cannot exist outside of the texts we read and the texts we live; meaning is the texts we *continually* read and live.

*The Shipping News* engages in the seemingly opposite actions and manifestations whereby meaning is created, contributing to the complex and various manifestations of faith as inherent in language, reading, and reading process. The novel consists of a plot/story line of self-conscious repetitions addressing the
obsessive search for the meaning of the repetitions we live. Through using quotations from *The Ashley Book of Knots* to comment indirectly about the story, the narrative always creates meaning in terms of what the story of Quoyle’s life is like. From the start the novel suggests that “Quoyle: A coil of rope” represents the protagonist Quoyle and that he is the metaphorical equivalent of “a Flemish flake… a spiral coil of one layer only. It is made on deck, so that it may be walked on if necessary” (SN 1). Quoyle, whose life has been characterized by “failures” that “multiply like an explosion of virulent cells” (2), is set up as an image of everything to which he can be related. Even his “thoughts churned like the amorphous thing that ancient sailors, drifting into arctic half-light, called the Sea Lung… where liquid was solid, where solids dissolved, where the sky froze and light and dark muddled” (3 emphasis mine). Quoyle, as he is perceived and perceives himself, exists in a place defined by lack where much falls into opacity, “an amorphous thing.” By setting Quoyle up in a structure of metaphorical equivancy, the novel sets up our expectation that life will contain infinitely more meaning when events go beyond an initial visible existence or most obvious interpretation. Creating connections between things seemingly dissimilar provides a space in which the reader can wonder about the authenticity of the visible and the impact of what is always invisible. But simultaneously, the narrative also often introduces characters in the present and unravels their pasts or their relation to Quoyle as the story progresses. To readers, this tactic seems to offer a prophetic sense of mysteries unraveling, becoming visible throughout the course of the story. The visible and invisible always seem engaged in a give-take ending in
excess, in continuation, where we do not know what is to come. The Shipping News unravel s readers’ expectations rather than simply affirming the familiar ‘logical end’ responses, like happily-ever-after, that our culture might prioritize. By deferring readers’ expectations, the novel reveals our repeated desire to pursue the infinite other. The collision of expectations also reveals a faith whereby the novel opens to multiple paths for interpretation rather than satisfying or quelling one desire to remain in one fixed passageway. These paths often require a continuous process of engaging in oppositions and letting go of what one cannot control and making choices about how to interact with the world. In The Shipping News, readers and characters are both bound to the process of faith while always having to recognize the duty to give in to it. Perhaps not allowing one’s ego to give in to faith (meaning the openness to multiple interpretive possibilities), for readers creates stock responses to fiction that become all too predictable and rather lackluster; for the characters, not giving in to faith shuts out the possibilities of growing into the future by relying on old habits. The actions of and consequences for readers and characters are interchangeable here.

The story of Quoyle’s struggles is far more interesting in the context of other stories, story-telling, and the world beyond the actual events within his life. The presence of The Ashley Book of Knots provides readers with repeated layers in which to take pleasure by drawing seeming connections between oneself and Quoyle and the significance of Quoyle’s struggles with those of all humans. Paradoxically, coupling the narrative with another ‘outside’ text makes struggles seem more manageable by imbuing them with complexity. Texts can speak to each other through readers’
interpretations, allowing readers to imagine, to see life existing on more planes than are immediately visible. There might be forces beyond us controlling the decisions and meanings we make; one can give oneself over to this power by having faith in it. Layering texts among texts opens a space at once readable - to satisfy our love of prophecy - and beyond the infinitely containable and predictable - to satisfy our desire to always have untold prophecies. The potential to add another text into any reading equation changes the readable and unreadable spaces. Faith in the process of layering texts to expect definitive outcomes reveals a calculation of readable spaces. But the act of continually layering texts and offering interpretations allows one to be open to the eternally unreadable spaces. Creating new interpretations by always putting news texts together allows one to be open to new ideas.

The Shipping News’s various levels of dissolution and its reliance on the effects of magical realism point to the notion that, as readers and writers, we love to pursue what we perceive as unknowable. This pursuit is faith because while we chase the unknown, the unknown must be preserved in order for us to engage in pursuit. Unraveling one mystery will always lead to another, revealing ‘unraveling’ as a perpetual process and one without end. Offered in the unknowable is a hope for change, movement, and perhaps salvation. The perception that something guides us in which we can place responsibility, even faith for our happiness and mistakes, can be overwhelming. This might seem to suggest we always seek a place in which we can escape accepting responsibility for our own paths and their meanings (visible or not). But creating, perhaps walking, a path is the readiness for the coming future.
This more complex faith has a double movement embodied by our acting search and the giving over of our perceived control to enact search. It is also the inevitable function of language we are obligated to follow. Stemming from these complex interactions and expectations, *The Shipping News* proves language the grand paradox of all: *It is a site of excess that requires our investigations (to) have meaning – it requires us and requires of us.* While neither Quoyle’s nor the reader’s quests are permanently resolved, meaningful experiences emerge in these processes, proving these processes essential to the making of meaningful experiences. Language is at once transcendent; it contains mysteries and structures that go beyond our comprehension, even beyond our apprehension. At the same time, language is a construct of our desires to make meanings because we constantly, repetitively, seek to make sense (and do, regardless of temporality) of that which we cannot understand — hence the creation and interpretation of stories. In essence, *we are responsible* for acknowledging engagement in this process because it is always already beyond our ability to choose to — it is an “absolute duty” to which we are eternally subject (Derrida 63). Both readers and Quoyle engage in these processes of multi-layered self-discovery, revealing *The Shipping News* a complex enactment and re-enactment of human desires and the structures that may guide and deny them.

Louise Flavin argues that Quoyle does, in fact, complete his quest — he is the “archetypal quest hero” (239) from whom “the bonds of friends, family, and community radiate out...like a spider’s web” at the end of the novel (11). In Quoyle’s achieving happiness, over-coming his past, getting married, and making
connections with his new community, *The Shipping News* tells a story of redemption, a certain happily-ever-after. Quoyle is at the center of the world Flavin describes. While her points are provocative and have inspired some of this piece, I think *The Shipping News* is not so simple. The novel’s use of the visible/invisible inherent in language, coupled with gaps and leaps in logic, points to a more complex formation of identity — one that requires subjects to succumb to an unknowable future that may not always provide guarantee. Flavin’s piece concentrates on visible gains/losses as the sole determiner of fate where Quoyle is at the center of his own quest. I am arguing that *The Shipping News* proves Quoyle must accept that he is not at the center of his world — his world is always already someone else’s as well. Quoyle must also realize that he is inseparable from the world’s happenings. Paradoxically, gaining a meaningful self-identity is a complicated movement of taking action and creating autonomy, to giving oneself away, to realizing we are always already loaned to another’s perspective and struggles. We are at once self and other — we are centers, “instants,” constantly shifting toward locations we cannot always see and determine (Derrida GD 65). This “trembling balance,” to borrow from *The Shipping News*, is the law of faith. It is a process leading to a fulfilling self-identity hinging on the ability to remain poised among mutation and repetition (SN 196). Faith’s exchange — “Tout Autre Est Tout Autre,” “Every other (one) is every (bit) other” (Derrida, GD 82) — creates the continual act, not completion, of quest.
In Chapter One, I claimed that reading in good faith requires creation of the space for future interpretation to occur. Examining quest as a way to open possibilities rather than to seek a goal may enable new meanings and a future. Perhaps Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche implies this opening through the “eternal return,” which could be considered the process *The Shipping News* inspires and enacts:

The lesson of the eternal return is that there is no return of the negative. The eternal return means that being is selection. Only that which affirms or is affirmed returns. The eternal return is the reproduction of becoming but the reproduction of becoming is also the production of becoming active...In the eternal return being ought to belong to becoming, but the being of becoming ought to belong to a single becoming-active (Deleuze 189-90).

The “negative” is not a single transcendent sense of immorality; rather it is the act of eliminating everything one perceives as unfitting. The “negative” in this passage could be read as that which cannot find a place. For example, Quoyle continues viewing himself as a “great damp loaf of a body” whose “sense of self was as a distant figure” far away from his family and life and to whom “nothing was clear” because that is what he knows; one can affirm a negative behavior that serves a purpose perceived as survival or normal (SN 2-3). “To be” is to select; when one “affirms” or confirms something as desirable or even inevitable, that selection will return. In a sense, what eternally returns is a “reproduction,” re-enactment, of the past. Yet, simultaneously, a “reproduction” is an act in itself in the present moving into the future, “the production of becoming active.” The passage suggests that “being”
has a double obligation as a product of the past and the future. Simultaneously, it must belong to the process of always becoming but at the same time actively becoming something in the present that is always moving into the future – *that which is unknowable*. "Being" and the sense of self I suggested earlier that *The Shipping News* seems to inspire in character and reader sounds uncanny in its similarity to Derrida’s “instant” - an unlocatable present location like a place that always moves (GD 65).

*The Shipping News* seems to enact, by nature of its structure, this paradox of the “eternal return” on many levels, by showing readers we love to perform the search for self and the possibilities for becoming happy human beings and, moreover, that we are bound to search. At the same time, *The Shipping News* suggests, through *telling a story*, the power of the “eternal return” through the narrative of Quoyle and his struggles by showing how what one affirms can change but that the past and future are integral to how one always becomes:

Quoyle was not going back to New York, either. If life was an arc of light that began in darkness, ended in darkness, the first part of his life had happened in an ordinary glare. Here it was as though he had found a polarized lens that deepened and intensified all seen through it. Thought of his stupid self in Mockingburg, taking whatever came at him. No wonder love had shot him through the heart and lungs, caused internal bleeding (SN 241).

In the process of new situations with people who genuinely like Quoyle and who do not see his worth through his prior negative self-conceptions, Quoyle gets perspective on some of his behaviors and changes them; he “becomes the subject of his own actions and finds completeness and the full richness of life” (Flavin 241). Quoyle
sees his former, simple, “stupid self” as undeserving of love but at the time his prior life, though “ordinary” in retrospect, seemed inordinately challenging where “what he had was what he pretended” (SN·14). Paradoxically, with his new more substantial “lens” on life, living becomes “deepened and intensified” to levels more complicated and farther reaching. He gets a clearer sense of self worth through engaging with life’s challenges rather than always succumbing as a victim to them. One of the most illuminating examples of this risk to gain self worth is Quoyle’s decision to include an unsolicited profile of the infamous Melville Botterjacht with the shipping news section in place of his expected “accident” assignment (142). This risk leads to success but not without apprehension for defying his superior’s orders: “you should have stuck to what he told you to do…Quoyle went sweaty and tense” (143). But Quoyle learns he does have good ideas, he can write, “the words fell out as fast as he could type” (142), and he can take constructive criticism from others. When Quoyle tries to explain by self-degradation and submission, “I don’t have to write another one. I just thought - ,” Jack Buggit, whom Quoyle perceives as the “terrible” editor, indirectly points out that Quoyle must stand up for his own actions: “you sound like you’re fishing with a holed net, shy most of your shingles standin’ there hemming and hawing away” (143). Jack finally gets Quoyle a computer as a reward for proving his worth: “thirty-six years old and this was the first time anybody ever said he’d done it right” (144). Risk engenders this new sense of self for Quoyle, but he does not always get a visible reward for ‘improving’ himself. What begins returning to Quoyle are the friendship and respect he offers through opening up and risking
relationships with others. Risk leading to self-worth leading to more unknowns is a more complicated faith than the simple notion that risk or trust always leads to known, visible rewards, as Flavin’s article suggests. It requires one to make a judgment call where judgment is often the skill one cultivates in the process of risk.

The novel enacts the “eternal return” in the way it makes readers consider human life as a series of moving intersections between past, present, and future. In essence these intersections are faith; they are at once visible locations that engender interpretation while they also exceed the visible into the infinite range (a bit of an oxymoron) of possibility – an uncertainty that requires pursuit. The epigraph of the final chapter “Shining Hubcaps,” “There are still old knots that are unrecorded…” (324), and the epigraph noted at the beginning of the novel, “In a knot of eight crossings…,” frame The Shipping News to suggest that life’s complex mix of past and present stories, meanings, and potential discoveries are both readable through and shrouded by the intersections of knotted threads weaving them together. One decision or different turn can lead to infinite possibilities and impossibilities: “make only one change in this ‘over and under’ sequence and either an entirely different knot is made or no knot at all may result.” The Shipping News suggests that, through the description of mariners’ knots creating anticipation at the start of each chapter, meaning exists in the seeming tangle of thread, the opaque mysteries that often occur to many of the main characters. Without knots, meaning seems one dimensional; but the novel does not suggest all knots’ meanings are always visible or “recorded,” perhaps even recordable. The possibility of the unknown always looms
but that does not preclude one from “becoming-active” in the sense of the “eternal return”; one must always “produce” in order to “reproduce” and vice versa (Deleuze 189-90). The presence of the epigraphs creates “Rope” as a metaphor for life where meaning exists only in “purpose,” in living and choosing every day, from which will stem new meanings, “new knots to discover” (SN 324). These two epigraphs suggest living is the unavoidable making of meaning - but there are better and worse ways to live. They also suggest life occurs in the visible and invisible, in the past, present, and future simultaneously. Either way it seems the old adages might sing in the background, ‘you reap what you sow’ and ‘you get what you give.’ But rather than facts, The Shipping News might suggest these ‘knowns’ as possibilities depending upon the always-becoming-present and changeable act of what one gives and sows.

The Shipping News, a Pulitzer Prize winning novel, suggests storyline quests for self-discovery may end with multiple paths of continuation into the future rather than the happily-ever-after offered by some less substantial, novels. Yet the novel’s end has been revered for its apparent feel-good fairytale ending, “a tale of redemption and healing, a celebration of the resilience of the human spirit”; it has been called a “heart-thumping romance.” Flavin suggests, “Quoyle is incomplete for much of the story, until he discovers a positive identity at the book’s end and ties himself to other people and a place” (239). While these observations may offer some truth about the narrative story, the life-affirming end is not so undemanding as happily-ever-after. Arguably, Quoyle does not come into wholeness – he is always coming into wholeness (to be discussed). However, it is easy to read the ending as a positive
conclusion by taking for granted a visible, pre-ordained path to happiness and guarantees. The title of the final chapter, “Shining Hubcaps,” directly alludes to Quoyle’s marriage and literal gift, “a row of shining hubcaps placed upon sticks in the front-yard of his house” (SN 324). Yet, the chapter starts by showing Quoyle’s new place and happiness among friends in Dennis and Beety’s kitchen and the completion of his boat - the key to embracing one part of his heritage. It continues with a fantastic account of Jack’s drowning, apparent death, his miraculous “awakening,” and Quoyle’s daughter Bunny’s inability to understand death, one theme among many repeated throughout the novel (333). Rather than a discussion of Quoyle’s marriage, the chapter more ostensively reflects a consideration of the unexplainable nature of some events in life. The only mention of marriage actually exists in the novel’s conclusion, but it is among the more ineffable mysteries the novel seeks to consider:

Quoyle experienced moments in all colors, uttered brilliancies, paid attention to the rich sound of waves counting stones, he laughed and wept, noticed sunsets, heard music in rain, said I do. A row of shining hubcaps on sticks appeared in the front yard of the Burkes’ house. A wedding present from the bride’s father. For if Jack Buggit could escape from the pickle jar, if a bird with a broken neck could fly away, what else might be possible? Water may be older than light, diamonds crack in hot goat’s blood, mountaintops give off cold fire, forests appear in mid-ocean, it may happen that a crab is caught with the shadow of a hand on its back, that the wind be imprisoned in a bit of knotted string. And it may be that love sometimes occurs with pain or misery (337).

While the passage does not even mention Wavey’s name as the bride, leaving ever so slight a chance that Quoyle married another woman, more importantly it seems to
suggest that even love holds no guarantees. Its mysterious process, like those of life in general, "sometimes occurs," depending on a number of factors, some of which one can orchestrate, like developing a sense of courage. But more often, as this passage suggests, unexplainable phenomena create the window through which one can see possibilities while taking action in the present, "For if...what else might be possible"? The various interpretations one reads and creates suggest that the text, the story, cannot be pinned down to one final answer or meaning: "water may be older...it may happen..." (emphasis mine). The text will always exceed that one interpretation through the presence of the perhaps, the "may." But only through performing an act of interpretation can the realization of multiple possibilities and future interpretations occur. Thus, the text becomes the eternal because it is the place to which we repeatedly return to make meaning through interpretations – that we engage in this process eternally into the future creates a space for the future to come - this is faith (not to mention the notion that it might be fun to engage in this type of process or play). But more importantly, the stories and their language require us to continually engage in interpretation – they require us to think into the future and to continue to ask ‘what’s next.’ These repetitions are faith because they always point to continuation, to the future. In The Shipping News, through the revelation of seeming impossibilities and maintaining awe in mystery and not the guarantee of eternal happiness, one is inspired to live, to wonder, and to keep interpreting a process that always inspires one’s faith.
Derrida’s use of the “gaze” and the construct of “secrecy” hold a certain resonance when considering The Shipping News (GD 91-2). The gaze consists of both the visible and invisible; its law creates the “secret,” commanding that what is visible to one is eternally invisible to another. The novel’s constant repetition of illusion and reality as largely constructs of the momentary visible and invisible make up most of the story’s suspense. The ability to see or not see engenders pursuit of Quoyle’s mysterious background, his Aunt’s past and secrets, his ancestry, and Wavey’s past, but more importantly, the future of all of these characters. Quoyle goes through most of the novel unaware of his past and that of others, namely his Aunt; he is unable to see clearly, and often disguises the truth about events in order to protect himself and his children (SN 3). The novel embodies Quoyle’s quest of learning to re-see his place within the world. The reader often knows of certain mysteries before Quoyle, like the aunt’s rape at the will of Quoyle’s father and her brother Guy, thus creating the dramatic question for us, ‘When will he figure it out?’ Flavin refers to this tactic as “dramatic irony,” where readers know more than the character they are reading (241). Readers’ investment in Quoyle, by nature of the way the story unfolds, becomes visible and creates another mystery to pursue. For readers and Quoyle, faith is often the play between the visible and invisible.

Interestingly, Quoyle, “to whom nothing was clear,” is surrounded by people who can see more clearly or who have a sense of clairvoyance (SN 3). These characters coupled with Quoyle’s perpetual naming as “son” and “boy” suggest his
status as an adult-child who must catch up with the rest of his surroundings.

Partridge, Quoyle’s first friend, “saw beyond the present, got quick shots of coming events as though loose brain wires briefly connected. He had been born with a caul; at three witnessed ball lightening bouncing down a fire escape... He was sure of his own good fortune” (3). Partridge gets Quoyle his first job as a reporter and also offers a model of a happy life. When Quoyle is on the move to Newfoundland and asks Partridge for a contact in the news business, Partridge has a vision:

Pleased to be fixing up Quoyle’s life again. Quoyle made him think of a huge roll of newsprint from the pulp mill. Blank and speckled with imperfections. But beyond this vagueness he glimpsed something like a reflection of light from a distant hubcap, a scintillation that meant there was, in Quoyle’s life, the chance of some brilliance. Happiness? Good Luck? Fame and fortune? Who knows, thought Partridge. He liked the rich taste of life so well himself he wished for an entrée or two for Quoyle (31).

We see the end of the story at the beginning in Partridge’s uncanny vision of “shining hubcaps,” guised in a fleeing hunch. This description of Partridge begs the question: must one have supernatural gifts or be born with the fantastic, “a caul,” in order to be sure of oneself or happy? What does it mean to see? As readers, at the start of the novel we come to expect the supernatural in the normal, the inexplicable as part of one’s reality and the ability to see, or to imagine seeing. The narrative’s construction as a series of foreshadowings, in which the future’s place is perhaps more akin to a hunch or an illusory vision, creates the tension between attaining and pursuing knowledge for both characters and readers. We all seek the visible and yet are constantly guided, even thwarted, by the invisible. I will discuss a good example
of this in Quoyle’s relationship with his daughter Bunny and her encounters with death and dying.

Quoyle, as opposed to Partridge, is not gifted with such fortune of clarity and must learn that “what don’t happen is also news” (8). His response “I see. Pretending to understand,” indicates Quoyle’s desire to fit in as a conscious attempt to construct what he does not know, to make visible what he cannot see (8). The novel seems all about Quoyle learning to contemplate the absences in any given visible present. In seeking acceptance by his peers, Quoyle learns “his only skill in the game of life” which is to “inspire talkers” through his “attentive posture” and “flattering nods” (9). Quoyle becomes a vessel through which others can ruminate about themselves; he is in essence like the Flemish flake coil on which anyone can walk without care. His inability to see leads Quoyle to “abstract himself from the times” (11) and to develop illusions about himself and the world:

The small decisions of local authority seemed to him the deep workings of life. In a profession that tutored its practitioners in the baseness of human nature, that revealed the corroded metal of civilization, Quoyle constructed a personal illusion of orderly progress. In atmospheres of disintegration and smoking jealousy he imagined rational compromise (9).

Quoyle reads no other newspaper but the Mockingburg Record, thus ignoring any happenings outside his immediate surroundings: “collapsing governments… terrorism…AIDS…were the stuff of others’ lives. He was waiting for his to begin” (11). Through his inability to engage with the world and take some risks he falls into marrying Petal Bear. His deepening spiral into unhappiness and lack of self-respect aggravated by his two-timing and strong-willed wife leads him to “believe in silent
suffering” (16). He does not see that his silent desperation actually “goads” Petal to treat him worse: “Oh for God’s sake grow up” (16). Quoyle thinks that by “deadening his feelings,” to enduring sharp pain, “the end would be all right” (17). This kind of endurance resonates with certain kinds of faith – the kinds in which self-sacrifice leads to happiness. However, the story progresses to show there are different kinds of self-sacrifice and endurance that can lead to happiness. Largely these depend on one’s ability to see and to have a sense of self worth generated by the self through the interaction with others, not solely by their judgments or presence. Even after Petal Bear dies and sells her children, Quoyle believes she was “starved for love,” “didn’t have a good opinion of herself,” and that he “wasn’t good enough for her” (23-4). But the aunt, who comes to help him with this and the death of his unloving parents; realizes Quoyle’s various levels of “invention”; she immediately recognizes Petal Bear for what she was, “a bitch in high heels” (24). This is not news to the reader, who watches Petal Bear’s horrible treatment of Quoyle and their children, whom she often “pretended not to recognize” (15). With his Aunt’s help it seems possible that Quoyle might get some positive guidance on how to see better, to live better, and to treat himself better. Aunt Agnis’ role as Quoyle’s second mentor in life (Partridge was the first) maintains the path of the novel - the continual revelation of the invisible to Quoyle through the guidance of those who can presumably see more clearly.\(^4\) By the motivation of his Aunt, Quoyle, “having reached his lowest point of fragmentation” (Flavin 240), and the children set off to Newfoundland, their place of ancestry, to start anew and find something else to “brace against” (SN 31).
This pattern, whereby Quoyle learns from those seemingly more gifted with sight, suggests the novel will reveal all truths and illuminate all mysteries, but it does not. In fact, it continues to play with the visible as various levels of illusion to show that one must engage and make a choice about what to believe at any given moment. Quoyle goes through this process on many levels with different people but the interaction between his seemingly clairvoyant daughter Bunny, her visions of the mysterious white dog and prophetic nightmares, coupled with his own self-perception/reflection and haunting visions and nightmares of Petal, creates an interesting space to consider the nature of seeing and its inextricable tie with pursuing that which is a mystery.

“When are we gonna get there?” Said Bunny, kicking the back of the seat. ‘I’m tired of going somewhere. I want to be there. I want to put on my bathing suit and play on the beach’”: so marks the family’s adventure out to the ancestral house on the point (38). Bunny, Quoyle’s older daughter at six, has a keen sense of the family’s journey where the present seems never quite locatable — Flavin refers to her as “clairvoyant” as well (242). She feels her father’s battle with the demons of the past and fear of the future. This displacement manifests itself in her visions of the white dog and her nightmares. In response to Quoyle’s inquiry about his daughter’s normalcy, Bunny is described, by the aunt, as “different,” “as sensitive in a way the rest of us aren’t. Tuned in to things we don’t get...his daughter might glimpse things beyond static reality” (SN 133-34). Quoyle “doesn’t believe in strange genius” and thinks “loss, the wretchedness of childhood, his own failure to love her enough had
damaged Bunny” (134). This seems ironic, for throughout the novel Quoyle is surrounded by people with “strange genius” who provide almost a sounding board on which Quoyle must face himself – this is one potential function of the white dog, which I discuss below. Throughout the novel Bunny seems to misunderstand death because of Quoyle’s explanation of Petal as forever “asleep” and never able to “wake up” (45). Even at the end of the novel Bunny is unconvinced about the finality of death. Witnessing the magical resurrection of Jack at what she termed his “awake,” where she “stations” herself next to his coffin as though willing him to awaken from his death-slumber, reinforces her intuition of death as a matter of temporal perspective (331). Her lack of belief indicates a reliance on continual life beyond one individual death, but is interpreted by adults as misunderstanding. In an attempt to clarify the difference, Wavey talks to Bunny about the incident with the dead bird they found weeks earlier when berry picking. Upon returning after the storm and Jack’s awakening to see its remains and finding only a feather left over, Bunny exclaims, “It flew away” (336). Wavey recognizes Bunny is a child “gauging the subtleties and degrees of existence,” but that does not take away the wonder about the events in the novel. No visible proof of death exists for Bunny or the reader at times – there is a chance the bird was not really dead, just as Jack was not really dead. It will take time and experience for her literally to see death as not simply sleep. But, more interestingly, The Shipping News foregrounds Bunny’s intuitive understanding of death itself as unequivalent to finality in its continuous creation of pursuable mysteries. Her youth allows her to have faith in what she cannot see – the structure
of visible proof is the one she tests and the one the novel repeatedly questions – but clearly her path is one seeking visible results. Growing older often teaches us to not see life continuing after death and after what seems only visible. Baudrillard’s consideration of the visible, “We require a visible past...” reveals an interesting point in *The Shipping News* (10). The visible intertwined with the invisible is an uncomfortable position for those, like Quoyle, who seem to lack a sense of self. In his singular reliance on visible guarantees, Quoyle does not contain or emit the seemingly paradoxical wisdom of co-existing visible/invisible that Bunny’s mentality represents. Growing older, seeing others die and experiencing pain, seems to produce a layering of desire for visible guarantees.

Quoyle’s inability to see and his characterization as child-like at times offer a paradoxical notion of what it means to see as a child, as an adult, and whether the progression of life can offer a more truthful vision of life’s meanings. One might assume that simply by aging Quoyle would learn to see ‘better’ and simply because Bunny can’t understand death that her vision of it needs to mature into a more visible truth. But the aunt’s characterization of Bunny again seems to reveal wisdom as not necessarily a function of age:

‘I agree with you nephew that she’s different, you might say she’s a bit strange sometimes, but you know, we’re all different though we may pretend otherwise. We’re all strange inside. We learn how to disguise our differentness as we grow up. Bunny doesn’t do that yet.’ Quoyle exhausted, slid his hand over his chin. A feeling they weren’t even talking about Bunny at all. But who, then? The conversation burned off like fog in sunlight (134).
While it comes to pass that the person the aunt had in mind was probably herself because she is a lesbian and Quoyle doesn’t know it, Bunny provides visible proof of someone who resists social norms and the judgments passed on her. Quoyle could also be the subject of this “disguising” as suggested by his insecurity over his “giant’s chin” (2). This visible manifestation of his difference caused his “invented stratagems to deflect stares; a smile, downcast gaze, the right hand darting up to cover the chin” (2). Quoyle virtually opposes Bunny in his desire to please and “know his company was pleasure to others” (4). It is easier for him to view Bunny as maladjusted rather than examining her impact on him and what her difference forces him to examine within himself. Nevertheless, in dealing with his daughter’s ‘weirdness,’ he learns a sense of growing not always subject to the prioritization of the visible.

Bunny’s fascination with death seems unnatural to Quoyle, but his own inability to let go of Petal’s memory in some way enables Bunny’s obsession. Bunny’s initial ‘sighting’ of the white dog at the ancestral house is met with a search through the “tuckamore” finding no dog (46). Quoyle believes Bunny, for why shouldn’t he? But later after several more ‘dog sightings’ Quoyle begins to realize it is a fabrication of Bunny’s imagination. Like her father, Bunny continues to have nightmares about not being able to save Petal from the car wreck. “The Old Hag’s got her,” claims the aunt after one nightmare episode to which Quoyle thinks “…the Old Hag knew where to find him, too. Fragments of Petal embedded in every hour of the night” (54). As time goes on, Quoyle’s nightmares and fleeting visions of Petal
become more manageable because of his moderate focus on Wavey, “that tall woman” (148):

Quoyle chopped at his secret path to the shore. Read his books. Played with his daughters. Saw briefly, once, Petal’s vanished face in Sunshine’s look. Pain he thought blunted erupted hot. As though the woman herself had suddenly appeared and disappeared. Of course she had, in a genetic way. He called Sunshine to him, wanted to take her up and press his face against her neck to prolong the quick illusion, but did not. Shook her hand instead, said “How do you do, and how do you do, and how do you do again?” Invoking Wavey, that tall woman. Made himself laugh with the child (148).

Quoyle is making a conscious effort to move on, to heal from the past. He is not simply shifting his gaze from one woman to another, for he doubts his feelings for Wavey until close to the end of the novel. But in making himself laugh in moments of potential heartbreak, he begins to realize one’s responsibility for not being a victim of all life’s hardships. To move into the future with his daughters he must learn to see the past as part of life, not all of life. Just after this when Bunny claims to see the white dog in the water “that is mad at her and wants to bite her” while in the boat with Quoyle and her sister Sunshine, he tries to “vanquish the white dog with logic” (151):

“It’s not a true dog, Bunny. It’s an imaginary dog and even if it looks real it can’t hurt you. If you see it again you have to say to yourself, ‘Is this a real dog or is this an imaginary dog?’ Then you’ll know it isn’t real, and you’ll laugh about it.” “But Dad, suppose it is real!” “In the water, Bunny? In a stone? In a piece of plywood? Give me a break.” (151)

Is Quoyle also talking to himself here, giving himself advice on how to rid oneself of demons? The question of what Bunny actually sees when she envisions the white dog remain a mystery, for why does she think what is invisible is visible, that what is
clearly unreal could be real? What seemed ironic, 'blind' Quoyle always surrounded by people with more insight, reveals itself a false end to the reader's expectations to see more clearly after reading – for, even the characters who seem more wise still must learn and grow. No one character emits one final and completely real truth – there is no one person the reader can look to as eternally sage. But, through these tactics, the novel reveals our desire for a real truth – irony is the perception that we can achieve and locate this truth or that we have in the past. More accurately, in the novel truth becomes a matter of repeatedly weaving different perspectives together – it becomes a moving location apt to change. *The Shipping News* denies our ability to maintain irony by showing that we can never get outside of the text to see it as a whole. Moreover, the characters can never get outside of the lives they are living. Certainly, *The Shipping News* shows that some things are more 'real' than others; the memory of Petal is not the same as the real woman, the white dog is not physically as real as Warren, the aunt's dog. The narrative does not provide the 'why' to so many questions. Rather it unfolds and moves along in a way that requires reading and interpretation to make sense and to have meaning. Reality and the visible prove neither cut and dried nor entirely reliable. To "require the visible" is always already to require the invisible as well (Barthes 10). Seemingly, the more Quoyle relies on his vision, the more problems he creates/encounters. In only relying upon visible proof, he shuts out the possibilities for growth. Throughout the course of the novel, Quoyle realizes that the visible and invisible, inherently inseparable, are the slippery, shifting planes upon which one must continually balance.
The chapter “Deadman” marks a turning point for Quoyle and his acceptance of death, the possibilities of life beyond logic, and the limitations of the visible (SN 206). His weekend alone in the house on the point working on an article for the Gammy Bird becomes an epic journey into the self he has merely approached until this point. In taking a walk out to the point, he comes to a huge cairn imagining its function as a “marker for Basque fisherman or wrecker Quoyles luring vessels onto the rocks with false lights” (208-09). As soon as he takes in the visual surroundings the more distant and abstract they become, the less real they seem; his imagining of the past breaks down, revealing itself a “mirage:”

At the last end of the world, a wild place that seemed poised on the lip of the abyss. No human sign, nothing, no ship, no plane, no animal, no bird, no bobbing trap marker nor buoy. As though he stood alone on the planet…. These waters, thought Quoyle, haunted by lost ships, fishermen, explorers gurgled down into sea holes as black as a dog’s throat… The glare of ice erasing dimension, distance, subjecting senses to mirage and illusion. A rare place (209).

Perceiving himself at the “end of the world,” Quoyle certainly stands on the edge of an “abyss” where he thinks he can see the ominous “waters” of death, perhaps a metaphor for his life and history. He sees himself separated from it by the “glare of ice,” his own preconceptions about himself, thus creating his vision of the world as void of “dimension, distance.” Yet this perception of himself as always exterior of life’s mysteries gets him into trouble in the first place. Flavin suggests, “symbolically, Quoyle must drown his old fragmented self to put an end to the influence of the low-minded Quoyles from whom he descends” (241). He must consciously plunge into the perceived illusions and fears of the past in order to
experience the waters of living and gain "dimension" – but he cannot "drown" them, as Flavin suggests. He can only learn to live with them in another way. Until such time, his sense will always be subject to the "mirages," limitations he creates about the past, rather than seeing his place within that past. "A rare place" it certainly is for Quoyle who has never taken many risks. Upon seeing the floating body, Quoyle panics and rushes to get help. But the body is not the sole command of his assistance; the body becomes a metaphor for Quoyle. Flavin claims his continual "confrontation" with the corpse of Melville is "emblematic of the man Quoyle will remain if he continues to cling to the memory of his demon lover wife..." (242). His attempt to save himself, to enable himself to see more clearly, results in his literally almost drowning. Quoyle is metaphorically immersed into the world from which he has so long run. In the terrifying process of capsizing the boat, a "length of line slid out from under the seat" and Quoyle realizes "for the first time...there was meaning in the knotted strings" which he continually finds at the house (SN 210). Quoyle realizes that "old knots must be untied before new ones can be tied" (Flavin 242). He must release himself from the bonds of his past in order to find new connections (242). So it seems just as we have hope that Quoyle is 'figuring it out,' meaning that one must act in order to live and that life often transcends our seeming understanding and vision of it, he is doomed to death. His survival and ability to create happiness in the world, to learn to re-see, hinge on his ability to swim and survive the rough and cold waters of his pirating ancestors. Paradoxically, seeing the illusion of the cooler as a "hot box," his body fat, and the miraculously presence of Jack, who "knowed
somebody was out here. Felt it,” save Quoyle (SN 212). Rather than revealing a
transcendent truth, re-seeing teaches Quoyle that some illusions are better than others
and in giving himself over to the unknowable there is resurrection: “... but the yellow
man was not dead. Sleeping... Quoyle thought he would roll over and get some sleep.
As soon as they shut the lights out. But the hard light was shining directly into his
swollen eyes.” (212). His literal act of practically drowning after trying to get help
for the “yellow man” becomes a kind of “baptism” cleansing him of the past visions
of himself as a failure (Flavin 242). Quoyle can become “euphoric with life” because
the bond of the negative that so long returned to him is now loosened (SN 215). At
the start of the novel, his empty “abstracted” ruminations, “Who knows? Who
knows?” based on “waiting for his (life) to begin,” now hold more resonance (11).
For Quoyle does not know the outcome of things but he is certainly ready for the
possibilities of the world containing more than it ostensibly contains: “he is ready to
face his struggle to emerge a new and restored human being” (Flavin 242). While I
disagree that Quoyle is “restored” because it implies he was a whole being at one
locatable moment, Quoyle’s near-death experience echoes the earlier discussion of
Levinas’ exploration of language and the requirements of story, interpretation, and
inspiration:

But as a reward for a life accepting limitations, one can also understand the
nature of this very life: the limitation of the wild vitality of life, through which
this life wakes from its somnambulant spontaneity, sobers up from its nature
and interprets its centripetal movements, in order to be opened up to what is
other than self (JRS105-6).
After this paradoxical process of self-transformation and discovery of himself as not the center of meaning or life’s forces, Quoyle comes to learn that he is the controller of an uncontrollable fate. He accepts life’s limitations, frees himself from always worrying about things, all while being forced to “open up to what is other than self.” He learns to take pleasure in the text that unravels as each day progresses, to take pleasure in the tricks that coincidences (pre-ordained or not) allow for making meaning. The process of awareness and gaining awareness, in all the term’s loaded glory, creates the novel as life-affirming in a way that goes beyond making amends to understanding that we are always being amended by virtue of the choices we make. Quoyle is saved from his own lack of forethought by something akin to grace: “stupid to die with the children so small. No life jackets, no floating oars, no sense” (SN 211). From this experience, Quoyle literally gains a new “sense” of life. As readers vicariously experiencing Quoyle’s near-death incident, we are left in a similar sense of wonder – for how does Jack “feel” a drowning man’s presence in a huge span of water? Why does Quoyle get “meaning in knots” in such an abstracted, seemingly isolated incident? What intersects to cause these forces to collide? As readers we can only read on and speculate possibilities based upon what we know of Jack as a “weird chap” who can “read your mind” and whose abilities to know are “beyond logic” (96-7). These various unknowns create hope for our position and dilemma as humans and because they always affirm the ethereal, the unknowable other. As a self-conscious text, The Shipping News acts as both a mirror and a sieve for our intentions. As a mirror it shows how we go about making meaning and the necessity of the process –
readers can see their own struggles in Quoyle's desire to understand himself and his past. As a sieve it shows our meanings are almost always apt to change, to reinterpretation, and that our control is never transcendent – how can we account for a distant relative intentionally tying knots and imbuing them with "winds" (296) against Quoyle as mere superstition when it seems his intentions come to pass and the ancestral house blows away (321)? In the revelation of these moments, The Shipping News recalls Hansen's description of a "faith inspired fiction" requiring readers and characters to "face the imponderables of life," to "confess to desolation and doubt" (6). The "thoughtful processes" I am suggesting characters and readers must engage prove all of us as "vital characters" rather than "conforming types," like Flavin's formulaic "archetypal quest hero" (240). To read as though Quoyle achieves his quest is to remain in Levinas' "bed of the preformed and customary ideas that protect and reassure" (115). It assumes Quoyle has lost a restorable wholeness, as Flavin seems to suggest (243). But to read with the notion of continual quest in mind opens The Shipping News and reader's self-confrontation to hope for a coming future – one that will always promise the meaningful. Repeated, perhaps seamless, acts of quest denote continual promise that one is always giving the self away and being given away to the future. This paradoxical notion of faith requires subjects to develop resilience to endure hardships while also engaging the self within the present.

This also recalls the sense of awe and wonder inherent to Rosenblatt's "essential act of faith" (92). Through various repetitions that continually set the reader in the act of pursuit and Quoyle in quest, The Shipping News shows how the
language of narrative inspires continuation. The narrative creates a sense of continual wonder, as suggest the above questions, while the language used in the narrative requires pursuit. Both wonder and pursuit receive partial satisfaction because readers and characters learn some secrets as the story unfolds. Even the baptismal act is predicted to some degree at the end of the earlier chapter “Berry Picking,” a discussion of which will follow (SN 190). But more often wonder is re-created, resulting in a sense of awe directing us to pursue. The “essential act of faith” in The Shipping News is the reader’s desire to know, the text’s eternal deferral of something to know, thus inspiring interpretation. The novel’s playful and oftentimes ominous use of language to describe the weather and condition of the ocean provides a location whose meanings always spill over in excess. In Quoyle’s near-death experience, knots become a language and a metaphor for the story’s events: They embody another language subject to interpretation that can seemingly symbolize something other than itself. But their presence in the novel is clearly orchestrated by the narrator whose presence seems virtually invisible. Would the descriptions of knots contained in The Ashley Book of Knots hold meaning if read out of context of The Shipping News; might the knots symbolize something else beyond their literal function as holding, binding, and connecting certain objects? Likewise, the ocean/sea is presented as a living being often imbued with human characteristics of intention and conscience, “crests with cruel smiles” (210), “as each struck, foaming lips closed over it” (45), “the waves pouring on shore had a thick look to them, a kind of moody rage” (197), “the alchemist sea changed fishermen into wet bones, sent boats to drift among
the cod, cast them on the landwash" (33). The sea as representative of Quoyle's baptism is portrayed as a doorway before the turning point in "Deadman." This is another place where the text engages in prophecy and portent: "The long horizon, the lunging, clotted sea like a swinging door opening, closing, opening" (159). Does the sea contain these traces or do we as readers and writers insert them in order to pursue our desire to understand any thing in excess of human power? Perhaps we are bound to read everything as language, for in language exists the hope of "an inexhaustible surplus of meaning" (Levinas, JRS 109). In regard to the Douglas Glover epigraph I used, what makes The Shinning News "strikingly original" is its eternal capacity to remain full of "magic and portent." Its power lies not in the resolution of characters' quests and readers' curiosity, but in showing these processes as essential to moving into a meaningful future. While Flavin argues Quoyle completes his quest at the end of the novel, I would like to suggest that his quest has really just begun.

The continual presence and awareness of the sea, its power to control the people of Newfoundland's livelihood, and its ability to claim lives make it a force to reckon with for the characters in the novel and the readers who must make meaning of it. In some instances the water seems somewhat akin to language in its ability to change, disguise, and contain various illusions. The power of a metaphor exists in its ability to be like something else, not to be that other, but like it. The essence of 'like' shows us that we cannot truly account for or locate everything. It recognizes the spaces, the gaps, the excess, in language that are always beyond explanation. Moreover, it shows us that we are bound to interpret in order to make connections
between the seemingly dissimilar; it also works to differentiate between that which tries to be self-identical. Metaphor opens the world to many enriching interpretive possibilities. Knots and the sea function to enrich the experience of life through showing the various levels of invention we live and create.

Tracy Peterson Turner, in her short consideration "Knots and Metaphors in The Shipping News," claims the various knots used as epigraphs become images for Quoyle and his interactions with the world. Knots define him, what binds him to others, and those from which he must sometimes break loose (2). Turner claims "Berry Picking," (190) the other turning point chapter shortly before "Deadman," (206) creates the metaphors of Quoyle as the clove hitch knot, which is tied around another object for support (2). Wavey is the double hitch knot, anchored to herself (2). Because both knots "have the same knot form," "the difference between them is exceedingly vague" (SN 190). We come to discover only at the end of the novel, through her uncle Alvin Yark, that Wavey had a similarly bad marriage to the "tomcat type of feller" Herold (304). So while the two of them have shared similarly difficult pasts, they have different ways of coping. Turner claims both knots are "equally important" in their functions: "one is not less than the other because of its need for a supporting member -- and it is in this realization that Quoyle begins to become whole" (3). Moreover, she claims these realizations of needing "to hold on to someone else for support" and "asserting his desire for Wavey" help to "loosen the bonds of his past" (3). While it may be interesting to consider knots as potential signifiers or metaphors for the characters, I think it too prescribed to assert these
knots as the characters and dictate how they ultimately can or cannot proceed. Turner does not utilize the power of metaphor’s ‘like.’ Quoyle comes in to wholeness in movement, not destination, by taking a risk to share himself with someone. To locate Quoyle within the knot, as the knot, or even an image of the knot, is to leave him there. He has no chance to open to a new sense of life because he would then always wait to be untied. Quoyle, like the knot, leaves more room for finding other ways of self-expression and autonomy. For example, one could be at once like a knot and like the scissors that cut a knot. Quoyle can resemble both of these seeming opposites. Turner’s reading of the “binocular scene” as Quoyle needing to hold onto Wavey for support in order to survive seems too literal. One would think that from this point on Quoyle would not struggle with his feelings for Wavey, but he does, and the memory of Petal continues haunting him. His redemption may exist in opening up to others but first Quoyle must open up himself to the possibilities of himself by giving over himself—this happens in his near-drowning discussed earlier but actually starts at the end of “Berry Picking” (SN 190). For at the end of the berry-picking episode, Quoyle has a seemingly clear prophetic vision defined by a nebulous sense of the physical coupled with an imagining of the future:

He pressed his groin against the barrens as if he were in union with the earth. His aroused senses imbued the far scene with enormous importance. The small figures against the vast rock with the sea beyond. All the complex wires of life were stripped out and he could see the structure of life. Nothing but rock and sea, the tiny figures of humans and animals against them for a brief time. The sharpness of his gaze pierced the past. He saw generations like migrating birds, the bay flecked with ghost sails, the deserted settlements vigorous again, and in the abyss nets spangled with scales. Saw the Quoyles rinsed of evil by the passage of time. He imagined the aunt buried and gone,
himself old, Wavey stooped with age, his daughters in faraway lives, Herry still delighted by wooden dogs and colored threads, a grizzled Herry who would sleep in a north room at the top of the house or in the little room under the stairs. A sense of purity renewed, a sense of events in trembling balance flooded him. Everything, everything seemed encrusted with portent (196).

In literally grounding himself to the earth, “pressed his groin,” the heightened physical awareness sparks a new sense of vision in which Quoyle glimpses hope for the future. This new “gaze” is defined by the opaque effect of the physical on the mind – what kind of desire drives Quoyle’s thoughts? Is it his desire to be grounded or to ground himself? At this point in the novel, the reader’s familiarity with “portents” as signs, omens, even warnings, enables reading this with a similar sense of “trembling balance.” For, like Quoyle, we know something will happen; just exactly what is the question. While this passage does seem to offer a future in which “purity (is) renewed,” it does not promise the path will be easy. Moreover, the “structure of life” “stripped” of its “complex wires” Quoyle sees is actually the one he needs to enter; more accurately, he needs to see himself already functioning in it and not apart from it. The “complex wires” and knots will always be there but do not always have to remain the sole focus which one must “brace against” (31). The seemingly ironic omen of Quoyle seeing his ancestry “rinsed of evil” comes to pass in “Deadman,” thus showing the novel’s construction as a series of prophecies that partially reveal themselves as the narrative unravels. But re-reading this section in tandem with Quoyle’s literal “rinse” shows that signs more likely point to a coming future not necessarily the contents of that future. For, how could readers know from this passage that Quoyle will be in danger of drowning?
Quoyle’s faith at this point is still a construct of his imagining of the future, imagining giving himself over; he is still learning how also to be in the present while moving into the future. His metaphorical drowning serves a dual purpose. It grounds him within the present while also teaching him to trust the sense of things to come through forcing him to surrender himself to what he cannot control. It would seem Quoyle needs to learn how to come into a more continuous sense of “trembling balance” and not feel as though he must “brace against” the possibilities of all evil and sadness. Moreover, for readers, irony transforms into awe because we know the future will come but we do not know what it will contain.

The collision of past, present, and future described by Quoyle’s vision marks an interesting theme in the novel whereby he must learn to live them all simultaneously, in “trembling balance,” in order to keep living. The narrative itself is a series of stories past, present, and future, all working in tandem yet not always visible to Quoyle, or the reader. This creates the narrative’s obsession with what is to come. The references to the sea-entity as an ever-presence of which the characters must be aware almost mirrors the life of knots in which everyone must engage. The ancestral house becomes an embodiment of the past, its presence loaded with absent presences and echoes. But the green house also represents a portal through which Quoyle and his family must pass in order to move on. Quoyle’s constant speculation about his past from the start, “he wondered about ancestors” (5), through the end when the ancestral house falls off the cliff, creates a narrative setting Quoyle and the reader on the path of pursuit. Readers, following this obsession, are forced to
confront their expectations and desires to know the origins and processes of self-identity. We are also forced to realize dramatic irony is a false end in a text that defies definitive meanings; rather, *The Shipping News* continually creates questions. Will discovering events about the past reveal a truth by which Quoyle can construct or reconstruct a self? Will that truth be ascertainable or will it simply reveal itself only to be replaced by another mystery? Can what one perceives as an origin or creator of that origin grant a peace or intention revealing how to live in the present into the future? And most importantly, if no visible proof and guarantee on how to construct a self can be revealed, can one, without blind naivety, retain faith and wonder in a way enabling Hansen's "thoughtful consideration," (6) rather than Marin's "trappings" of secularism's "desperate clinging to belief" (2)? Recall the Levinas epigraph:

But in this start that readers receive there is a new alternation of movements: they go from the traumatic experience of the unknown and strange meaning to the grammar which, already operating on another level, restores order, coherence and chronology. And then there is a movement back: from history and philology to the understanding that again affects and awakes, forcing us out of the bed of the preformed and customary ideas that protect and reassure. An alternation which, admittedly, testifies to the hesitation of our little faith, but from which also stems the transcendence that does not impose itself with denials through its actual coming and which, in inspired Scripture, awaits a hermeneutic – in other words, reveals itself only in dissimulation (115).

To call ourselves 'whole,' to seek 'wholeness' in personal identity commanding capital and power in the world, is a complicated positioning often overused today in too simple formulas. It is often a construct existing largely in the past – for, if one is 'whole,' what else is there to know – why bother living? Presumably, one who is
‘whole’ is perfect, enlightened beyond human capacity for Hansen’s “doubt and dissolution” (6). Can we consider Quoyle wholly enlightened at the end of The Shipping News? An authorless card on my dresser reads, “The arithmetic of love is unique: two halves do not make a whole, two wholes make a whole.” Flavin, Turner, and surely many others read Quoyle’s quest ending in discovery of a whole and knowable identity enabling a good life. Everyone, as readers and writers, walks around today questing for wholeness in response to a society so fractured with wars, divorce, poverty, and corruption. It is fashionable today, again, as always, to speak of one’s inner quest, to “know thyself,” as though we can locate an unchangeable essence that will provide us guarantees of future happiness. Can one truly find a ‘whole’ and unchangeable self in the now, the past, the future? What are the limitations of this ‘wholeness’ and might it be more useful, more liberating, more enlightening, to consider the self in constant give-take-give, pursuit-location-pursuit, in a “trembling balance” of existence (SN 196)? Perhaps this balance is akin to the “provisional unity” Kristeva’s psychoanalyst helps the subject to achieve:

We are no doubt permanent subjects of a language that holds us in its power. But we are subjects in process, ceaselessly losing our identity, destabilized by fluctuations in our relations to the other, to whom we nevertheless remain bound by a kind of homeostasis. By postulating this eclipse of subjectivity at the dawn of our life, by sensing a hiatus in subjectivity in moments of intense passion, the psychoanalyst does not “biologize man’s essence,” as Heidegger feared. He places, instead, exorbitant confidence in the power of transference and interpretive language, knowing from experience that they are capable, once recognized and hence named eclipse and hiatus of the subject, of reestablishing the provisional unity of that subject and thus preparing it for the further trials set by the life process of the passions (Psychoanalysis and Faith, 9).
Quoyle's engagement in all of his surroundings create a plane in which he can learn to take pleasure in the continual "life process of passions" by realizing, to some degree, his subjectivity is subject to a language process itself in fluctuation. The "provisional unity" of subjectivity depends upon the ability to communicate oneself through "transference" and "interpretive language." Levinas also speaks of a language in constant gestation revealing itself, revealing itself to show itself as "already operating on a different level" (115). The place of the reader is to come to one understanding only to see the mystery of another to pursue. Paradoxically, wholeness of self-identity in light of this is a constant becoming; it is like the "eternal return" (Deleuze 189), neither a location nor destination, but rather the perpetual act of awaiting a "hermeneutic" (Levinas 115), another interpretation. And in these various spiraling levels of interpretation, wholeness actually already contains gaps. For, in interpretation something is always like the unrepeatable other it pursues — the gap between these is the "dissimulation" where meaning can always reside, where we can and are subject to make fantastic, enlightening, visible, and invisible connections in the various texts of our worlds (Levinas 115). In terms of self-identity, wholeness, the visible, and invisible, is revealed as everything one becomes and has the power to become. For, the unrepeatable other might actually occur in the future, not the past; or perhaps it may not be subject to our linear understanding of time.

Let me, again, re-direct the question toward The Shipping News: How can we consider Quoyle whole at the end of the novel and how is he the author of himself? Again, a response returns to the visible invisible and the ability to see. It returns to
the notion that Quoyle is *part* of the shifting center of the last chapter, “Shining Hubcaps.” His future is not the sole subject of truth revelation but rather an epilogue, an afterthought, to a treatise on the mysteries of life and death. Quoyle’s declaration, as the new editor of the Gammy Bird, in response to Jack’s death and Benny Fudge’s question, “Will it be put to rest?” is “No. A paper has a life of its own, an existence beyond earthly owners” (SN 330). His response coupled with envisioning Jack’s miraculous awakening “on the front page, knocking everything else sky-high,” indicates Quoyle’s new functioning in the presence of the visible and invisible (334). His response indicates a calm acceptance of individual life as one aspect of the grander scheme of life and living, where “certain wheels turn, certain cogs enmesh” (altered a bit, SN 301) to produce results transgressing one intention and one’s visible goals. But envisioning the future shows his acceptance of Derrida’s “absolute duty,” which is Deleuze’s Nietzsche “becoming-active.” Quoyle recognizes his place in the world is to keep growing into wholeness. Authoring a self-identity, for Quoyle, depends on acknowledging the future will always come, and realizing he is not the sole creator of his surroundings – he is always part of someone else’s periphery. Quoyle is the one who “smoothed things out,” in the conflict between Bunny, Mrs. Lumbull, the principal, and the aunt. But he is not the center of the conflict. And in revealing Petal Bear’s infidelities to Wavey, he sees and accepts his own self-effacement. This self-offering creates a space for Wavey to share her bad memories of Herold, and for the two of them to acknowledge their former “demon lovers” as subject to the “ratholes of memory” (SN 308). This kind of self-offering releases the
negative; it makes room for a better sense of self to become active – one that can always come into an opening future. For Quoyle and readers, wholeness becomes a matter of moving into a new readiness, and readiness becomes a matter of a wholeness always becoming. A center-less self-origin moving amidst a wholeness defined by the gaps of the future requires pursuit; self-identity as a continual process of interpretation is faith - the inevitable process of “dissimulation,” the continuous place where meaning resides.

1 This is not to say we know what goes on after we die, but rather that life continues.
2 For a similar discussion of knots and metaphors and their importance to the novel’s use of fragmentation to define identity, see Louise Flavin’s article, “Quoyle’s Quest: Knots and Fragments as Tools of Narration in The Shipping News,” from Critique Spring 1999.
3 These descriptions were taken from the edition of The Shipping News. The first is from Sandra Gwynn and The Toronto Star, and the second from Sandra Scofield and The Washington Post Book World.
4 Flavin refers to Partridge, the aunt, Jack Buggit, Billy Pretty, Beety and Dennis as “mentor-guides” who “guide Quoyle on his quest to live and love in the foreboding, seemingly infertile landscape of Newfoundland” (241).
5 Flavin uses this passage to illustrate Quoyle as the “ironic victim…unaware of the aunt’s secret” (241). She concentrates on the use of fragmented sentences to show Quoyle’s “limited awareness” and perpetually “fragmented self” (241).
6 Inspired by discussion of Foucault’s Pan-Opticon and Baudrillard’s Simulacra.
7 Flavin’s article, like Turner’s, creates Quoyle’s discovery of self-identity as hinging upon his ability to “tie himself to others,” namely Wavey. The women in his life are “the missing segments in the circle of Quoyle’s existence” (239).
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION: 2002

The more interesting part of my project exists in its potential to open onto many planes for discussion. Other than the unanswered questions in the Introduction concerning language's tie to religion, for me this project has been most fascinating in how it reveals situatedness and how one perceives location. It seems there has been much talk today that our society is coming to the end of the age of irony. And faith and irony seem incompatible terms. *The Shipping News*, through its perpetual questioning of location and how one is located, seems to suggest one is never able to 'step-outside' and make an accurate judgment call. In this realization emerges a faith requiring one to open to the future. But the novel also shows readers' and characters' desires to see their own lives as though from outside. Paradoxically, it shows how calculation gets in the way of potential growth but the desire to remain outside is a necessary step to growth. Without the desire, there would be no breaking point where the desire was unfulfillable. I find this important because my generation, end of the X'ers, puts much stock in one-up-manship, knowing more than the next person, and how to keep a 'game-face.' We have grown up with the sarcastic humor of David Letterman and the mocking humor of "Saturday Night Live." But also, perhaps as a response to the limited ability of these humors to entertain, another strand of conversation exists. The kind of sarcastic wit that comes with one's seeming ability to see a more real truth outside of a particular circumstance perhaps is coming to the
end of its course — the ‘you’ of the ‘joke’s on you,’ is never quite final and is often too close for comfort.

Frederic Jameson suggests the impact of our positioning in the world has been “decentered” to the point that we can no longer stand outside of a perspective and comment upon it (245). We only think we can. The implications for this are great in the culture at large for our understanding how perspective is created, but also in how we might consider labeling the present condition of our ideologies. His “decenteredness” seems to suggest we are losing, or have lost, our ability to maintain irony. For, at some point we were able to locate a definitive center from which to judge any (re)action. Are we embedded in a post-modern world, where the seeming “decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” creates our inability to “locate” ourselves as authentic individuals (245)? Are we just beginning a post-modern world, where the inability to stand apart from one’s situation has become evident or visible? Are we still in the modern, where the emphasis on revolutionary newness, originality, and the utopic vision to create a better system, reigns? Perhaps, in realizing we cannot engage in anything and know exactly the impact of what we engage on all levels, we are coming to a place where faith has more relevance and newsworthiness than in the current sexual scandals of the Catholic Church.

Jameson’s point, however, seems to beg the question: when have we been able to definitively locate ourselves as individuals, as selves, as authentic, for certain?
When has irony been anything but a created illusion, perhaps delusion, of one’s desires? To these questions, nostalgia always has an answer that a reading of history could disprove. Besides, it seems more logical that any kind of definition is always at the expense of excluding others – choice is a panacea for the ‘inherent wisdom in nostalgia.’ So, finding a locatable identity in the past has really been a reflection of what ideology, value, or moral, one prioritizes within the culture. Surely, the argument has been suggested that we have not really shifted into a post-modern era – that renaming eras has more to do with, well, our need to name, rather than the condition of society’s structure. Or, perhaps it has also been suggested that to name one’s era is impossible, for no one has the capacity to step away and see a time in its entirety. And this assumes ‘entirety’ is a matter of what is always visible. If we have never really been able to engage in irony the way we believe we have, if we begin to see irony as not so funny, does this present a problem? Probably, if you make your living as a comedian invoking irony at the expense of others and not yourself. But I think there are (at least) three questions that are more important than trying to decide a naming or a condition. If there is no such reality as irony, what do the desires, however illusory, we maintain about imagining the ability to ‘oversee’ provide for us? Moreover, if we see the construct of irony as a limitation (meaning, why try to be the outside ‘smarty’) what may open as another way to interpret our surroundings and potentials as individuals always within a context? Does irony exist in a fixed
definition for itself – or is it more like awe disguised with a chuckle? I hope we can begin to see irony as a construct of our desires for a better reality, rather than some better reality from which to judge. I hope that the delusioned reality of irony has run its course, but not because I feel we need disillusionment – that is simultaneously always happening and impossible by nature of what is always visible and invisible. Rather, in realizing the importance and multitude of our illusions and their malleability at any level, there might be an opening for a future that has not already been anticipated by Hollywood. Now that is something to hope for.
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