



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 Quoye, 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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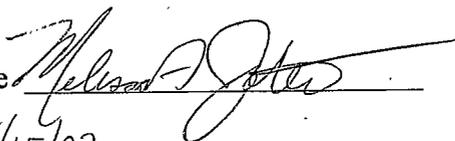
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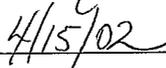


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ABSTRACT

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.

EPIGRAPHS

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

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"

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"

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."

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"

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”² (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.⁴ 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 Quoye 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?⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

¹ 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.

² "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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Inspired by Therese Lichtenstein's examination of the modern photographer Claude Cahun in "A Mutable Mirror: Claude Cahun," Artforum, v.90, Dec. 9, p. 17.

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.'¹ 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).² 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.³ 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 Intention⁴

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).⁵ 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.’⁶ 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.’⁷ 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, sobers up from its nature and interprets its centripetal movements, in order to be opened up to what is other than self (JRS105-6).

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, sobers 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 (JRS 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.⁸ 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?⁹ 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 disabling 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 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).

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.

Strikingly original, richly energetic... a stunning book, full of magic and portent. Douglas Glover, Boston Sunday Globe.

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, Quoye, 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 Quoye 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 Quoye 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 Quoye and to the story we create through reading Quoye'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).² 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 equivalency, 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

